

We'll leave here with decades of memories

Debbie Oliver and **Robert Rymill** share what makes St Wilfrid's, Fratton, so special as the church closes its doors for the final time

Who are you? Debbie Oliver and Robert Rymill, the final two deputy wardens at St Wilfrid's in Fratton.

What church are you part of?

We've been at St Wilfrid's, which is part of the parish of St Mary's, Portsea. The final service at St Wilfrid's was on November 20.

Why did you start going there?

Debbie: we moved from Hilslea, where I'd stopped going to church because I had a daughter who was noisy in services. I came here in 1988, and my first impression was that I was in the wrong place, as it was very High Church. But we stayed, my daughter Leonie joined Sunday School and I got involved.

Robert: I was baptised here as a baby in 1955, but had stopped going to church by the early 1970s. My sister was in the choir, but had missed one Sunday service. The priest called at our house to find out why. He said to me: "I expect to see you in church on Sunday" and I turned up. I then hardly missed another Sunday for 40 years!

What do you love about your church?

Debbie: it's the sense of community, the welcome, and all the activities that have happened here. There was the Mandy Allen Dance School, the Brownies, the Mothers' Union and the church choir. We always used to do good Advent and Lent projects to raise money for charities.



Debbie Oliver and Robert Rymill at St Wilfrid's Church, Fratton

We've always enjoyed good celebrations, and hosted the parish pantomime in recent years.

My husband said he'd be confirmed when he retired from the Navy. He's a West Brom fan, so when he discovered that the new bishop – Bishop Christopher – was a Wolves fan, he quickly got confirmed by the interim bishop instead. I remember he also came to a children's Nativity here, grabbed a tea towel to put on his head, and joined in!

We've been talking about closing the church for years, and I think now is the time.

Robert: it's the fact that this place has been full of saints who I've

been privileged to meet. People who wouldn't think they are saints, but just got on with helping others, raising money, loving God. They taught me about being a Christian.

I also had my first religious experience here. I was sacristan for 20 years, so I had keys to the building. I came in on my own one day. I reached out to God and felt the breath of his touch. That sustained me for 40 or 50 years.

Although I'm the person who is most closely involved with the building, I know that's not the most important thing. I believe in mission, not maintenance. The 12 of us left in the congregation will still be part of the Body of Christ in another church.