

***IN THE STEPS OF JOHN WESLEY:
CAPEL ST MARY 18 AUGUST 2024***



We know that in 1776 & 1777 John Wesley preached extensively throughout Suffolk. Did he preach at Capel St Mary? We don't know for certain - but some 240 years later a woman priest preached to an outdoor congregation of over 200 souls on the churchyard greensward, very much in the style of Wesley, and in addition conducted a double immersion baptism.

Preaching from Ephesians 5: 15-20 and John 6: 51-58, and speaking without audio aid, Rev Sally Letman held the congregation spellbound.

The baptism event and service, accompanied by St Mary's recently-formed choir, was followed by a memorable barbeque.

If the folk in the villages of Capel St Mary and Great Wenham had any doubts previously that they had a most remarkable personality leading their Anglican worship - then they were dispelled on that day.

What follows is a researched amplification of the five years that Rev Sally has been our priest.



*With prayer & faith in God we seek to engage with the community -
inside we enrich & equip: outside we give & care.*



SALLY'S QUINQUENNIUM (A CELEBRATION OF FIVE YEARS AS OUR PRIEST)

In June 2020, the Parishes of Capel St Mary with Little Wenham and Great Wenham effectively ended their year-long period of interregnum - and we offered a very warm welcome to Sally Letman, our first female incumbent in her role as Curate-in-Charge..

Sally came to us from a career teaching English and Drama at Ipswich High School for Girls at Woolverstone. Later she was appointed Head of Year and Pastoral Head at the school.

Retiring from education she determined upon ordination in the church. For two years Sally worked at All Saints, Kesgrave as part of its ministry team whilst undertaking an academic diploma in Theology, Mission and Ministry with Eastern Region Ministry Course.

In 2020 Sally told the LINK: *"At the end of the first year, my husband Simon, who was head of Holbrook Academy, died suddenly. He had supported me all along and had been due to retire in 2021. I found it tough to be widowed at 59-years of age, after 36-years of marriage, and I miss Simon every single second of the day. At the same time I know that Jesus has walked with me and wept with me."*

A challenging start



Sally joined at a strange time in the life of CofE worship - during a pandemic. The first church lockdown lasted from March to July 2020 and commenced again in November of that year.

The LINK spotted immediately that Sally has the ability to address a group of people in a way that makes them feel individually acknowledged and respected. This is a valuable skill in communication.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pfLLg9KcNBq>

The result was a series of YouTube videos whereby she was able to address her congregation despite the churches being locked down (example above).



The LINK attempted to do its best in relieving the tensions of lockdown by offering light-hearted observations to the challenges of working from home.



There seems little doubt that Sally's regular video casts during the interminable and upsetting times of pandemic lockdown served to boost the morale of her congregation and ensure that no discernible reduction in numbers of worshippers occurred post-lockdown in this benefice. *This is a result not mirrored elsewhere in the Church of England where, in many cases, numbers have still not returned to pre-pandemic levels..*

Unique

Sally's initial position in Capel & The Wenhams, whilst still under church training, was Curate in Charge. *"There has never been such a post in Suffolk before," she smiled, "and that's why I'm being so closely supervised. The fact is that my tasks are greater than a curate in the*

church would ordinarily be expected to undertake. In fact my job specification was written especially for me!"

Finally, she said: *"It is a privilege and an honour to be here, and I am determined to serve the people of Capel and the Wenhams to the best of my ability and show everyone that they too can share in the Kingdom of God."*

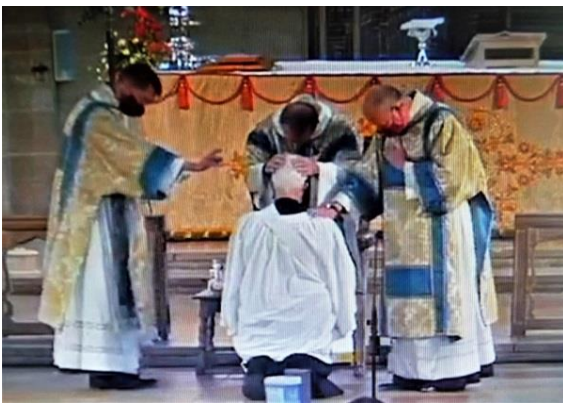
During the interregnum, between the incumbencies of newly-retired Canon Jim Pendorf and Rev Sally, our churchwardens Mel Sutcliffe and Trevor Peartree had adroitly managed and organised a series of locum priests to attend services at St Mary's.



Mel explained: *"Sally arrived as a Curate because she was recently qualified was not allowed to lead most services. However, we enjoyed seeing several new faces who watched over Sally as she got to grips with her new vocation."*

"In no time at all she was able to lead worship on her own and we were able to see and enjoy the real Sally leading our worship."

Sally added: *"I am very grateful that I had Rev Stephne from East Bergholt and Brantham benefice as my training incumbent and supervisor."*



Sally was fully installed as Priest-in-Charge on 4 July 2021 at a service at Bury Cathedral led by Suffragen Bishop Mike Harrison.

(Right) She is fully supported by her wardens at the installation.



Curates are usually moved to a different parish upon full ordination as Priest. However, the Bishop granted special dispensation and at the time Sally said: *"I am delighted to be staying in this great village and have enjoyed getting to know you; all the great kids and teachers and admin staff at the school where I am a Governor, marrying and baptising couples and babies and walking beside you in the sorrow of preparing and conducting funerals."*

"All of it has been amazing and I have flourished as God intended me too. I will now become a Priest/ Vicar in Charge rather than a Curate and be responsible for both St John's and St Mary's Churches."

She added: *"But, (there is always a but) ... now the churches must pay my salary through fund raising alone. Imagine having to pay for the upkeep and heating of the churches and now the vicar's salary on top. It is daunting and we must Trust in God."*

The fiscal challenges rise

Quite apart from the priest's stipend falling fully upon the benefice, the UK experienced a significant increase in the cost of living between 2021 and 2024, with inflation peaking at a 41-year high in October 2022.

While inflation has since eased, with the Bank of England's target of 2.0% reached in May 2024, the overall cost of living remains elevated compared to pre-2021 levels.

The significant uplift in the diocesan share that the benefice has had to pay has been adroitly handled by Malcolm, treasurer at St Mary's and Val, treasurer at St John's.

The annual benefice diocesan share successfully paid was:

<u>Year</u>	<u>£</u>
2021	: 21,117
2022	: 22,166
2023	: 23,604
2024	: 42,121
Projected 2025	: 43,023.

*Thus both parishes in the benefice have coped successfully with a **104% increase in diocesan quota** so far during Rev Sally's incumbency.*

The Congregation responds

Faced with such financial challenges the benefice congregations responded magnificently. During Rev Sally's incumbency, as the **Holy Spirit** moved among us by her inspiration and enthusiasm, the size and diversity of our congregation expanded and grew.

This was displayed financially by the income growth on an annual basis (with the exception of 2021 when the pandemic impacted).

General Account income growth:

2020-2021:	-5%
2021-2022:	+22%
2022-2023:	+3%
2023-2024:	+13%

This represents a **cumulative growth of 35%** over the past five years.

It should be mentioned that this growth in income is exceptional and is not replicated elsewhere in the diocese where post-Covid collections and income remain depressed.

Not your average priest!

From 2 to 9 October 2021 Sally undertook a trek of 100km (62 miles & rated as tough!) on the *Camino de Santiago Compostella* pilgrim way to raise funds for the *Regenerators Appeal*. After seven gruelling days she achieved the sponsorship goal of £2,500



(Left) Sally finally arrives at the Cathedral de Santiago Compostella.

(Right) Her route from east to west.



A plethora of innovations

No sooner had Sally arrived than she commenced a series of innovations that were new to the benefice.

Some more experienced members of the congregation were elevated and tutored as Elders, a Compassionate Café which met on the third Monday in the month in St Mary's Church Hall soon attracted a good number of villagers who sought companionship.

Mel added: *"We now can look forward to Advent and Lent courses which are well attended. The format of watching an excerpt of a film followed by discussion where the film is compared to bible passages has proved very popular."*

It soon emerged that Sally was also a significant motivator, or inspirer, of people. These terms all describe someone who provides support, guidance, and positive influence to help others develop and achieve their potential.



Jenny, St Mary's PCC Secretary, Server and Christmastide preacher explained: *"PCC meetings have become much more a space for diverse perspectives, collaborative dialogue, and exploration of different viewpoints."*

"There is more opportunity for committee members to voice their opinion - and thus we achieve more."

She added: *"We are encouraged to bounce ideas off each other which has*

the effect of making us feel valued - which is a crucial pay-back for church people who are non-stipendiary."

St John's continues to thrive

Diana is a churchwarden at St John's where congregation sizes have grown to some 20 congregants - plus six to eight children.. She stressed: *"Sally has brought a light and joy to our congregation which I never thought to see again in a tiny rural community.*

"In fact I still cannot understand why we have been so blessed to have the ministry of one of the most committed of priests!

She added: *"St John's serves a small parish but has always endeavoured to provide a safe and caring space for anyone who wishes to join us and Sally has embraced that ethos wholeheartedly as a result of which the church is thriving and the community involves itself in the non-worship ministry.*



Promoting her faith via the Holy Spirit

One could say that the essence of a good church preacher is one who connects with their audience by being genuine, relatable, and passionate, while effectively communicating biblical truths with clarity and application to daily life.

So, with the **Holy Spirit**, Rev Sally demonstrates a love for her congregations, a commitment to their learning and growth, and a desire to see positive change in the lives of those whom she serves.

Diana adds: *"Sally's Ministry is the closest I have experienced to that detailed in the New Testament and delivered in accordance with the two great commandments.*

"She brings her faith to whatever situations present themselves: she conducts services, preaches succinctly, helps with the cleaning, organizes the children, considers the needs of the older and frailer members of the community, she visits, she smiles, she prays and she cares."

An outstanding choir from scratch



Gill Williams is St Mary's choir leader:

She explained : *"Rev Sally came to us five years ago, and during that time she has led with much enthusiasm, warmth and commitment. One of the areas where this is apparent is in our worship, and a part of that is the music.*

"Our church has had a strong musical tradition in the past, and Rev Sally was keen for a choir to be formed once again. She contacted the experienced choral director Susie Rose, who came along and led a series of rehearsals for those who had enthusiastically come together to form a choir, and conducted us at the Christmas carol service in 2021.

Following on from this Rev Sally suggested that perhaps Gill could lead the choir going forward. Although she had sung in choirs from a very young age, and was a long-time member and officer at the renowned **Trianon Music Group**, Gill had never envisaged 'standing out the front' and taking the lead!



She explained: "However, here we are a few years later, and this has indeed become my role, with the support of Carole and all the members of the choir.

"We have sung at each subsequent Christmas carol service, and in 2024 also provided the music for the additional evening of carols and readings, which was on a more informal basis - with the choir donning cat masks for one of the songs!

Gill added: "We sing at Easter and for other special services, including Rev Sally's licensing service in July 2023 and the Confirmation service at St John's in April 2024. We all enjoy coming together to sing and play to contribute to the worship with our music.

"Carole and I choose the music together, which ranges from the traditional four-part harmony carols, anthems and hymns, to the more contemporary worship songs.

She smiled: "For these we are often joined by our guitarists, and now we just need Sally's prayers to be answered for a drummer to come forward to complete the sound!"



The experience of newcomers to Chapel

Martyn and Beverley Dowsett moved to the parish just prior to Rev Sally's incumbency.

"We came from a large United Reformed church in Witham, Essex," Beverley said, "where we had been active members."

"On an initial visit to St Mary's under the latter days of the prior incumbent we found it not at all welcoming. So we tried the Methodist Church in the village."

Martyn smiled: "We didn't seem to find a home there, so after a chance meeting with the newly-arrived Rev Sally in the village, as she walked her dog Buzz, where we talked about Anglican services, we tried St Mary's once again."

He added: "Then things had begun to happen!"



They both indicated a move of which they approved "from red book to blue book" (I.e. hymns selected more readily from *Songs of Fellowship* rather than *Hymns Ancient & Modern*). Martyn applied his expertise in technology to significantly improving the audio-visual system in St Mary's and at the same time introduced some new modern hymns at the pre-service time of preparation.

Beverley, who is also active in a range of church events, stressed: "*There are more fun events such as the Friends' Wine Tasting evenings, the establishment of an active Prayer Team was also an important introduction and overall the church is moving further towards accepting progressive change.*"



After many years' service as churchwarden, Trevor Peartree stood down in 2024 and Valerie Franklin (pic right) volunteered to the post. However Trevor's wife Hille (pic left with Trevor) continues her valuable work pastoral work.



Jim and Sarah Kelland moved into Capel immediately prior to Rev Sally's incumbency.

Jim explained: "*I actually joined St Marys when the church was in interregnum, so I don't really have any previous Capel clergy to use as a yard stick.*"

"*However, I have always felt that I have been led here. A house that we were buying fell through which led me to buying Orchard house next door but one to the church.*"

"*Sally's arrival for me was indeed a breath of fresh air and I could see a real relief on the faces of the 'old guard' congregation members.*"



Radiating love - and an endearing "fault"

"*Sally has been pivotal in my journey as a Christian. She has been my spiritual leader my teacher and my friend, She radiates love into our community and in this short space of time she has brought the people of Capel together.*"

Shortly after joining St Mary's Jim's participation got into top gear.

Despite still working full-time in his career, he took time to serve as a Chaplain at St Elizabeth Hospice, trained as a Sacristan (server at the Eucharist) led some All Age services, became chair of the Friends of St Mary's Church charity - and is currently under diocesan instruction on preaching.

In addition, the biannual wine-tasting evenings run by Jim and Sarah are not-to-be-missed valuable fund raising events.

He added: *"I work closely with Sally at Eucharist time. When Sally occasionally errs in service she smiles and laughs it off which shows the humility that she exudes throughout any of the many, many jobs that she undertakes in her daily life.*

"It has been a pleasure watching Sally enter into the hearts of the village and I look forward to spending the next five years at her side in whatever role that should be."

Churchwarden Mel summed up: *"During her short time here we have seen both St Mary's and St John's churches grow and children are again seen attending services.*

"Whilst walking her dog Buzz, she is frequently seen about the village and is known by all at Capel School. We have had several memorable events such as baptisms, weddings and confirmations since Sally joined us and we will never forget the full immersion baptisms held outside the Church on the Green with the barbeque which followed."



"Sally has been like a breath of fresh air and both churches are moving forward when for a long number of years it has felt we were standing still (if we were lucky.)

"We must make sure we make the most of Sally's time with us as she is already talking about her retirement!"

What is without doubt is that the Holy Spirit through Rev Sally's preaching, teaching and example, has inspired her congregations in many ways.

Some describe the presence of the Holy Spirit as a feeling of peace, warmth, or tingling.

Others experience it as a sense of God's nearness, joy, or a deep sense of conviction. The Holy Spirit is also experienced through the Word of God, in community with other believers, and in spiritual gifts.

Her influence in inspiring the Holy Spirit amongst those to whom she preaches, extends to other local non-Anglican churches where her following is growing - not least in the Lent and Advent Groups.

From the commencement of her ministry, Sally has adopted the mantra that "the small things will lead to bigger things".

She said: "By offering hospitality and compassion and encouraging the way people speak to each other, bigger things emerged. By chatting to people in the street we are able to allow glimpses of heaven."

She explains how many in her congregation have grown spiritually. "People recognise that they can in fact enjoy doing more once given the opportunity. All I am is an encourager and a facilitator - I perhaps provide the structure, but growth must come from the heart."

Joy and laughter

And an important part of Rev Sally's ministry rests on joy and laughter.

Writing recently she said:



"I have a really loud laugh. My husband nearly didn't ask me out on a second date because I laughed so raucously, he was embarrassed!

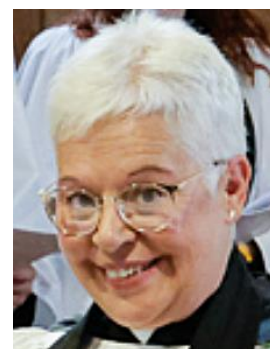
"I find I have to suppress my laughter in certain situations and people expect a vicar to be serious - but I love laughing!

"In the bible it says there is a time for everything: a time to reap, a time to build, a time to tear down; there's a time to dance, a time to sing, a time to laugh, a time to cry. God has appointed times and there are times to laugh.

"Faith makes us laugh and imbues us with joy. Psalm 126:2 says: 'we were filled with laughter and we sang for joy'.

"God and His Son laughed over the people they love, he will 'rejoice over us'. And He will show us the depth of His love, compassion and forgiveness over us.

"I can't imagine Jesus laughing but I can imagine Him chuckling over me with complete love.



And she adds:

"We laugh a lot at church, and the sound reverberates with friendships, company and joy in our faith. You are very welcome to come and laugh with us at St Mary's and St John's.

