

### **Visitor Opening 2024**

2024 was the busiest since pandemic shut downs with total visitor numbers reaching 3432 (visitors and children/schools). This is up by almost 100 extra people on 2023 figures. From January to March we opened mainly on Sunday afternoons 2-4pm with the exception of our 'Draw St Mary's' artist event (mid March). Easter until mid-November we were able to open weekly on Fridays 12.00-4pm, monthly on Saturday mornings and also every Sunday afternoon. Late November – December we returned to Sunday afternoon opening to accommodate many school visits and Carol /Christmas service events. We owe a debt of gratitude to our enthusiastic and committed volunteers without whom this would not be possible.

### **Draw St Mary's – Artist Event**

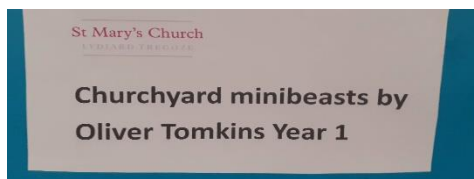
This took place in March and saw us able to open the church for four days during which several local artists were in residence.

Members of the public could view their work or join in as they pleased. Special activities for

children to participate were available on the Saturday. During the four days of opening, we had 133 visitors. We plan to build on or possibly expand this event during 2025.



### **School Visits and Events**



St Mary's remains a popular venue for school visits for both the history and RE curriculum. May and June see returning visitors from several local primary schools and we also had some year seven classes from Lydiard Park Academy visit in

December linking items and practices of the church to the RE syllabus. It was a pleasure to welcome both the primary and senior school children and share their enthusiasm and interest in learning about the church.

This year we have seen increased interest in using the churchyard and finding out more about its history and ecological diversity. We plan to build on this and develop specific resources for use with both visiting school groups and families in 2025. In total 325 children visited St Mary's for educational purposes accompanied by 48 staff and adult helpers. Many more children and helpers attend St Mary's for school carol services, end-of-academic-year services, Christmas concerts and other events. The church

is well-used by our local schools and most contribute to displays and activities around the church. We have had much positive feedback for this and are grateful for a much-needed display board which showcases their contributions. (Thank you Roy)

### **Triptych Birthday Weekend July '24**

This annual and much anticipated opening of the St John polyptych saw 172 visitors over three days of opening at the end of July. Many of these visitors come quite a distance to view the William Larkin painting of the St John family and the colourful, illustrated family tree.

### **National Heritage Open Days**

In September St Mary's was open for three days each for two weekends as part of the National Heritage Open event. This was extremely popular with visitors both local and from much further afield. On one of the Saturdays St Mary's was also part of the national 'Ride and Stride' event with several participants visiting the church and raising funds through sponsorship. During these weekends there were several activities for children to take part in and it proved to be an enjoyable visiting time for families. Resources for activities both inside and outside the church were popular. A total of 262 visitors attended during the two National Heritage weekends.

### **Conservation Cleaning Day**

4<sup>th</sup> June saw our yearly conservation cleaning day with volunteers from Nationwide working alongside several church volunteers to give the church a much needed 'Spring Clean'. Windows, floors, altar rail, pews and other artifacts were cleaned leaving the church spruced up and ready to receive visitors over the Spring and Summer period. Our grateful thanks to all those who took part, these efforts are very much appreciated.



### **Conservation Gardening Days**



Two events took place this year (September and November) with a range of volunteer gardeners, local business staff and Sue who is working with the Friends of Lydiard Park to give advice and produce a churchyard report. Brambles and overgrowth were cleared from the eastern end of the churchyard and under Sue's direction a dry habitat was created for wildlife using the cut materials. This allows a clearer view of the church from Lydiard Park and the lake. School children visiting shortly after this added a temporary Bug Hotel (this will be replaced by a larger, more permanent structure in 2025) but it was good for them to contribute and increase understanding of creatures who live in the churchyard. We were also able to clear the sides of the

main path leading up to the church and add gravel as a weed suppressant and for drainage.

A second day in late November allowed drainage areas around the main building to be cleared (mainly led by Robert) and also Yellow Rattleseed to be planted which increases plant diversity into the churchyard. A huge 'thank you' to those who gave their time and much physical effort to this.



### **Strawberry Teas**

Thanks to Pat and Pauline who host these teas weekly during the summer months. Hugely popular with both locals and those travelling from further afield, we've had many very positive comments. Thank you to those who support this both by consuming the delicious scones and also to those who work as waiting staff, washer uppers and maybe most importantly as bakers.

### **Visiting Groups**

This is mainly hosted by Paul who gives in-depth talks to a range of historical groups, university groups, local charities and business. An important part of our ability to share the history of this unique church in more depth than usual.

**Furry Friends** – St Mary's is a very dog-friendly church and this encourages quite a range of visitors to come in who could not visit if they had to leave their dogs outside. Although we do not officially count dogs and most are not counted there were 40 dogs added to the visitor records in 2024. I also spotted one sitting happily with their person in a carol service just before Christmas.



When we catalogue some of what has been done over the past year we see that even aside from church services, bellringing, weddings, funerals, baptisms and more we have a hugely active church with an enormous range of events, volunteers and visitors who impact the local community and much further afield. Thank you and well done.

Ann Hutchinson

Education and Volunteer Coordinator