

# Improving buildings at heart of outreach

One major way we can serve others is by refurbishing our church buildings so they can be at the heart of each community

It was an ambitious project that has created a vibrant meeting place at the heart of this rural Hampshire village.

The £600,000 initiative succeeded in preserving the heritage of the historic church in Droxford – and launching a Community Hub and Heritage Centre that includes a busy café. Now villagers, walkers, cyclists and tourists flock to drink coffee and sample home-made cakes in this idyllic spot close to the River Meon.

The creation of a new annexe meant St Mary and All Saints Church became a bustling centre for the local community. It includes a kitchen and toilets for Wilfrid's Café, which opens four days a week with seating inside and outside.

Those modern facilities will allow the 12th century church to be used more easily for music concerts, parties, plays, community meetings and exhibitions – and showcase the rich heritage of the church and village to visitors.

The innovative project pre-dates our current Live | Pray | Serve vision, but echoes its desire that churches should find a trusted place at the heart of their local community.



Above: John Symes outside the annexe built at St Mary's Church, Droxford, to accommodate the community hub; right: operations manager Sarah Smith (right) and volunteer Nicki Smith inside the kitchen

The rector, the Rev Tony Forrest, said: "When I arrived six years ago, the church was packed with people who were interested in how this project was going to unfold. It's a testament to all those involved that they've succeeded amid conflicting pressures, and in the face of a pandemic.

"For those who worship in the Bridge benefice, an important part of our Christian discipleship is to serve those who live in

these communities. We want to serve God by serving others, and this project gives us a fantastic opportunity to do just that."

**'We want to serve God by serving others and this helps us do that'**

The project was initially conceived seven years ago by the PCC and

## Church annexe provides meeting place

IT has been 11 years since Bishop Christopher officially opened a new annexe at St Peter's Church, Soberton.

The £350,000 project was 10 years in the making, with a decade of planning and fundraising. It includes a meeting room, kitchen and toilets. Since then, the Church Room has been used well by the local congregation and community.

As well as a place for children's groups on Sundays and coffee after the service, it's hosted a monthly lunch club for the elderly, a bi-monthly film club, and the monthly local history society.

It has hosted away days for other parishes, quiet days, drawing classes and a needlework group. And it's also a place where families can hold a small party or gathering after a baptism or funeral service.

Lay minister Norman



The Rev Sandra Beavis and Norman Chapman outside the annexe in 2010

Chapman said: "In 2000, the wardens and congregation were faced with the loss of the vicarage, which was a meeting room, water supply and toilets. So we reviewed our ongoing needs of the church and community.

"The Church Room became and

still is a multi-use building. The parish and community have been blessed with a wonderful, warm new build."

The pandemic stopped usage of the Church Room, but the parish hopes some of those activities will resume soon.



the Friends of Droxford Church. From the outset, the idea was not just to raise the £250,000 needed for structural repairs to the tower, walls and nave roof, but to go further and create a hub to serve the community.

The first phase – the restoration work for the grade 1 listed building – was largely funded

by the National Lottery, on the understanding that community facilities would follow. This took place between 2016-18. The work included the removal of a run-down Victorian organ from the north chapel to provide space for a community hub.

The second phase involved the creation of an annexe on the

north side, with flint walls to blend in with the existing church. It includes a kitchen, toilet, disabled toilet and office.

Hampshire County Council and the South Downs National Park were among the bodies providing funding, as they recognised the community benefits. And a new Droxford Community Hub community interest company was created to manage the new café and facilities.

The work was completed towards the end of 2019 and a launch planned in early 2020.

Unfortunately, the new Wilfrid's Café was only open for 10 weeks before it had to close because of the Covid pandemic. A takeaway-only service was started last summer, and the café has gradually opened more fully during 2021.