



# The Benefice of Ashill, Saham Toney, Ovington and Merton

Benefice Profile 2024



## **Thank you for reading our profile and taking the time to discern whether God might be calling you to be our new Priest-in-Charge.**

We are seeking a Priest-in-Charge (half time) to minister across our four villages of Ashill, Saham Toney, Ovington and Merton. Merton joined the benefice informally in April 2024 and this is working well across the group.

The parish of Carbrooke, which was formally part of this group, is under the care of Watton. Formal reorganisation is in progress and will be completed by the end of the year.

The Ashill Benefice is made up of four parishes – St Nicholas, Ashill, St George's, Saham Toney, St John the Evangelist, Ovington and St Peter's, Merton. We work well together to make Christ known in our communities. Our churches are all listed and are of ecclesiastical and historical interest.



## Location

The Benefice is in the Breckland area of Norfolk, close to the small market towns of Watton and Swaffham. We are a rural benefice, surrounded by productive farms and woodland and close to Thetford Forest.

There are good communication links with Norwich, Kings Lynn and beyond. The unique and beautiful Norfolk Broads and the North Norfolk Coast are all within 'day trip' distance.

We are within easy reach of a good variety of sporting and cultural venues in Norwich and King's Lynn and a little further away in Cambridge, Bury St Edmunds and Ipswich.

## Who is the person we seek?

A priest who, through the Word of God and the work of the Holy Spirit, will guide us ever more closely in knowledge and love of the Christian faith.

A priest who will respect and celebrate the individuality of our four churches, our different services and traditions and who will journey with us as we grow in faith.

Each church has particular needs and practices but we believe that, as welcoming forward-looking congregations, we are ready to share our faith with openness and commitment alongside our new priest.

We seek someone who will be supportive, understanding, and inspiring in preaching and spreading the Word of God.

After a long interregnum we are looking forward with much anticipation, to welcoming and working with our new incumbent!

## What is our vision?

- To encourage those who do not believe in God to consider doing so!
- To be a visible presence in our villages and to promote 'outreach'.
- To build on existing links with our schools and reach out, in new and varying ways, to young families.
- To maintain and develop a variety of services, seeing diversity and inclusivity as providing positive opportunities.
- To encourage a greater use of music in our churches both in our services and the possibility of setting up choirs and encouraging visiting musicians.
- To use our churches for a variety of appropriate events – mindful always that they are primarily houses of prayer.
- To deepen our discipleship and spiritual growth; we would hope to develop study and prayer groups and to encourage a fresh look at how we can grow as churches within our communities.



## The Rectory

A spacious modern house has been purchased by the Diocese in the parish of Ashill.

The Rectory is a four-bedroom detached family home built in the 1970s and is located at the end of a quiet cul de sac in Ashill.

There are four bedrooms upstairs, one with an en-suite and a separate family bathroom.

Downstairs there is a large living room with separate dining room and kitchen with utility room, there is also a smaller study and W/C. The garage has been converted into a study and there is ample off-road parking on the shingled front garden/drive. There is an easily maintained rear garden with a covered patio area.

The house has gas central heating and an EPC (Energy Performance Certificate) of D64 and is connected to mains drainage.





# St Nicholas Ashill

## Our Vision

Our vision is for our church to continue to grow and move forward in faith and love and by our example encourage others to join us on the journey.

## Who are we looking for?

A person of faith, rooted in Christ to lead our church, which will encourage spiritual growth in our congregation and lead others to discover the joy of faith for themselves.

A minister who is friendly, approachable, has a real love for people and is comfortable with village life.



# Ashill – Our village

## Location

St Nicholas Ashill is a rural parish in the Breckland area of Norfolk, located between the two market towns of Swaffham and Watton. An hourly bus service serves Ashill to both towns, with half hourly connections onward to Kings Lynn and Norwich respectively. Regular trains run to London from Norwich/Diss and King's Lynn and Downham Market.

Ashill has a population of approx. 2,000; most work outside the village, going to Norwich, Kings Lynn etc. There are several productive farms within the parish but mechanisation means they employ relatively few who live in the village.

## The Village

Ashill is an active village! There is a Community Centre, which is regularly used for village events, Cubs, Brownies, singing group, fitness group and Parish Council meetings.

Next to the centre is a well maintained children's play area, multi use games area, tennis court and football pitch.

By the duck pond in the centre of the village is 'The Call-In' a much-cherished amenity for morning coffee several days a week, breakfast on Saturdays, an active Archive Group and a sewing group. The 'Call-In' is run by volunteers, under the auspices of the Ashill Village Aid Charity and is owned by the Ashill Welfare Charity which uses its funds to help members of the village who are in need; the incumbent is an ex-officio member of this charity.

Ashill has a village shop and Farm Shop; Swaffham (15mins) and Watton (10mins) both have a number of supermarkets.

There is a popular village pub; many tradespeople live and work in the village; Holme Hale a neighbouring village just a few minutes drive from Ashill has an active Gardening Club and U3A meetings.

There are many walks around the village, including to the special place that is St Mary's Houghton.



## Ashill Church of England VC School

There are many families with children in the village and a thriving Primary School with 107 students aged from 4 to 11. The church Foundation Governor is the Chair of Governors.

The school website is kept fully updated and makes clear that it is the Christian ethos that is paramount in the life of the school.

The school had an Ofsted Inspection in September 2023, which gave a rating of 'Good' overall, with 'Outstanding' in two out of the five areas inspected; personal development and leadership and management.

St Nicholas has a close link with the school; students come to church for class work and services. We hope that our new incumbent would develop this link.

There is also a Pre-School, which is held at The Fountain of Life Church, situated on the outskirts of the village. This is an 'extra-parochial place'/ missionary church' of the Church of England, which gathers people from across the county. We hope that our new incumbent will develop a good relationship with The Fountain of Life.



## St Nicholas Church

Our church is a beautiful Grade 1 Medieval Church with Victorian additions that were carried out in the time of Rev Bartholomew Edwards, who features in the Guinness Book of Records as the longest serving incumbent of all time – 76 years!

The Chancel has been adapted to form a meeting room with an independent heating system and kitchen facilities, which is a great blessing and is well used. The area under the tower is now used as the vestry; there is also a toilet here.

After a break of several years, we held a Harvest Supper in 2023 for 70 people in the church and chancel room – it was a great success and plans are in hand to have another one this year!

We are delighted to have a ring of eight bells that were re-hung with all new fittings in 1997 and are rung most Sundays before the service and on practice nights, when we are supported by bell ringers from other local towers. We are a popular tower for visiting bell ringers who are always made most welcome.

Our organ is in good condition and is played weekly by our volunteer organist with a back up of CD's of worship songs.



The church is in a fairly good condition. During the past 20 years we have re-roofed the Chancel, and the Tower and we are at present raising money to re-roof the nave. Over the past 10 years both central heating boilers have been replaced. An Open Gardens Day, Harvest Supper, Quizzes, Cake Stalls and Coffee mornings have been held during the past year in aid of funds for the Church Building. The Spring Grand Draw, Tombola and Cake Stall have just raised a total of over £1,800 for the Roof Appeal, with great support from throughout the village.

Surrounding our church is the churchyard, managed by the church and still open for burials.

The grass cutting is paid by The Ashill Welfare Fund – one-third of the cost and by the Parish Council – two thirds of the cost.

We are delighted that the school, Cubs and Brownies attend the main Festivals and Remembrance Sunday Services.



## Sunday with us



Services are held every Sunday in St Nicholas. Once a month there is Holy Communion and on the remaining Sundays various forms of Morning Worship are led by Lay Readers or AWA's. Members of the congregation take part in the service by reading, leading intercessions and welcoming at the door; all done on a rota basis. The average attendance at Ashill is around 36.

We have 44 on the Electoral Roll all of whom attend church at sometime throughout the year. We paid the Parish Share in full for 2023. During 2024 we have 2 weddings booked, and baptism and funeral services are provided when required.

Following the service each week we have coffee and fellowship in the Chancel room. The donations from this are sent to various charities, including Mission Aviation Fellowship, Mercy Ships, The Children's Society and The Bishop's Lent Appeal.

## During the week

**A Monday Mardle** is held twice monthly, an informal meeting for all, although mainly attended by retired people. Messy Church is held once during each main school holiday. Bell ringing practice is held fortnightly and we aim to ring for every service. Once a month members of the congregation go to The Lodge Care Home to sing hymns and pray with the residents, we would welcome the incumbent to join with us.

## Safeguarding

Churchwardens, Lay Reader and AWA's have completed the Diocesan Safeguarding courses; members of the PCC have also taken those required of them. We have a Safeguarding Officer who is also a PCC member and who reports to the PCC.

## What we can offer you

St Nicholas Ashill is a warm, welcoming, friendly congregation working together for the glory of God.

We are proud that over the past 3 years during the interregnum we have managed to hold the family of the church together but we really look forward to having established leadership in the future.

At St Nicholas we have a Lay Reader, and 3 AWA's with 2 more in training. A Lay chairperson has led our PCC during the interregnum.

**We look forward to the arrival of our new incumbent and assure you of our prayerful and practical support.**

## St Georges' – Saham Toney

The 13th Century Grade 1 listed building in the heart of Breckland in the Norfolk Countryside situated midway between Norwich and King's Lynn within easy reach of Thetford Forest and having the National Nature Reserves of the North Norfolk coast 33miles away.

The Church is supported by a committed but currently small congregation having weathered the Covid pandemic and a protracted vacancy. The village population is currently well over 2000, with Parkers C of E primary school, an active well-appointed community centre, with children's play park, and a popular public house.

The benefice administrator, who is currently also the PCC secretary, ensures that the currently available resources (retired clergy and AWAs) provide cover for services within each of the four churches every Sunday as well as services for Baptisms, Weddings and Funerals.

The two Church Wardens apart from ensuring the maintenance and security of the building, and the availability for services and casual visitors alike adhere to a policy of being open from dawn to dusk seven days of the week.





A good relationship is with the nearby Parker Primary School is maintained by way of regular services and informal visits by small groups where PCC members work together with Teaching Staff in explaining both the history, traditions and current activities within the Church culminating in a Q and A session. Currently an Authorised Worship Assistant conducts fortnightly assemblies in the school, which both school and church are enthused to continue.

Authorised Worship Assistants have enabled services to be held every Sunday during the vacancy with regular input from retired clergy who provide Communion and conduct Weddings, Christenings and Funerals.

The current mission statement “The Advancement of Christ’s Kingdom through Prayer and service” is as relevant today as it was when first promoted over 25 years ago.

St George’s has 6 bells which are rung for services and there is bell practice on Tuesday evenings.

Fund raising activities include regular coffee mornings and quizzes with other seasonal activities such as Easter events, Advent Breakfasts and Christmas markets etc.

Sponsored Lighting and Bell Ringing is encouraged for those special times (Birthdays, Wedding Anniversaries for example).

Pastoral activity has been somewhat neglected for several years and exacerbated by the pandemic but is still recognised as important in the expansion of both spiritual and physical well being particularly with the recent increase of the number of residential properties.



PCC meetings are held bi-monthly with a list of readers, intercessors and sides persons being maintained ensuring that all services are well supported.

Currently due to a generous legacy, ring fenced for the fabric of the building, a Tower project team has been established to progress the proposed works having to date, following two surveys (during which some minor repairs were carried out), established costs and the necessary detail to seek match funding.

The Parish Share is, by mutual agreement and subject to review, divided between the four Churches within the Benefice.

Grass cutting within the churchyard is covered by a Parish Council contract, which covers all grassed areas within the village.

The clock on the Church tower, for which funding was raised by public subscription, is also maintained by the Parish Council.

There are a number of organisations within the village; Cricket and Rugby clubs are active (when in season) on the Village playing field while Heritage and Wildlife groups are active. There is also a Hotel/restaurant set in open parkland along with a nearby caravan park open to touring caravans with a Café on site the latter is also open to the public.

The community centre, which was built in 1996, provides much needed space for several village organisations as well as a location for musical events and family celebrations. This is well served by a well-appointed car park, children's and adult play area together with a popular dog walk. During the summer months the grounds provide the ideal setting for family picnics.

Other nearby facilities include numerous public houses providing quality meals with many historic buildings, nature reserves and activity centres together ancient sites all within 30 minutes travelling time.





# St John the Evangelist, Ovington

## Our Vision

Our vision is to have someone who will bring the love of God into our village and community, someone who can encourage each one of us on our own personal Christian journey.

## What is the Task?

- To grow our youth ministry and become more inclusive to all our village communities.
- To encourage more people to come to our welcoming church.
- To be someone who is seen to be approachable.

## Who are we Looking For?

### Our new priest will be:

- A person of enthusiasm, wisdom and integrity;
- Visible in the community;
- Able to provide sensitive pastoral care;
- Inspiring to people of all ages.



## Location

Our Benefice is in rural Breckland, essentially a farming community but the nearby towns of Watton, Dereham and Swaffham provide other employment opportunities for many. The countryside has that raw rural beauty with many woods and forests. Situated in mid-Norfolk provides easy access to both Norwich and King's Lynn as well the beautiful Norfolk coastline and the Norfolk Broads.

## The Village

The Village of Ovington is situated 1.5 miles north east of Watton and can be seen from the A1075 Watton to Dereham Road. It consists of 1500 acres.

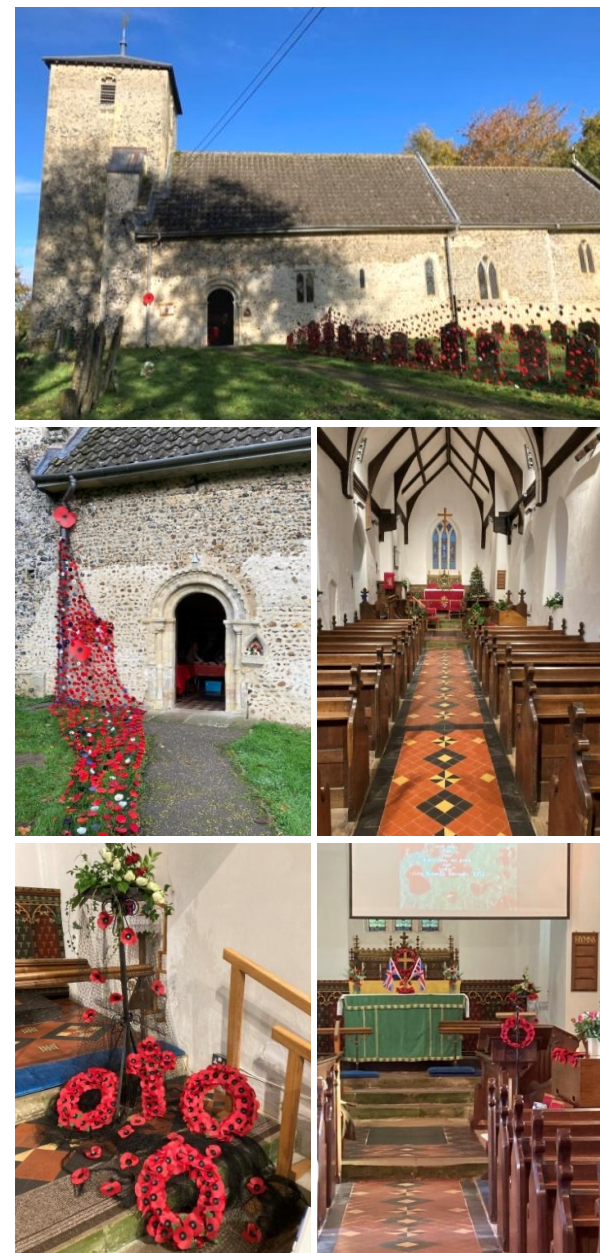
## The Church

Our church is a Grade 2 listed building, which has benefitted from a recent renovation paid for by a grant from the Heritage Lottery Fund, which matched the money we raised from concerts and other fund raising activities. Part of the funding supported a Schools Project involving seven nearby Church Schools taking part in various activities within the church, the churchyard and the nearby village hall for one day a week for a whole year. The Churchyard is open for burials including ashes.

**Please see the various photographs (right) showing:**

- a) The external of the church and churchyard plus the display of Poppies at last year's Remembrance Sunday; and
- b) The internal views showing the Altar and stained glass windows, Altar and screen used for pictures and videos during special services and Poppy Wreaths on the Altar Steps.

We also have a fitted kitchen for refreshments after service.





## The Community

There are under 300 people in the village mainly consisting of middle aged and those who have moved to the village on retirement, but there are a few younger families and a few that have lived in the village all or most of their lives.

## Our Schools

We have no schools in the Village.

## During the Week

We have a Youth Club in the village, which meets once a month in the Village Hall. Several of the PCC members are involved in helping other volunteers run this; the occasional appearance by a new vicar as part of his/her pastoral duties might be well received

## What we can offer you

Ovington Parish PCC has a medium size PCC with two churchwardens, a treasurer, a secretary, a chairperson (our Lay Minister), a parish safeguarding officer and two community liaison officers.

## Any Other Business

Ovington, like several other Norfolk villages, benefits from a "Fuel Trust"; this is a registered charity, which seeks to help villagers who have fallen upon hard times. Originally set up to provide winter fuel to the poor the remit today is broader. The constitution calls for the village vicar to be one of the 5 trustees. This is, of course, not mandatory but being involved with a charity that helps the needy would enable the incumbent to meet the villagers outside of the regular parishioners.

# St Peter's Church, Merton

## History of the Church

The church of St Peter's is a round Towered Church set in an idyllic situation, surrounded by trees in parkland which lies two and a half miles SW of the small market town of Watton. The church is locally known as 'The Church in the Park'.

The Merton Estate came to the DeGrey family in c1337 by marriage into the Baynard family and still belongs to them. There are many memorials to the DeGrey family to be seen in the church. The Estate Hall lies to the south of the church, though what remains following a fire in 1956 is largely the Victorian wing.

The Parish of Merton has very few houses, mostly of 'Estate origin. Currently the population is just over 100, many of whom are either retired or working locally.

The Church is now the only building in the village available for public use; consequently its importance within the village is much treasured. Functions held at the church, including Open Days are always well supported. Merton Parish Council regularly book the church for their meetings.





## The Church Today

In recent years there has been some association with St Mary's Watton. This has provided much spiritual and everyday guidance for several years.

Being a very small rural and old 'Estate Church' it is felt that having a positive link to a larger church and wider community has the potential to enable us to create a more healthy and productive Christian outlook for the Parish of Merton.

It is now proposed that Merton Parish should become part of the Ashill Benefice. This proposal has been given full consideration by Merton PCC and a Resolution to that effect has been agreed by the PCC.

## Services

Traditionally, St Peter's is a church which essentially uses the Book of Common Prayer for its services.

We celebrate Holy Communion and sung Morning Prayer on a regular monthly pattern with Choral Evensong on occasion, together with the usual Festival services during the year on Mothering Sunday, Easter, Harvest Thanksgiving and Christmas, including a Candlelit Carol Service followed by seasonal refreshments.

Attendance at normal regular services has varied between 6 and 10 persons. At Festival times our congregation can range from 25 to 40, with a healthy number of 8 to 10 children all of whom are encouraged to take an active part in the service. The enthusiasm and eagerness from the youngsters to take part has always been most rewarding for everyone involved!

During the course of a year a wedding is often celebrated; on average there are 2 to 3 funerals. There is the occasional Baptism – and pleasingly there was one this May.

## The Church and Services Currently

Following the restrictions during the Covid Pandemic together with fewer clergy available at St Peter's, the PCC decided to move to just one service per month with the intention that this would allow greater flexibility and availability of clergy to conduct a service at Merton.

The PCC also agreed that although the Book of Common Prayer is preferred for services, we are not opposed, for Holy Communion, to the use of 'Holy Communion Order One' in traditional language.

The PCC at St Peter's are very mindful of the importance of providing a continuity of Church Services at Merton. Three PCC meetings plus an APCM are held each year.

Following the Covid 19 restrictions and lockdown it must be noted there has been a small decline in numbers at services, but a celebratory Open Day during Daffodil Time for the re-opening brought healthy numbers of folk to the church, especially as refreshments were available and there was overall a satisfying result in donations to help Church Funds.

## Merton Church Project Plans and The National Heritage Lottery Fund Grant

Following the theft of lead from the nave roof in late 2015 an application for a grant was made to The National Heritage Lottery Fund to:

- a) Repair the nave roof and make it weatherproof
- b) Install a kitchenette to enable catering facilities for community and heritage events to be held in the church
- c) Replacement of existing chemical lavatory and old shed with a new accessible timber building.

Merton was awarded a grant of £100,000 towards these improvements.

Due to Covid restrictions and various other unavoidable delays, although the nave roof was fully repaired, the other works were delayed. However, a contract for the kitchenette within the church and other necessary work was achieved in early 2023 – though with considerable increases in costings.

Unfortunately, due to insufficient funds available the replacement of the toilet was not possible; it remains the intention of the PCC to install when the necessary funds are raised.

The Project has provided an important opportunity to make Merton Church, in addition to a place of worship, a building to be used for more community, school and heritage activities and also a functional place for people to gather as a village meeting place, especially as Merton lacks a village hall or other community building.

Another significant factor is that Merton Church is situated immediately adjacent to the Peddars Way, much used by walkers and rambling groups and also lies on one of the National Cycle routes.

An increase in visitor numbers will provide opportunities for securing donations, which will enhance the sustainability of the church by boosting PCC funds and importantly contribute to the preservation of a unique part of local history.



**Thank you for reading our profile.**  
We hold this appointment in our prayers  
and look forward to hearing from you.



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