

## Statement of Needs – St Mary’s Church Studham: reuse of western and north western sections of the churchyard for full burials

### **1. General information**

The Parish of Studham is located in south west Bedfordshire very close to the boundaries with Hertfordshire and Buckinghamshire. It is a small parish with approximately 480 dwellings, mainly owner occupied and with a population of about 1,300.

The Church of St Mary the Virgin has an Electoral Roll of 65 in April 2024, with 71% over the age of 60.

There is a service every Sunday, a non Eucharistic Family Service on the first Sunday of each month and a Communion Service on other Sundays. Attendance varies between 15 and 20 with a larger congregation of about 25 on the third Sunday when there is a Children’s Church.

The building is open for private worship every day during daylight hours and it is also used for Occasional Offices and for a half termly Kids’ Club, courses, concerts and meetings.

The PCC ensures the church is financially viable by investing wisely, carrying out fundraising events and keeping costs to a minimum. The parish share is paid in full.

There is an annual maintenance schedule to ensure regular checks and routine repairs and maintenance are carried out.

Happily the Quinquennial Inspection Report of March 2022 did not identify any major areas of restoration or immediate repair. However it did advise the checking of the roofs and gutters and minor masonry repairs below four windows. The PCC carried out most of this work in 2023 - 2024; on close inspection of the nave gutters by our professional architect it was decided to replace them and this work was finally completed in January 2024. The minor masonry repairs are outstanding.

A large and beautiful churchyard surrounds the church building and remains open both for full burials and the burial of cremated remains.

### **2. Our Needs**

Over the centuries all the churchyard has been used for full burials. In recent years, burials have taken place in the eastern and north eastern sections and these sections are almost full. Please see Photograph 1. There is an unofficial grass footpath along the eastern boundary and consequentially the next burial will take place at the beginning of the final row in the north east section providing 18 new burial plots. In the last 3 years there have been 9 full burials, 2 into existing graves and 7 into new spaces. If this rate were to continue, we would run out of space in 7- 8 years. It is not possible to be certain about the rate at which burials will be requested but the PCC would like to have a firm and agreed future plan in place to avoid uncertainty. This is consistent with a priority in our Mission Action Plan, to reach out to meet the needs of our local community.

### **3. The PCC's proposal**

At the meeting on 17<sup>th</sup> September 2024 the PCC passed a resolution to seek permission from the DAC to reuse the western and north western sections. This land is currently not used for PCC activities; it is a grassed area mown by our team of volunteers. Please see photographs 2 and 3.

Burials have taken place in the past but there is only limited information from our churchyard plan records and from the old headstones of the dates of death. In the western section, no dates are recorded on the plan and dates can be read on only a very few old headstones. For example, Goude in plots 20 and 22 were buried in 1851. In the north western section evidence from remaining headstones and from the plan records indicate that the area was last used between the 1890s and 1918, for example Austin (plot 1) in 1901, Green (plot 2) in 1901, Ashby family (plot 4) from 1899-1902, Revd. Wagstaff (plot 5) in 1890, Cutler (plot 7) in 1910.

In the western section approximately 50 new graves would be available in 4 rows to the west of the grass footpath. In the north western section, approximately 24 new graves would be available in 3 rows to the west of the grass footpath. Please see Plan 1 of the western section and Plan 2 of the north western section of the churchyard.

New burials would take place between old headstones so there would be no removal or damage to old headstones. If and when human remains were to be found during the digging of a new grave, they would under the supervision of the Rector be respectfully buried at the base of the new grave.

### **4. Justification**

The PCC proposal is designed to keep the churchyard open for future burials. It is a priority to continue to respond positively to the needs of the local community for burial spaces in Studham. The Rector continues to receive requests for burials from village families and from those who have had recent connections with the village, and informal consultation with villagers by PCC members indicates a preference for burials in Studham rather than burial in the municipal graveyard in Dunstable. Other options present significant difficulties: no other land is available locally, and in any case the PCC does not have the funds to purchase any land. The PCC do not want to apply for an Order in Council to close the churchyard and transfer responsibility for maintenance to the Parish Council. The preferred option is to reuse the western and north western sections.