



# Brentor Parish



## *Churchwardens' Report 2020*

This has certainly been an exceptionally demanding year for all of us at Brentor Church. The first time coronavirus was mentioned in church, during the intercessions in mid January, it seemed a remote new disease that none of us expected at that time would have such an impact on all our lives. However David was diligent in tracking the progress of the disease and was instrumental in our rapid response, buying plenty of hand sanitizer and disinfectant and appropriate PPE while it was still available and relatively inexpensive. Before it became obvious to the general public how serious it was becoming we were already at least partly prepared and we were able to hold our APCM in person just before the first lockdown in March. David and I vowed that no matter what happened the order of service would be said every Sunday and we have maintained this throughout.

We were both particularly concerned about the enforced closure of the churches from March 2020, even for private prayer. It became clear that some parishioners found this distressing and as soon as possible we opened up our churches, all day and every day, for prayer, with appropriate risk assessments and regular cleaning. We would particularly like to thank Hilary and Diana, and later Emma, for their work in cleaning St Michaels every week, while Sally and Christopher have been equally meticulous in cleaning Christ Church. The work of these people meant we could open the churches safely.

Church services continued but were recorded and streamed to our congregation via the church website and Facebook. As churchwardens we performed something of a double act, introducing services from David's cabin and linking segments recorded by our ministers together with recorded readings from various members of the congregation. David very quickly mastered the techniques of producing recorded services and these became more sophisticated over time with improved lighting and music creating a professional appearance. However these services always remained acts of worship and we only re-recorded when we had said something definitely wrong - otherwise we just carried on.

During this first lockdown we felt that people needed more from the church and so Tony and Hazel and our lay ministers produced a series of mid week reflections which were very well received by our growing online congregation. Over the year this online congregation has grown and we know we have regular viewers across the world as well as across the south west. For some of these regular viewers we are now 'their' church and some engage in email correspondence with our ministers or have requested particular services - we even received a Christmas card from a couple in the Netherlands. We would particularly like to thank Tony, Hazel, Wendy, Sally and Christopher and Mike for their magnificent work this year in making the church alive and accessible to everyone.

Although congregations have not been allowed to sing in church all year music has remained an essential component of all our services. This is in large part thanks to Wendy, who recorded all the hymns ministers asked for - for months the problem was that copyright prevented any other recordings being used online. Even when the Royal School of Music started producing music we could use Wendy then went one step further and wrote original new carols which were recorded by our socially distanced choir during the autumn, when there was a dispensation for them to sing (without a congregation) in church. These carols were then broadcast as part of the benefice carol service and for our own pre recorded Christmas Day service.

It cannot be emphasised strongly enough that the online services, videos and reflections have taken a great deal of extra work. David has been instrumental in developing the skills required for this but each service also takes hours and hours every week to produce in its final format for people to join in with our worship. We are very grateful to Nick for stepping up to record occasionally, giving David a break. Also as we were advised to remove all service books from church, Sam has had a considerable increase in her workload producing orders of service every week. She has created consistently high quality booklets week on week, allowing our congregations on line and in person to take part.

Given the restrictions we were pleased to be able to commemorate Remembrance Day with a socially distanced service at the war memorial, with representatives of the Royal British Legion and Brentor parish there to lay the traditional wreaths. Again this service was put out online and was viewed by many.

Christmas brought real challenges and was marked by pastoral care and online outreach. We delivered gifts and cards to every household in the parish, which were almost without exception gratefully received - and conversations on the doorstep were a key component of this as some people had hardly seen anyone for months. At this point we must mention the outstanding work of Sally and Christopher Pancheri who have worked tirelessly to support all the many people struggling in Brentor during this pandemic, with conversations, time, prayers and of course cake (Sally has now branched out into marmalade as gifts).

We also set out - in an unplanned ad hoc way - to reach out to the wider community via a Brentor Advent Calendar with short videos featuring readings, short talks, poetry and various Christmas related content. We are really grateful to all those who recorded segments for us and this turned out to be a great success, reaching out widely with a gentle Christian message. This is something we will definitely look to do again.

Our usual Nativity service, when the church is full and everyone gets dressed up to take part, obviously had to be altered this year. In a wonderfully imaginative way, Amanda recreated the nativity in and around Brentor using the knitted figures made for us by Nicola and the film version online was very popular. We were able to send a DVD copy to Blackdown Nursing Home to bring the Christmas story to the residents in their isolation. We also had a large wooden crib, made by Christopher, to house the figures in Christ Church - thank you again Christopher.

Christmas itself was marked in Brentor with the most magnificent display of red and gold lights around the trees in the churchyard, thanks to Rob. Many people have said how much these lights brightened up the village during the season of Christmas and they were left on until Candlemas. On Christmas Eve we were able to celebrate Midnight Mass at Christ Church, thanks to Sue Tucker, despite social distancing requirements making it a very different service from our usual occasion.

On Christmas Day itself we held an 'Open Church' from 10-4, with lay ministers and churchwardens on a rota to welcome visitors and ensure Covid regulations were maintained. We had carols playing, chocolates and Christmas cards to give out, and we offered prayers for those who wished. Altogether we welcomed about 200 people and we feel it was extremely successful, so much so that even when we can hold our usual Christmas Day carol service again we would look to do something similar again in the morning.

As part of our pastoral care the churchwardens and Sally and Christopher were instrumental in setting up the support group the Brentor Community Volunteers, in conjunction with local medical practitioners. This was an organisation with volunteers drawn from across the village and every house received a printed card detailing who we were and the support we could offer (food and prescription collections, and someone to talk to during isolation). In the event there was comparatively little demand but it provided a safety net for everyone and several parishioners said they did feel safer because of it.

As ever we are so grateful to the Brentor team that make all this possible. The fact that our churches are still standing and safe, that so many have been reached in person this year, that so many weary and vulnerable people have been cheered and supported, that prayer has continued and the order of service has been maintained despite the never ending obstacles - thank you to all of you.

In conclusion, while at present our in person services are distanced and effectively limited to local people, they still happen and will continue to do so. Our online congregation will continue to be served as we intend to continue recording, and as so few churches even locally are actually open for services we are really meeting a need. We do not know how many of our previous congregation - kept away as a result of regulations or illness or changed circumstances - will return in person when they can, but we have hope and confidence for the future of the church in Brentor. This was the year we were expecting the new pilgrimage route, the Archangel Way, to open but now we look forward to the launch of this later in 2021. It has been the most challenging year but we feel we have done the best we could to keep the faith.

Helen and David  
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