

Our nave hosts gigs and recording studio

WALK into St John's Church, Forton, and you'll discover a state-of-the-art recording studio alongside the font and pews.

Musicians may be finessing the vocals on their latest track, or doing a sound check in the performance space in front of the altar. Lighting technicians may be up ladders tweaking the lighting rig, while audience members order drinks at the bar.

This historic Victorian building has found a new lease of life as a venue for live music, theatre and dance in the past few years. It's now also the home of Quay West Studios, who offer artists the chance to record and mix tracks in two purpose-built studio pods which are tucked under the church's stone arches.

Every month there's an Open Mic night when students from nearby St Vincent College and local bands show off their musical talents to packed audiences. Artists and audiences alike enjoy the ambience and acoustics of the church's exposed brickwork, stained glass windows and soaring ceilings.

But the building is also still a church, where worship can happen. Our diocese has recently appointed Matt Gatt as a pioneer minister with a brief to plant a new worshipping community back into St John's. As a musician himself, he appreciates the crossover there's likely to be between the audiences for live music and the 16-25 year olds he'll be trying to reach.

This is just one of many ways in which our churches host and



Top: Louis Crowe in the recording studio inside St John's Church, Forton; below: one of the live music gigs taking place in the nave of the church

support the creative arts. Many of our buildings host performances by choirs, orchestras and rock bands. Some host entire music festivals and art exhibitions. And several are happy to be the venue for live theatre or dance performances, on Christian or secular themes.

Quay West Studios was set up in

2011 by Louis Crowe and Nicholas Bowen, organising gigs in local pubs and offering recording facilities in a Gosport industrial estate. They heard that St John's was hosting Elvis nights and explored its potential as a live music venue.

"I loved the space straightaway," said Louis. "The acoustics are great,

Churches host music and theatre

IN this Cosham church hall, dancers were bopping in sequins and fancy dress as the chorus of *Mamma Mia* blasted from the stage.

The sound of Abba's greatest hits filled the hall of St Philip's Church as they played host to tribute band Abba Re-Bjorn this summer. It demonstrated that churches can be versatile venues for more than Sunday services.

With more than 100 people in attendance, aged five to 98, it proved that diversifying the types of event offered can attract those who don't normally come to church.

The Rev Amy Webb, the vicar at St Philip's, said: "It draws people across the threshold and challenges their preconceived ideas about the church."

ABBA Re-Bjorn is

just one example of the parish's commitment to finding new ways to reach the community.

The church has also hosted two touring plays, both of which were written and created locally. People and Stories have performed *Undertow:1982*, a play about the effect of the Falklands conflict on the city, and *The Party*, which looked at mental health, both in the church hall.

Director Scott Ramsey and his cast performed in churches across Portsmouth, utilising their space and community links to bring a theatre experience to local residents.

Scott said: "Like churches, theatres can also be intimidating for some, but by hosting performances that are hubs for their local community, they can become more accessible."



Top: *The Party* being staged at St Luke's Church, Southsea; below: Abba Re-Bjorn at St Philip's Church, Cosham

"Many amateur theatre groups struggle to find suitable venues, while there is an

abundance of churches – and pubs – that are looking for ways to reach people."

and I love the font, the pulpit, the candles and everything that makes it into a church. Carrie, who was vicar then, was very supportive, happy for us to have a bar and sell alcohol. We came in about once a month to do a gig.

"Our contract on our industrial estate unit was finishing, and we talked to the new vicar, Ray, about using one of the church rooms as a recording studio. That room had been taken, but he got back to us the next day and asked if we'd like to use the main nave. That was the start of a 16-month process, which involved hiring a designer to see how the space worked acoustically and building these two pods – a live room and a control room.

"It then took 16 weeks to build in 2022, and included us bringing in a stunning API 1608 console, one of

only four in the country. Artists can record in the partially-soundproofed live room, or in the nave itself. We can place microphones at various distances around the artist and blend the sounds together to create a really natural sound.

'You can hear a pin drop when artists play - the audience really listens'

"The artist often feels different depending on where they are performing, so recording in this awe-inspiring nave with all this space around them affects their energy and emotions. And it also means we can record a choir of 50 singing in a way that will feel natural.

"We still run Open Mic nights once a month, and we get more than 100 people coming from as far afield as London. Last time, we had 15 artists playing and had to turn five away. So many people comment on how special the atmosphere is, and you can almost hear a pin drop when artists play – the audiences really listen."

Louis is a musician himself who grew up in the Gosport area and learnt to play trumpet and guitar. But after a course at Chichester University, he found himself happiest facilitating other musicians in a studio environment or at a live gig.

"The great thing about having a venue here is that there is nothing like this in Gosport, and local people turn up because they like the ambience and love live music,"