

The CHURCH of St PETER, RIDLEY

HERITAGE STATEMENT

St Peter's church serves the parish of Ridley, only 837 acres in size, which was created in Saxon times as recorded in the Domesday book. The Redlege (Ridley) parish was established some several hundred years earlier, probably about 600 AD. Prior to the Norman Conquest, a Saxon church had been built, as recorded in the "Textus Roffensis," in which the ancient records of the diocese of Rochester are given. The present church building is basically of Norman flint walled construction of the 12th and 13 centuries followed by two extensions in Victorian times

St Peter's remains an independent benefice within the Church of England. The Patron and Rector are shared with the neighbouring benefice of Ash and New Ash Green. There has been a continuity of 51 Rectors at St Peter's since 1327, in the reign of King Edward III. Since 1909 the incumbent has been shared with Ash, though the two churches continue to function amicably as otherwise independent bodies.

Since its inception, Ridley inhabitants have mainly depended on agricultural activities for their livelihood. It is only in recent years, as farming has consolidated, that the current inhabitants, many of whom are new to the district, now depend on their livelihood for employment outside of the parish. As a Greenfield designated area, new house building has been restricted. It is only with the conversion of farm buildings providing new residences that we now see the population increasing slightly to the present level of about 80. It is relevant to note that in the 1841 census the population stood at 91. In comparison our neighbouring Ash church services a parish population of some 6,500.

The church building itself is basically of flint construction with a tiled roof. The Norman construction is exemplified by the small window in the North Wall, and the Chancel arch some 700 to 800 years old. Internally items of historical interest include (a) worn stones by the font, where archers sharpened arrows for obligatory post service archery practice in the Middle Ages. (b) A hole in the wall to enable lepers receive communion. (c) The modern stained glass window by Leonard Walker in remembrance of the Hennell Family (including the father Harold being rector 1909-42 and his son Tom the Noted war and countryside artist). In recent window repairs, Walker's work was identified as of artistic and technical value, and was given special protection to protect window and the colours. (d) The two 1834 pews identified by Historic England as a rare remaining sample of simple rural construction, and worthy of preservation (e) The lectern has been fashioned from a Jacobean bedpost. f. Externally the thatched Bowdler Well (currently being restored) and the metal sculpture "The Angel of Ridley" provide interest for many visitors.

The church has a number of literary/artistic associations. From 1811-22 the rector was Thomas Bowdler whose uncle, Dr. Thomas Bowdler, was renowned for expurgation of works

of the English language. The life and times of Thomas Phelps the rector from 1840 to 1893, who executed the extension of the church in the Victorian style during his tenure, is recorded in detail in the book by Gerald Van Loo. The artist Thomas Hennell, a lay reader in the forties, whose father was rector between 1900 and 1942, has his work and life commemorated, not only in the family stained glass window, but in a detailed book on his life as a countryman, author and artist, by Michael Macleod. A second book by Jessica Kilburn dealing with his life and paintings is planned to be released in 2020. A more detailed description of the current church and parish is contained in the 2017 joint publication "The parishes of St Peter and St Paul, Ash and St Peter, Ridley" by the respective PCC's

There is no traditional village of Ridley as such. There is no longer a parish school, and no village green, shop, pub, or village hall. The church is the sole communal building, and St Peter's has sometimes been referred to as the church in the farmyard. Ridley suffered badly with The "Black Death", in the 1300's, resulting in several survivors rebuilding homes away from the central area, initiating dwellings in the New Street area of the parish. The church does have strong community support, best exemplified by regular help from "The Ridley Society" in helping with the traditional harvest Lunch, and providing Refreshments with the annual Carol Service which fills the church to capacity. The Ridley Xmas card, by the artist Liz Rolph has for 20 years related the church activities with the farm animals and is now eagerly awaited by recipients globally. The church has good acoustics and recent concerts in the building have been most successful. The graveyard was declared full in the 50's, and still is the responsibility of the PCC. Recently a faculty has been obtained permitting the interment of ashes with a small head stone which is proving to be a popular amenity for the parish. The church is always open, and many, both secular and ecumenical, comment on the peace and inspiration that they find in the building. The foregoing are some of the current positive contribution to the future heritage, we are continuing to develop.

The survival of such a church as St Peters would appear to be something of an anomaly to many, in the modern world in this country. The church must have one of the smallest parish populations in the country, to be able to hold regular weekly services and to maintain financial viability. In the 1970's, serious consideration was given to closing Ridley Church down. On occasion the rector would have no one attend the weekly Sunday service. The community reacted to the threat, and since then attendance and growth of the church has significantly improved, and it has now been in a stable and independent position for some 30 years. It has already had to deal with, and resolve over some forty years many of current issues threatening the existence of other churches in the country. However modern amenities are however essential if the church is to continue to have greater and wider use by both the Church of England, and the community.

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A F Wishart Churchwardens - December 2019

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