

Benefice of Gillingham, Milton on Stour & Silton Parish Profile - Rector



Open to God, Open to All



**The Parishes of St Mary the Virgin, Gillingham,
St Simon & St Jude, Milton on Stour & St Nicholas, Silton**

Contents

Page

Introduction from the Bishop of Sherborne	1
The person we are seeking	2
Where we are now	3
Outreach in Gillingham	4
Map and description of the area	5
St Mary the Virgin, Gillingham	6
St Simon & St Jude, Milton on Stour	8
St Nicholas, Silton	9
Our schools	11
Current ministry team	13
The Benefice Office and Vicarage School Room	14
The Rectory	15
Current pattern of services	16
Statistics for 2024	17
Blackmore Vale Deanery	18

The Benefice of Gillingham, Milton on Stour & Silton

Introduction to Vacancy by the Bishop of Sherborne

This is an exciting opportunity for a priest with the right gifts to serve as Rector of the growing town of Gillingham in north Dorset, together with two vibrant small village church communities.

We are seeking someone with leadership gifts, comfortable within a central Anglican tradition with experience of a range of worship styles, who can bring their own gifts and vision here.

The new Rector will be joining a team of local leaders, lay and ordained to share in ministry and mission. As a growing town with much new housing, there are numerous opportunities for outreach, to develop ministry and the life of the congregations. You will need to be committed to ministry inside and outside the church, within local schools and see the potential in welcoming newcomers and building up people in their faith. The training of lay ministers, the building up of team and the development of new ministry to reach the missing generations will enable the church here to continue to grow and bring transformation to those that live within its reach.

The Vicarage School Room in the heart of the town has been a focus for community outreach, including a café run by local volunteers a couple of times a week, and a monthly Repair Shop.

The diocese are committed to outreach to children, young people and missing generations so there is possibility of further resources to assist this in years to come. This also includes the appointment of a colleague to share in mission and ministry.

The church sits at the heart of the town centre adjacent to the vicarage school room and the rectory. Gillingham is a considerable local hub with good supermarkets and other local shops and businesses. The train station gives connectivity to London and the West Country.

Milton on Stour is a short drive from the town centre. The re-ordered space provides a welcoming space for community events and is next to the primary school with whom there are close links. A little further north, Silton is a congregation gathered around BCP liturgy. It is an intensely local missional and pastoral congregation.

There are good colleagues within the Blackmore Vale Deanery. Most have joined the Deanery within the past two or three years. The deanery plan is attached to this profile for information. This aligns closely with the diocesan vision of making Jesus Known in ways that are relevant and accessible.

This is an ideal post for someone wanting to relocate to Dorset, with good administrative support, town centre opportunities, countryside right on the doorstep and the coast not too far away..



Should you wish to know more about the vacancy please do not hesitate to get in touch. With me, or the Archdeacon of Sherborne, The Venerable Penny Sayer (01305 269074)

+Karen (01747 811960)

Opportunity



Open to God, Open to All

Town and two villages

The main church is in the centre of the old town at the heart of the community, with the Rectory, church hall and office just across the road, plus two village churches, one with church school right next door and one centred on a missional BCP community.

The Person we are seeking

The person we are seeking will have...

- A passion for the gospel and the ability to proclaim it in word and action to people of all ages.
- A strong belief in collaborative ministry, able to equip, empower and motivate us all to serve Christ and his church.
- Personal qualities that include kindness, compassion, approachability and empathy.
- An enthusiasm to engage with our growing town and the village communities in many and varied ways.

The person we are seeking will be...

- Comfortable with both Common Worship and Book of Common Prayer, and prepared to support and continue the diversity of our liturgies and rites across the benefice.
- A team player – accessible, approachable and energetic – as well as a person of prayer, guided by the Holy Spirit.
- Keen to support our schools putting children, young people and their families at the heart of all ministry and mission.
- Equally keen to minister to the older members of our community in church, at home, and in hospital and to share that ministry with others.

Where we are now



The benefice comprises a town parish, Gillingham, with two rural parishes, Milton on Stour and Silton. Gillingham is a friendly town with an ancient centre, which has in recent decades expanded greatly. Its fine church occupies a dominant position in the old town centre at the heart of the community, with the Rectory, church hall and office just across the road. The village of Milton on Stour is very close to Gillingham, the church itself and the adjacent school being only half a mile from the northern edge of the town, and the village of Silton is less than two miles away. In terms of geography, therefore, the benefice is very compact and as a result there is a real sense of shared identity and the feeling of being one benefice rather than three individual parishes. Common Worship is generally used in Gillingham and Milton on Stour, whereas Silton is a gathered church centred on a long BCP tradition, missional and pastoral... and sells very good marmalade!

The last Rector was here for 14 years before leaving to take up a new post in Yorkshire. Since then, the parishes have really pulled out the stops and almost nothing that used to happen has ceased. Outreach in Gillingham continues very much as before and some of these activities are shown on the next page.

Our hope for the future



The diocesan vision and strategy, *Making Jesus Known*, gives us a sound plan with which to go forward, led by an inspiring Rector who can bring others on in new ways of ministry and service. One of our priorities is to extend our ministry to children and young people. An informal service of all-age worship, begun in 2011 in the school hall of St Mary the Virgin Primary School and held on the first Sunday of every month, ceased during Covid and we would really like to restart this or something like it. The school is situated away from the church on the south side of town, amidst a lot of new housing and close to where much of the new build is currently happening: its excellent hall with large stained-glass window was originally built with the idea of it being used as a worship centre on this side of the town.

Our partnership with our schools – both church and community schools – is a work in progress and we recognize that it is here where we have the strongest opportunities for connecting with children and young people. At the heart of our benefice are our loyal congregations and their commitment to outreach and work in the wider community.



Outreach in Gillingham

Eden Café

The café is run and supported by church members together with others from the extended community. It is held in the Vicarage School Room Wednesday afternoons between 2pm and 4.30pm and Thursday mornings between 10am and mid-day. An opportunity to relax with tea or coffee and cake in the Cafe. Recycle some things that don't go in the kerbside bin ...buy from a range of pre-loved books, jigsaws, etc.



This café also runs the local Gillingham Repair Café on the second Saturday of every month, where a team of fixers are available to perform repairs while you wait, for a small donation.



Craft-a-Noon at the Eden Café

Every Wednesday afternoon between 2pm and 4.30pm an opportunity to take along craft activities and projects and enjoy a cuppa and good company.



Board Games Afternoon

Every first Wednesday at 2:30pm in the Vicarage School Room.



St Mary's Church Choir



A regular practice is held every Thursday at 6:15pm for 45 mins.

We are a small but loyal choir of about 10 who do not robe. We lead the singing of hymns in the service and sing a suitable hymn during Communion.

Our organist, Dr Daniel Cummins, is our choir director and he chooses all our hymns and music, matching the hymn choice very ably to the theme of the week.

We also perform music for Christmas/Easter/Lent and other special services.

Daniel very expertly chooses music across a range of styles, that we can manage and enjoy singing. He constantly inspires us to sing better. Music is an important part of the worship at St Mary's.

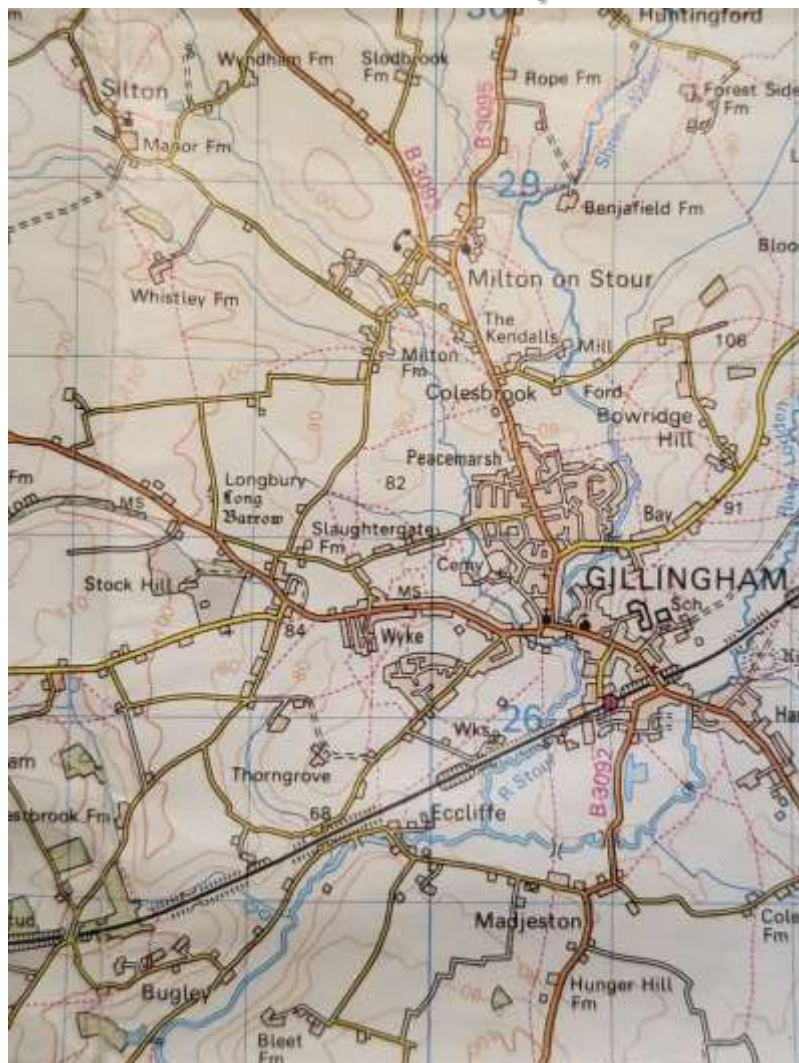
St Mary's Church Bell Ringing

There are 8 bells at St Mary the Virgin, with a 24cwt tenor (plus a small Sanctus bell).

The bells are rung for the regular 10am Sunday Eucharist service, plus special services (e.g Crib Service, Remembrance Sunday and the Town Carol Service); also for wedding service bookings.

There is a small dedicated team of ringers. Practice night is Mondays 7:30pm to 9pm (excluding bank holidays). Visiting ringers are often welcomed at our practices. The tower is within the Mere Branch of the Salisbury Diocesan Guild of Ringers.

Map and description of the area



© Ordnance Survey

Gillingham (hard G as in Gilbert) is the most northerly town in Dorset, close to both the Somerset and Wiltshire borders, approximately 4 miles south of the A303 trunk road. It is the largest population centre in north Dorset with a population of 11,007 (2021 Census and growing). This is greater than the nearby and perhaps better-known towns of Shaftesbury, Sherborne and Blandford Forum. It is also one of the fastest growing towns in the Southwest and has been identified in the North Dorset Local Plan as one of the places that will deliver the most housing growth, with at least 2,200 additional dwellings over the Plan period up to 2032. This presents great opportunities for the church.

With its outlying villages of Milton on Stour and Silton to the north, it is a very desirable place to live, surrounded by the beautiful countryside of the Blackmore Vale. Gillingham has a railway station on the South Western Railway line with direct connections to London Waterloo (two hours) and Exeter (one hour 40 minutes). Salisbury, our diocesan centre and cathedral city, is 30 minutes by train. The attractive and popular city of Bath is 30 miles to the north (about one hour by car), and the nearest seaside is at West Bay near Bridport, 45 miles to the south (about one hour 15 minutes by car).

Gillingham has three primary schools and one secondary school, with another primary school in Milton on Stour (more on page 10). It has three residential care/nursing homes. There is a Roman Catholic Church, Baptist Church and Community Church, all along the High Street from the Parish Church of St Mary the Virgin, and a lively Churches Together group. The town boasts a leisure centre with indoor swimming pool, rugby club, football club and all the other social groups and activities one would expect in a town of this size. Gillingham is not famed for the excellence of its High Street, but there are good facilities including a Post Office, dry cleaners, hardware shop, cafés – even a bank (for now!) – and a number of supermarkets: Aldi, Asda, Lidl and Waitrose.

The Parishes

Gillingham

St Mary the Virgin

The church was rebuilt in the fourteenth century and again in the nineteenth century, though the chancel survives from medieval times. It is listed Grade 1. The Good Shepherd Chapel was added in 1921 by the Cross family in memory of their son who was killed in WW I. Saint Mary's can seat over 250 people. For smaller weekday services either the Good Shepherd Chapel or the choir stalls are often used. The churchyard is in the care of the Town Council, though interment of ashes is permitted to the north of the church.



We are looking for someone to inspire our love for the community in this town. We want to make Jesus known in our outreach to the world around us.

We need a Rector to lead our parish team, which, though it has been strengthened through the Covid era and in the times since, is currently lacking a focus and guide. We look for a minister to help us through preaching – showing us an example to develop, and to support each other. We need someone to work with our very experienced Benefice Administrator, wardens, treasurer, organist, servers, bell ringers, etc.

We are a diverse community, Christian and non-Christian, and make every effort to welcome everyone. We hope for a new Rector to reinforce and develop our faith. We have good links with other churches in the town and with our schools – not just the church primary – but more could be made of these connections.



We are a friendly community, and a primary role of the new Rector will be to build it into a stronger team, working with lay people and the brilliant retired priests to take us further ahead. We have an active safeguarding lead and make every effort to follow Diocesan training protocols.

To achieve this, we need to build upon the varied styles of worship we currently enjoy: common worship, Messy Church, Open the Book, meditation, prayer groups, home communions, in care homes and so on.

We need to keep our beautiful church building open for the formal and informal services we enjoy offering and for the town to use as it needs to.



Beyond this, we would like to continue and expand our work with refugees and newcomers, our gifting time and money to charitable ventures, our pastoral work and funeral and wedding services. We have strong congregations and cheerful volunteers and look forward to reaching out to the growing numbers of citizens in the town – with a growing clergy team.

We think of our differences as strengths. We hope that we link well with the other parishes in our benefice. Worship is 'middle of the road' Liberal-Catholic based on the Common Worship Orders of Service. At the main Sunday service the Gloria, Sanctus and Agnus Dei are sung, Anthems may be sung and the Gospel is processed and read in the heart of the congregation. A now small but dedicated robed serving team assist the president and carry out all sacristan duties. At high feasts the serving team may be expanded to include acolytes.



St Mary's is located in the centre of Gillingham, near the confluence of the Shreen and the Stour. It is within the town Conservation Zone, as is the Vicarage School Room, which is itself Grade 2 listed. Church, School Room, Office and Rectory are conveniently located together. There is parking nearby, but some of it at cost. The School Room provides a kitchen and toilets, but there are steps and a road between it and the church.

Significantly for the church, the most recent developments in the town included the building of St Mary the Virgin Primary School (opened 2004, now part of Sherborne Area Schools' Trust) on the southern side. This contains a hall designed to offer worship opportunities near the new estates. We hope that building the long-discussed "Southern Extension" of the town might soon get under way. Gillingham is a town with a richly mixed demographic, likely to become more so, and we hope to welcome all to God's table.

Parishioners are involved in local events, such as the Good Friday Walk of Witness, Remembrance Sunday, Civic Carol Service and the Gillingham and Shaftesbury Agricultural Show Church Rest Tent.



The School Room hosts an increasing number and range of events and activities, especially since the sad closure of the Methodist Church and its hall.



For the latest, see the church website:
<https://www.achurchnearyou.com/church/6802/>

Milton on Stour

St Simon & St Jude

Milton on Stour is a rural and peaceful village on the edge of the fast-expanding town of Gillingham. It is a lovely place to be and many of us who live and farm here are keenly aware of our good fortune. The village may not have an obvious centre, but villagers get together from time to time and enjoy a sense of community, whether it is through the church or the school. Village folk rally round to undertake the many tasks for the benefit of the greater community. Our village, like many others, has changed and adapted over time. Today the village has a garden centre, a 14-bedroom hotel, rural holiday accommodation, new Scout Hall, and a flourishing CEVA Primary School.



Religious life may be traced back as far as 1319 when a chantry chapel was built in the Pierston area (then a separate hamlet). The present church was built between 1865 and 1867 on land given by Mr Thomas Matthews of Milton Lodge, who at the same time gave further land in order to establish our village school. The church is built of Tisbury stone in the style of the mid-13th century, and was dedicated, but not completed, on 17 December 1867.

Thomas Matthews never lived to see it built, but his family, together with Revd Henry Deane, Vicar of Gillingham for 50 years 1832-1882, made sure that the project continued. Public subscriptions and donations from various benefactors over some 30 years ensured its future. Our church is unique in the area in that all the windows are stained and painted glass, thus giving a myriad of colours on sunlit days.



The church was substantially reordered in 2017, coinciding with the 150th anniversary of its dedication. This included the installation of new lighting and heating, a kitchen and toilet. Pews were removed from the back of the church to allow a more flexible arrangement of chairs and tables as required and creating an open area for social events and other activities.



Silton

St Nicholas



The beautiful church of St Nicholas, Silton has a long history, stretching back over 800 years. This welcoming and lovingly cared for church is well attended and outward-looking. It treasures a joyful BCP tradition, embracing the

solidarity of the Gospel with Prayer Book services at 10:30am every Sunday. It occupies a central place in the spiritual and social life of the village and local area, attracting members of the congregation from surrounding towns and villages, including Mere, Wincanton, Bourton and Motcombe, and visitors throughout the year.

Set in rolling countryside on the edge of the Blackmore Vale, close to Stourhead, the church's location is further enhanced by views from the churchyard of gently undulating fields, with the splendid backdrop of the Cranborne Chase and West Wiltshire Downs AONB.



Parts of the church date back to the 12th century, although the existing building was built mainly in the 15th century, with extensive internal stencilling undertaken during the Victorian era. The church has beautiful Clayton and Bell windows, a Sweetland organ, a full set of bells which ring out every Sunday and an imposing white marble memorial to Judge Wyndham, sculpted by Jan van Nost.



Judge Wyndham Memorial

Altar with Christmas Nativity scene



The church which is Grade I listed is well maintained – recent work has included repairs to the plaster ceiling undertaken in mid-2023, enabled via generous grant funding from Dorset Historic Churches Trust, Erskine Muton Trust and Society of Friends of Silton (SOFOS).

St Nicholas, Silton's PCC has consistently paid its Parish Share in full. Considerable effort is also devoted annually by the church community to charitable fundraising.

There are approximately 60 houses with about 120 residents in Silton. Originally a farming village, the population would have been mainly agricultural workers and their families, but now only a small number are directly involved in farming. The occupations of residents are varied with many working away from the local area, although several now work from home, spending more of their amenity time locally and demonstrating an increased enthusiasm for the area.



Silton Village Hall is the social hub of the community with a variety of appealing events held throughout the year, organised by PCC members and/or Society of Friends of Silton.

Langham

St George



St George's is a beautiful First World War Memorial Chapel used for the major festivals of the Christian year and for weddings, christenings and funerals.

St George's is maintained by the Manger family trust and is to be found in the parish of St Mary the Virgin, Gillingham.



Gillingham



Silton



Milton on Stour



Langham

Our Schools



St Mary the Virgin CE Primary School, Gillingham

St Mary the Virgin CE Primary School became an academy in 2019 and joined the Sherborne Area Schools' Trust (SAST). The school's distinctiveness as a church school is underpinned by its relationship with the parish church, the school and church working together to provide an educational and spiritual experience that starts right from the moment a child is welcomed to the school at a special Welcome Service through to the time of saying goodbye at the Year 6 Leavers' Service.

The vision of the church, "Open to God, Open to All", is an ethos that is embedded in the partnership between church and school, where every child and member of staff is valued as an individual loved by God and a member of the church family. The pattern in the past has been for the clergy to lead Collective Worship on Thursday mornings, and the Open the Book team have made weekly visits.

Groups of children from all years regularly make trips to the church for special visits, and whole-school worship takes place in the church for special events such as Easter and Christmas services. Clergy and lay volunteers are involved in all aspects of school life and work closely with the school to provide pastoral care to children, families and staff.

Open the Book

Post Covid we had to rethink the format of how we offered Open the Book as several volunteers retired from this work. With a smaller team we now work weekly with Reception and Years 1 and 2 at St Mary the Virgin Primary School. We are located in a large classroom and the school likes to make it part of their programme of worship, so we always begin with the children singing their gathering song and close with another song.



We try as much as possible to involve the children in reading elements of the story and actions and prayers.

Our programme of readings follows the church year with Bible stories from the Old and New Testament. We try to draw out the relevance of these stories to the children and their lives, remembering the age group we are working with, ages 4 to 7. The sessions are very much appreciated by the school and maintain a strong link between the school and church community.



Milton on Stour CE VA Primary School, Milton on Stour

In February 2024 the school joined Pickwick Academy Trust, a group of 15 community and church primary schools in Dorset and Wiltshire that includes the two community primaries in Gillingham, Gillingham Primary School and Wyke Primary School. Milton Primary School was founded in 1865, the present building dating from the late 1960s and significantly extended over the last few years to accommodate a rising roll.



The school curriculum is based on the core Christian values of Love, Hope and Joy. The school has lovely grounds where children get the opportunity to learn how things grow, to appreciate the world around them and to explore and flourish outdoors. The grounds include adventurous play equipment, a forest area, a firepit and outdoor pizza oven, a woodland area, ponds and an outdoor amphitheatre.



The location of the school right next to the church has been mutually beneficial. Special services on all the major festivals are held in the church, as well as the leavers' service. In the past, one of the clergy team has led collective worship in the school every Tuesday morning, and an after-school club called MOSAIC has been held in the church on Tuesday afternoons. As a Voluntary Aided primary school, the majority of the school's governors have foundation status and have the overall responsibility for the buildings and appointment of staff.

Other Schools

There are also two community primaries in Gillingham, Gillingham Primary School and Wyke Primary School, as well as a large state secondary, Gillingham School, founded by benefactors in 1516. The church aims to be proactive in its relationship with these schools, alongside the other Christian churches in the town, and welcomes every invitation to take the love of God and the gospel of Christ to them.

The current team

Current ministry team



Associate Priest - Revd Canon Tim Heaton

Tim has held the bishop's licence in the benefice since 2012 and is also Rural Dean of Blackmore Vale.

We are also blessed in having ten retired clergy with **Permission to Officiate** living in Gillingham, who help out on Sundays and with the occasional offices with great regularity and enthusiasm.



Licensed Lay Minister – Barbara Priest

Barbara is licensed to the whole deanery but particularly enjoys leading BCP Matins two Sundays a month at Silton where her ministry is much enjoyed.

Benefice Administrator

Benefice Administrator

The administrator, Miriam Light, works 16 hours a week in the church office next to the Rectory.



Lay Pastoral Assistant – Sarah Snook

Sarah's ministry is focussed around funerals. She is also Parish Safeguarding Officer and an elected member of Deanery Synod.

The Benefice Office

The Benefice Office tends to be labelled as The Parish Office for the understanding of non church goers. It is located at the southern end of the Vicarage School Room, serves the parishes of Gillingham, Milton on Stour and Silton with the costs apportioned by fixed agreement.

The Benefice Administrator (a vital and the one constant administrative team member) is employed for 4 mornings per week and, under the direction of the incumbent, co-ordinates the considerable amount of administrative and office work relating to the benefice. The office also functions as a focal point for the exchange of messages, information and paperwork. Current opening hours: Tuesday to Friday 9.00am to 1.00pm



Gillingham Vicarage School Room



The Vicarage School Room is a name owed to its past and now functions as a Church Hall. It is used by our various church groups and is privately hired to many local organisations to help finance running costs.

Our church hall has become more and more a community hub. We now have Gillingham Repair Café, country dancing, pilates, the local community cinema, and our community café, Eden café, Friday Breakfast and Board Games Afternoon running from this building. Occasional events include Art and Craft Events, Lent Lunches, various fundraising pop-ups, and it is also popular for hire for children's parties when there is a free slot. A family of Syrian refugees run Syrian Cuisine, their takeaway and restaurant, from these premises on Friday and Saturday evenings.

It is the place where St Mary's congregation gather for coffee after Sunday morning Eucharist.

The Rectory or the Vicarage?

The Archdeacon has agreed that the incumbent could live either at the Rectory or at the Vicarage.



The Rectory was built in the 1970s in the grounds of the previous rectory. Its garden, now well established and mainly down to lawn, is a good size. The house provides spacious accommodation with hall, study, lounge, dining room, kitchen and utility room on the ground floor. On the first floor there are 4 double bedrooms and a bathroom. A garage is integral to the Parish Office/Vicarage School Room. The main entrance is via double gates from the town car park with pedestrian access from the rear of the Rectory garden to the Parish Office, with St Mary's Church just across the road from this.

The Vicarage is in Fern Brook Lane, almost a mile from the church but much closer to St Mary the Virgin Primary School. It is a more modern estate house, built about fifteen years ago, with five bedrooms and ample bathrooms. There is a double garage to the side behind solid gates and a small modern garden at the back. The front door gives directly on to a quiet suburban road. The town shops and railway station are in flat walking and cycling distance, though along the road from Shaftesbury into Gillingham.



Current Pattern of Services

Sunday	1 st Sunday	2 nd Sunday	3 rd Sunday	4 th Sunday
Gillingham	8.00am Holy Communion			
	10.00am Holy Communion	10.00am Holy Communion	10.00am Holy Communion	10.00am Holy Communion
Milton on Stour	10.30am Morning Worship	10.30am Holy Communion	6.30pm BCP Evensong	10.30am Holy Communion
Silton	10.30am BCP Holy Communion	10.30am Matins	10.30am BCP Holy Communion	10.30am Matins

On the 5th Sunday of the month, the three churches of the Benefice come together to share Holy Communion. The service takes place at either 10am (when in St Mary's, Gillingham) or 10:30am (when in St Simon & Jude, Milton on Stour or St Nicholas, Silton).

Every Wednesday morning Holy Communion is held in St Mary's Church, Gillingham at 10.30am.

Prayer Group

On Friday mornings in St Mary's Church, Gillingham a small group meet to support the work of the three churches.



Meditation is held on alternate Thursday evenings and Saturday mornings in the Vicarage School Room. This is a time for silent prayer and gentle Bible reading and listening. It is rooted in the Christian tradition and open to people of any or no faith.



The successful **Messy Church** is held periodically in the Vicarage School Room, usually at major festivals between 3.30pm and 5pm. It is for children and their families of all ages from across the Benefice, with

craft activities, worship and tea. We normally have between 30 and 40 attending, half adults, half children.

It's great. It's Messy. It's Church.

As a team we plan our worship and activities to reflect the church year and key themes such as the environment.

We have noted these sessions are of particular value to single parent families who appreciate the opportunity to relax and talk while their children are purposefully occupied. It's a great way to offer worship opportunities to young families in our community in an informal setting.



Open to God, Open to All

St Mary's Church, Gillingham is open daily between 10am and 4pm for quiet prayer and reflection.

St Simon & St Jude Church, Milton is open for private prayer on Mondays to Saturdays between 10am and 4pm.

St Nicholas Church, Silton is open every day for quiet prayer and reflection.



Statistics for 2024

	Gillingham	Milton on Stour	Silton
Christenings	5	3	1
Weddings	1	1	2
Funerals / Memorial services in church Plus another 8 funerals at the crematorium	20	3	3
Electoral roll	135	54	63
Worshipping community	118	28	30



The benefice made share payments to the diocese totalling £88,322 in 2024.

The Blackmore Vale Deanery



The Blackmore Vale is an extensive lowland valley in the northernmost part of Dorset, a large expanse of green fields and hedgerows, a patchwork of lush, low-lying pasture on mostly poorly draining clay and greensand soils. This is Thomas Hardy's "Vale of the little dairies" (*Tess of the D'Urbervilles*) and today it still supports mostly small dairy farms. It is the catchment area of the upper reaches of the River Stour, which has its source at Stourhead just over our northern boundary in Wiltshire. The river and its tributaries flow through every one of our eight benefices, linking them together like beads on a necklace. For 25 miles the Stour rolls southwards before finally leaving the Vale at Blandford Forum, a town nestled in a cleft between the Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase. The Blackmore Vale is God-made; it is very green and rural; it is very beautiful.

The Blackmore Vale Deanery is the work of human hands. Its 34 parishes (eight benefices) cluster into two halves:

The northern parishes (three benefices) congregate around the larger towns of Gillingham and Shaftesbury, with currently four full-time posts across these three benefices. The diocese is currently preparing to launch in January 2026 a number of frontline Mission Hubs, underpinned by investment, to revitalize surrounding parishes and plant new worshipping communities. Gillingham and Shaftesbury are on an initial list of locations to be considered for Phase 2 launching January 2028.

The southern parishes (five benefices) gather around the smaller population centres of Marnhull, Stalbridge, Sturminster Newton and Shillingstone. These five benefices are established as a Group Ministry known as the *Blackmore Vale Pilgrim Group*, comprising two full-time, one part-time and two House for Duty posts.

There is a sense of shared identity and purpose across the whole deanery, enshrined in a five-year plan 2024-28 that seeks to implement the diocesan vision and strategy at local level, *Making Jesus Known* across the Blackmore Vale. Chapter meets monthly for prayer, lunch and conversation – a place of fellowship, mutual love and respect. Deanery Synod meets three times a year in January, May and September, and we have a fruitful and long-standing relationship with the Diocese of Lui in South Sudan.

*The Revd Canon Tim Heaton
Rural Dean of Blackmore Vale*