

RE: Open Churches Weekend 2010

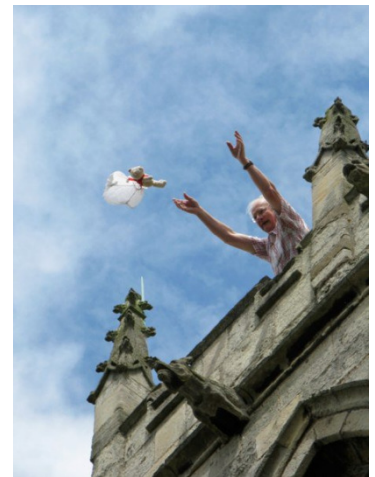
Thursday, 12th August 2010

Dear

As you will know, seventy churches across the Bassetlaw and Newark & Sherwood Districts of Nottinghamshire opened their doors to visitors on Saturday 3rd and Sunday 4th of July 2010. In the time since this event we have been collecting all of your feedback via conversation, letter and email, and we have been using this to learn as much as we can from the pilot in order to make future events even better.

Many churches hosted events such as tower tours, historical displays, arts and crafts, plant stalls and prayer/meditation stations. There was also one scarecrow exhibition and one teddy bears' parachute jump (from the church tower)! These attractions, plus the beauty of the buildings themselves, meant that altogether the churches received approximately 2000 visits in total. One church alone raised well over £1000 during the weekend through donations and sales of refreshments, plants and crafts. However, we are also aware of a few churches that had very few visitors despite the booklet and publicity, and we are just as grateful for their efforts.

As one visitor commented, the response of your churches *"was really quite overwhelming and meant I stayed for some time. Local people had taken it very seriously, put on displays, tea and cakes/biscuits, and made visitors really welcome... some also had stalls from the local history societies so that you could learn not just about the church but also the community - and this of course got quite a few local people through the door."*



Teddy being thrown from Ordsall church tower
- photo by Alison Thorpe

Here is a sample of some of the other visitor comments we received:

"We saw the 'Open Church' board at the roadside and were very impressed by the church and its setting."

"We were almost overwhelmed by the amount on display."

"The scale of a pilot scheme was impressive. The quality of the publicity was astonishing and gave the impression that the project had been running for years."

Here is a sample of some comments from church representatives such as yourself who organised the open weekend in their respective parishes:



"Overall the weekend went extremely well and better than we'd anticipated. We had many visitors – a good mixture of local people and people who had travelled to come to see the church -and or- the history display we had put up."

"Of our visitors, 5 were French people visiting a house opposite the church who had seen the A board... all who visited us received a warm and friendly welcome."

"As you know we had a Local Art Exhibition (paintings) which brought people to Wheatley Church... we have raised almost £700 for church."

"Most took advantage of our open tower to see the bells and the views from the tower roof."

"The displays we had were well studied – the registers in particular – and there were many conversations and recollections being shared."

"There were folk who came to the church because they've driven past it every day and never been in. So that was good."

But aside from all of the hustle and bustle of activity, some churches stood out as particular havens for peace and welcome. Visitors were able to experience some touching moments of prayer and deep connection in these buildings – buildings where Christians have prayed and worshipped for centuries. One visitor to St Mary's church, Blidworth, was able to view for the first time a memorial to her late sister who had died in an accident. One young boy was inspired to learn about votive candles, lit one and prayed for his cousin who had recently died. Others who were bereaved, emotional or lonely found welcome and peace.



Here are some more of your comments on the event overall:

"The event was enjoyed by those who manned the church all of whom love to welcome visitors to our beautiful old church... we are looking forward to next year already!"

"Visitors were so delighted by the church that it made it thrilling to be part of the event."

"We are very glad to have been involved and have learnt a lot through the training etc plus we now have a guidebook so on the whole we're very happy!"

"We weren't expecting that many visitors but we've been pleasantly surprised – it's been a joy!"

"Open Churches was a wonderful initiative and was really successful here with about 70 visitors."

"I thoroughly enjoyed doing it and am inspired – 'what can we do next?!'"



Looking ahead

We are already looking ahead to next year when we will avoid obvious clashes of date such as the Wimbledon tennis final and the world cup – which may have hampered visitor numbers this year.

We also plan to widen our publicity of the event. But as one visitor pointed out, *"once the booklet is in the public domain it will stimulate folk to visit the churches throughout the year,"* others agreed, *"With it being a new idea, it may take two or three years to become well known."* *"The open churches weekend can only grow and grow."*



Although plans will not be firmed up until late September, it is likely that we may open the weekend up to the other half of the Diocese and focus resources on them in 2011, returning to Bassetlaw and Newark & Sherwood Districts as the main focus in 2012, and thus establishing a bi-annual cycle. However, we will let you know the date(s) as soon as we can and if you would still like to join in we would still encourage it – perhaps by having a 'back page mention' in the booklet.

We are currently thinking of having *two* weekends – the first and the second weekends in July so as to give potential visitors more opportunity to come. As I say though this is just what we're exploring for 2011 and it is not set in stone.



In conclusion

I will give the last word to a visitor from Chilwell who travelled the length of the county to explore churches in the Beckingham benefice. I am sure his feelings apply to all: *"I felt they had all made a tremendous effort and, of course, were extremely proud of their churches and church buildings, even if they were struggling financially... I felt that we were looking at deeply committed communities, some in a relatively remote area, with a great deal of faith in their villages and churches."*

We would like to thank you, once again for all of your tremendous hard work in making the Open Churches Weekend a success! If you would be interested to see a six-page document including all of the comments received as feedback on the event, email me on Heather.Sirrel@southwell.anglican.org and I will gladly send you a copy.



With many thanks,

Heather

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