

## Parish of Alston Moor – Vicar's Report for 2024 (11<sup>th</sup> May, 2025)

As I read my report from last year, I'm struck by how much of what I wrote then, I could repeat this year – I could almost copy and paste most of the report! This is no bad thing: it's not because we're stagnating, but because so much of what we do is the ongoing, faithful work of being part of God's church here on the Moor. It's always wise to keep asking ourselves if what we do and how we do it – and why we do it – are still appropriate or relevant; but often the answer will be yes! By and large we are good at what we do, and respected in the community; and that comes from faithfulness in worship, welcome and hospitality as much as from seeking to innovate.

So as I look back over 2024, I feel immensely thankful for richness of our church life here on the Moor, and want to celebrate it. I wrote last year, *"For all the challenges we face, the Holy Spirit is doing exciting things here, and it's a joy to be a part of the life of the Church on Alston Moor"*: I haven't changed my mind!

### Worship

The life of the church is necessarily rooted in prayer and worship – coming together in the presence of our Creator to be strengthened, nourished, reorientated and sent out to serve our communities. We have a wonderful team of worship leaders – Bar, Andy, Richard, Richard and Lizzie, as well as Churchwardens Richard, Madeleine and James; and our retired clergy friends Stephen and Philip – unlike most of my clergy colleagues, I enjoy the privilege of an occasional Sunday sitting in the pews! And I love that in practically any service in the parish, multiple members of the congregation are actively involved, whether in welcoming, reading, leading prayers or providing refreshments. We own our worship! And visitors tell us how much they feel welcomed as part of our worshipping family.

One highlight of the year was the Confirmation on the Feast of St Michael and All Angels, 29<sup>th</sup> September. Bishop Mark presided and preached on this joyous occasion, and confirmed 8 candidates – four from our own parish and four from Beltingham.

This year we resumed monthly services in St John's Garrigill, which means that we now offer services at least monthly in every church in the parish; and there is at least one Eucharist every Sunday. Daily offices are still said in Alston and Nenthead, as well as Friday Night Prayer online; and most services from St Augustine's are livestreamed. We have a couple of regular online worshippers on weekdays; we rarely have 'live' online participants on Sundays, but our services are quite often watched on YouTube after the event.

On Sundays St Augustine, Alston has three Sung Eucharists and a 'Prayer and Praise' each month; Holy Paraclete, Kirkhaugh maintains its tradition of fortnightly BCP services, sometimes with Taizé music; and the quarterly 'Come & Sing Evensong' is much appreciated. St John, Nenthead has a regular pattern of Eucharists and Morning Prayer three weeks a month. St Jude, Knaresdale and St John, Garrigill have a variety of special services on a monthly basis. Monthly Services in Lambley continue, but as almost all the members of the congregation have moved away the 'Messy' services have come to an end – it will be a challenge to rebuild a congregation there.

Ecumenically, the Thursday Holy Communion at the Chat Room has become an important part of the week. The new monthly service at Grisedale Croft is greatly appreciated, and has opened a door for us to offer more care to the residents and staff – something to build on.

We concluded that our fifth Sunday online services no longer met a need, so in 2025 we will be exploring alternatives – starting with a lovely gathering at the Hive on Mothering Sunday. The parish prayer group has also come to a natural end; but we continue to pray for the parish's mission at Saturday Evening Prayer.

### Baptisms, weddings, funerals

We had fewer occasional offices than usual in 2024. Our churches held nine funerals, including the unforgettable service for Trevor Wright (oh no it wasn't), a farewell to Dorothy Gilder soon after her 100<sup>th</sup> birthday, and the funerals of both Mary and Roger Rutter in Knaresdale. May they rest in peace and rise in glory.

There were just three baptisms this year – including, wonderfully, the first two in Nenthead for more than a decade – and, for the first time in since I was ordained over 20 years ago, not a single wedding. The national

trend of fewer baptisms, church weddings and church funerals has reached us, accelerated in the wake of Covid 19 – a pity, because I believe that what we offer has vastly more depth and substance than the secular alternatives.

## Church and Community Life

### Structures and meetings

Our PCC and Standing Committee meet regularly, as do the DCCs in Alston and Kirkhaugh. The Leadership Team meets from time to time, socially as well as for business, but the open meetings we hold 3-4 times a year are not attracting much interest beyond the team. The Churchwardens also meet to support each other and share experience and wisdom. Dissolving the DCCs in Knaresdale, Lambley, Nenthead and Garrigill simplified our structures but left something of a void in those churches; so we'll be experimenting with occasional open meetings there in 2025.

The Pastoral Visitors continue to meet, to co-ordinate the pastoral care which we offer, and are looking at training as 'Anna Chaplains', which should help us to increase our effectiveness and reach, and possibly to work with the local doctors' surgeries. For some years we also had a thriving 'Green Team'; I would like to see us pick up our environmental engagement again in the near future.

St Augustine's now has an active project management group, and there are informal groups in Knaresdale and Garrigill working to take forward the projects there. More generally, we have discussed the desirability of a parish building maintenance group; I think such a group would be immensely valuable, and hope we will be able to set one up.

This sounds like an awful lot of meetings! And in a sense it is; but this reflects just how much is going on in our parish – and I'm always thankful that we work together with great love and respect. Business meetings they may be, but they feel rather like gatherings of friends.

### Mission Action Plan (MAP)

In August we held a 'Vision Day' at Lovelady Shield, to listen to what God has in mind for us, and establish our priorities for the coming year or two. We agreed on three priorities: 1) to bring our church family closer together, possibly by means of a parish directory; 2) a 'fresh expression' – new, accessible way of worshipping on Fifth Sundays; 3) training/discipleship – encourage us all to identify, celebrate and use our gifts. Interestingly, shortly after the Bishop launched a 'Year of Seeking' for the diocese to look out for what God has in mind for us – as so often, we were ahead of the game!

### Andy and Richard

After a number of years exploring their vocations, what a joy that both Andy and Richard have been moving forward. Andy was recommended in 2024 for training for ordination, and is due to be ordained Deacon in June 2025; Richard has taken further steps in the discernment process, and we look forward to a recommendation being made in the coming weeks.

### Ecumenical

One of the things which makes church life on Alston Moor so special is the strength of our relationships with the other churches: we have several people worshipping in more than one congregation, musicians playing for multiple congregations, and warm relationships among laity and clergy alike. The ecumenical Fraternal group (a gathering of both clergy and lay leaders from the Anglican, Catholic and Methodist churches) meets regularly; and we have shared a number of events – the Lent and Advent groups and Christian Aid lunch; the Covenant Service and Harvest Festival; the Good Friday Prayers at the Cross and Last Hour at St Wulstan's; services for the Week of Prayer for Christian Unity and the World Day of Prayer; the Remembrance Sunday and All Souls services. Our Harvest Supper at the Cumberland Inn was a new venture this year, much enjoyed and to be repeated. In 2024 we bade farewell to the Revd Keith Speck, and welcomed Dean Lawson, the new Methodist lay pastoral worker. And it was a joy to attend Fr John's silver jubilee Mass in Penrith in the summer.

### Community engagement

Josephine's masterful playing of the carillon on Sunday mornings and other occasions is a special feature of

life in Alston, which the community, and visitors to Alston, treasure, and which is often commented on in social media.

The Alston Essentials prescription deliveries and *Faith in the Moor*, which never ceases to amaze me with its quality, are the most visible faces of our community engagement. Less visible but equally valuable, the church is represented on the Alston Moor Emergency Response Group and the newly formed Alston Moor & Fellside Place Action Group. It says a great deal for our standing in the community that we are welcomed without question as partners in these groups.

We have begun to strengthen our engagement with the schools of the Alston Moor Federation, and are delighted that the Principal, Rob Dawson is keen to develop this. We host services for the schools, in Alston and Nenthead, at key moments during the year, and love receiving works of art from Nenthead School at the high points of the Christian year. In recent months Andy and I have resumed leading assemblies in the schools, and we are exploring the possibility of offering regular pastoral care to students and staff.

Likewise, I'm delighted that we have begun to rebuild links with the St Augustine's Guide Company, who have come to St Augustine's church a couple of times during the year, and will again I'm sure.

Knaresdale's Coffee Stop has become such a core part of the life of the community, drawing people from far and wide; we're immensely grateful both to the ladies who give so generously of their time and baking, and to the Kirkstyle Inn for their delicious monthly contributions! In Garrigill, Angela Drane's monthly Coffee Shop is equally appreciated, and a wonderful source of income to the church there: it's fair to say that Angela's events – Coffee Shop, Jumble Sale, Spanish Evening – have turned St John's finances around – thank you! Thank you too to Veronica and Chris, the *Brief Encounter Duo*, for donating half the proceeds from their brilliant musical performance to the silent film *Piccadilly*.

As part of our vision for our church buildings at the heart of their communities we've continued to hold events in Alston and Knaresdale churches – and, in 2024 for the first time, in Nenthead church. A wide range of musical events – including part of the Alston Live festival – as well as Alston Art Group's annual exhibition, and talks in Knaresdale and Alston by Chrissie Griffiths and Alastair Robertson respectively, about the churchyards and their 'residents'. A particular highlight was Kenneth Wilson's moving sequence of poems and Bach Cello Suites in Holy Week. All this activity has attracted interest beyond the Moor – Steve Chaplin devoted an episode of his *3 Tynes Podcast* to our musical endeavours (<https://3tynespodcast.substack.com/p/secular-music-in-churches>)

I was also thrilled that Cath Graham hosted a 'Brew with the Crew' in St Augustine's to support our Great North Air Ambulance – great that the community is beginning to feel able to use their churches like this!

## Buildings and more

All six churches have had their obligatory Quinquennial Inspections ('QIs') this year, and Alastair our architect has produced very detailed and comprehensive reports which highlight the work which needs to be completed immediately and in the short, medium and long term.

## Rejuvenating St John's Garrigill

It's lovely to have a good news story to tell! By the end of 2023 St John's had no congregation, a declining bank balance and little apparent future. But a well-attended open meeting uncovered a real love for the church in the community, and a desire to help it to thrive. Generous giving by a number of people, Angela's amazing fundraising efforts, and help with churchyard maintenance, cleaning and decorating the church, flower arranging and more, have transformed the church's prospects. I'm immensely grateful to David Hymers who has put a great deal of time into researching grant funding, to Alice Bondi for her work on developing a permanent exhibition for the church, to a generous benefactor who has pledged a substantial sum in match funding. We are well on the way to being able to restore the porch and vestry, and install toilets and servery facilities –making Garrigill the best-equipped church in the parish – for now!

## The future of St Jude's Knaresdale

At last the covenant on the Old Rectory has been lifted, in return for a substantial payment from the Knarsdale Estate, which will go a fair way towards paying for the increasingly urgent repairs that the church needs. Though it strictly belongs in next year's report, it's worth mentioning that an open meeting early in

2025 has raised a lot of interest in the community, and potentially some practical and financial support. Watch this space!

### **Rekindling St Augustine's**

More good news! After many meetings and an immense amount of work by Richard Gr, Andy and Richard Gl, tender documents were drawn up and circulated, and Doonan Architects of Hexham have been appointed to oversee the Rekindling project. Joan's estate has been settled and the properties should be sold soon. The aim is for the detailed planning and obtaining of permissions to be completed in 2025, the bulk of the work done in 2026 and the whole project completed before St Augustine's Day 2027. The Bishop has been booked to come and rededicate the church on Sunday 23<sup>rd</sup> May 2027 – reserve the date now!

### **The Wider Church**

#### **Deanery**

The deanery has a full complement of clergy – no vacancies at present, since we welcomed the Revd Ollie Dempsey as the new vicar of the Churches on the Wall (East). We were pleased to welcome both the Deanery Chapter (clergy gathering) and Deanery Synod to meetings in Alston this year. Along with other parishes in the deanery, we were committed to a Generous Giving campaign in 2024, though in the event we found it necessary to postpone it until early 2025.

#### **Readers**

We were pleased to welcome the West Northumberland Readers group to Alston for an afternoon, finishing with Evening Prayer.

#### **Hexham Abbey flower festival**

It's worth noting that some of the finest flower arrangements at Hexham Abbey's flower festival in July were by our arrangers – it made me very proud to see them!

### **What else does a vicar do?**

It might be of interest to list some of the other things which have come my way over the past year:

- Visiting parishioners who were experiencing poltergeist activity
- Diocesan Environment Working Group
- Annual reviews with our Readers and Lay Minister
- Blessing a home
- Supporting the partner of someone with alcohol and mental health issues
- Going on retreat
- Diocesan emergency response group training
- Visiting parishioners in hospital
- Conversations with parishioners (churchgoers and non-churchgoers) in distress
- Chairing meetings of local charities
- Supper with the Bishop and other clergy
- Attending the Bishop's garden party(!)
- Clergy conference in Hexham Abbey
- Jury service (clergy are no longer exempt)
- Baptism and Confirmation preparation
- Pre- and post-funeral visits
- Attending Nenthead School's Big Breakfast
- Training for clergy preparing to supervise curates
- Training in making church accessible to neurodiverse people
- Ministerial Development Review ('work assessment')
- Supervision sessions with ordinand in training
- Home communions
- Clergy study day
- Talking to blacksmith about refurbishing church gates

## Looking to the Future

We are at an exciting, if challenging point in the life of our various churches: the Rekindling project in Alston is moving forward apace; Garrigill has new life and hope; Knaresdale has the beginnings of a way forward. Nenthead and Kirkhaugh continue in good heart. The future for Lambley will require serious thought and prayer in the months to come. And the regular, faithful life of our six churches – worshipping, loving, serving – continues to bring hope to our communities. All of this will require significant time and effort, but we are blessed with wonderfully gifted and committed people to do it!

In addition to the longstanding devotion of so many of you – practically everyone in our congregations is committed in one way or another – the prospect of several new Churchwardens this year fills me with great joy! We are, God willing, about to have a Deacon, when Andy is ordained; and all being well, he will be ordained Priest in 2026.

I would like us also to consider further how we can become ever more inclusive and welcoming to all. I was delighted when our PCC agreed this year that ‘Prayers of Love and Faith’ – prayers of thanksgiving for those living in same sex and other relationships – could be used in the parish. It would be good to consider whether we can take further steps towards inclusivity, sharing the radical love and acceptance of Christ.

## Personal

Much though I love being vicar here – and I do! I love the people, the churches, the place – it will come as no surprise that after nearly 11 years I’m increasingly sensing that the time may be right for a change; both for me and for the parish which, I think, needs new ideas and new direction which I can’t give. So over the coming months I will be actively seeking what God may have in mind for me next – confident in the knowledge that if and when I do move, the parish will be in excellent hands.

## People

My report wouldn’t be complete without warm and heartfelt thanks to all of you who make up our church families and, by your loving faithfulness and commitment make them the wonderful, welcoming communities they are. Not only those of you with official roles: the Leadership Team, Churchwardens and sidespeople, organists, bell ringers, magazine editors; the PCC and DCC members, lay vice chairs, secretaries and treasurers; the safeguarding officer, pastoral visitors and prescription deliverers; those who tidy, clean and polish, arrange flowers, tend churchyards; those who prepare All Age worship, read lessons, lead intercessions and serve as web hosts; those who fulfil all the other tasks which I may overlook. But also every single one of you who, by your presence, your faithfulness, your prayers enrich the life of the church on Alston Moor.

Thank you – and God bless you all.

Your friend and vicar,  
Mark Nash-Williams  
11<sup>th</sup> May 2025