

FROM ECO CHURCH TO VILLAGE GREEN

How Eco Church unified a village in its green dreams

Walk out the back of St Mary's Chiddingfold onto the grass that skirts the church, and after a handful of steps you'll be standing on an architectural gem, neatly secreted under your feet. The beautiful Church Room is crowned by a soft verdant arc of grass, a 'green roof' that acts as a bridge between the cemetery on one side and the church itself on the other, all at ground level. Follow a different pathway from the church downwards to the left, on the other hand, and you'll arrive at the building facade, looking for all the world like a sleepy eye, with its railing-eyelashes above and cornea glass-frontage, observing people and creatures who pass by every day.



In fact, these buildings see more than the incumbent, Dr Rev Rachel Greene, ever realised. During COVID, regulations stipulated signing in to buildings, and it was only then that St Mary's discovered the 60 or so people that came to use their church on any given day. 60 passers by, popping in for any number of reasons... a quiet place to sit at lunch; toddlers with mums; a space to pray. But it took Eco Church to really uncover the full extent of silent and invisible stakeholders in the village, all invested in the church in one way or another. And it took an outside agency to bridge the gap between their various interests, to fully realise their dreams of a greener village...

Instinctively, from the outset, Rev Rachel knew that Eco Church projects couldn't get siloed; it was going to need a whole-church approach. Most of the easy wins had been done. There was the beautiful Green Roof, LEDs had been fitted in a lot of accessible areas, they were using recycled paper and they were a Fairtrade church. So their next projects were always going to rub up against the boundaries of other peoples' expectations.

"...a central hub in a green wheel of recycling, conservation and activism"

But this parish has done so much more than simply tick the boxes of Community Engagement on the Eco Church survey. They have effectively become the central hub in a green wheel of recycling, conservation and activism that connects every corner of their village, made as visible as the numerous pathways that crisscross the churchyard with the help of Eco Church, and its uncanny knack of reaching into those parts of the community that other mission so often doesn't reach.

Take the relationship with the school, for example. The RE Lessons Rev Rachel was taking quickly turned into an explanation of all the church was doing on sustainability. When COP came along, a neat scheme was dreamed up to pose questions to Jeremy Hunt, the local member of parliament, in a special 'kids-questions' version of 'Meet the MP'. Something that surfaced was people wanting local recycling bins; as the church



couldn't usefully offer a site due to parking restrictions, they used the relationship with the school to arrange they be located just inside the school gates, which turned out to be the perfect spot for the village, as so many people have a connection with the school.

And the school has been brought into other projects as well. In Chiddingfold Wood, the Butterfly Conservation Trust found a rare colony of Wood White butterflies, all soft white wings, dustings of silver, delicate movement through the air.

Residents of the parish were delivering the research on them, working through the council and with the church to create corridors for the Wood Whites to thrive. So when it came to planting nectar sources all the way up popular footpaths through the churchyards, they brought in the school. This saw the children out working with conservation experts planting nectar sources, learning about the lifecycle of the wood white, and actively participating in conservation, alongside members of the village. Likewise, when the church wanted to plant trees along its boundary, again the school came in and helped dig the holes and plant the trees along the edge. Wonderful in every way.

But it was the delicate butterflies and their needs that saw the churchyard eventually become the site of quite a whirlwind of debate. It's a conversation being had up and down the country, in parish after parish, where the needs of the flora and fauna that cling so persistently to the surroundings of our ancient buildings, in grounds so often undisturbed for centuries, are perceived as at odds with the requirements of the people of that place. Chiddingfold churchyard became a perfect example of this conversation.

From the mothers with prams cutting through daily on the school-run, to wheelchair users, dog-walkers, conservationists, bereaved relatives visiting graves, and residents proud of their



beautiful village, the number of stakeholders turned out to be so much greater than first imagined. How do you balance the needs of a recently bereaved family with that of an endangered species?

It is the question, in macro, of our times. How do we balance the needs of human-beings to live with dignity, and at the same time sustain God's Creation in a planet that has lost 73% of wildlife in 50 years?

It became something of a headache for Rev Rachel. Gloriously, help was at hand in the form of a society called God's Green Acre – who exist to help churches cope with the demands of biodiversity in their churchyards. They came to facilitate at a meeting, and pointed out with wonderful optimism that there were 4 acres of land in Chiddingfold churchyard! There was undoubtedly enough space to achieve everything that people were hoping for. Longer grass as habitat could be accommodated alongside shorter areas in grave sites, the trick was to plan for different zones. This wasn't a dualistic debate of who wins or who loses. This was a mosaic waiting to be set down, with all the needs of people, butterflies, gravestones, wildflowers, all apportioned a place on a neat map. The result was stunning – people felt heard and

respected, and the churchyard is everything you could want it to be. A fabulous array of flowers, gravestones, lawn areas, pathways and more.

God's Green Acre are willing to help any church finding such conversations challenging, and they have devised similar plans in even the tiniest plots of land. Rev Rachel is certainly one vicar who is grateful to them for their generous facilitation.

It's good to know some other tricks – such as keeping wildflower patches long but mowing a pathway through, or edging the patch with a mown area, to make the long grass feel 'intentional' rather than simply unkempt and unloved. Similarly, putting a Blue Heart Sign on a stick is an increasingly widely recognized symbol that the grass is being kept long as wildlife habitat.

Wherever you look in St Mary's, whether it's creatures making use of the wildflower areas, or kids coming in to do the weekly activity sheets on the table at the back of church, you are likely to find quiet visitors, making use of this space, grateful for the vision of the PCC to allow room for everyone, and make life sustainable for people and Creation in this small but beautiful corner of Surrey.

