

A Vicar's Life: Rural communities at the heart of BBC documentary



Four clergy in the Diocese of Hereford were the focus of *A Vicar's Life*, a six-part documentary series broadcast on BBC Two in 2018.

The observational documentary followed three established vicars and a new curate over a six-month period as they ministered at the heart of rural communities, christening babies, marrying couples and burying loved ones. Camera crews spent six months capturing the life and times of parishes stretching from the beautiful small market town of Much Wenlock in the north of the diocese, to Breinton and the west of Hereford and up into the Black Mountains.

However, this series was no *Vicar of Dibley* as their modern day rural ministry sees them tackle pressing social problems of today including, homelessness, dementia, farm sell offs and supporting refugees. This is all against the backdrop of a Church looking to grow today's generation of Christians, as well as balance the books and maintain hundreds of historic churches.

The series shows inspiring local leadership sharing a Christian message of hope and the breadth of church experiences, which are ensuring there is a church for the future for all people in all places.

The Bishop of Hereford, the Rt Revd, Richard Frith said:

'I'm delighted that the spotlight is on the worship and faith in action in our rural diocese and on the incredibly valuable role our clergy and church members play in communities large and small.

'In these times of austerity cuts and a reduction in the voluntary sector the Church is often the only organisation left helping those in need, particularly in our very rural parts where the church building itself is the only focal place where a community can gather together.

'Our clergy are there for each and every one of us whenever we need them, regardless of whether they have met us before, ensuring the Christian message of hope is available to all.'

About the vicars

Revd Nicholas Lowton, Rural Dean of Abbeydore and Vicar of the Black Mountains Group of Parishes (St Clydog - Clodock and Longtown, St Mary - Craswall, St Beuno and St Peter - Llanveynoe, St Michael - MichaelchurchEscley, St John - Newton, St Margaret - St Margaret's)

After university at Oxford, where church music, especially at the Cathedral, led him to Christ, Nicolas spent a career teaching in schools while also finding time to train for the priesthood. In 1984 he found an escape from school life with a house in the depths of Herefordshire, and many years later he was fortunate in being chosen to be Vicar there when the vacancy came up. He has since become Rural Dean of Abbeydore, where he has developed a new pattern of ministry that spares clergy from the care of some very fine historic church buildings and allows them to concentrate more on building a vibrant church community in this wonderful part of the world.

'I took part in this venture because I hoped it might dispel some misconceptions that people – clergy and laity – have about rural ministry.

'Firstly especially for clergy – that rural ministry can be lonely with vicars operating very much on their own, whereas in this deanery we are showing that we can work together very much as a team across the whole deanery rather than in individual benefices.

'Secondly, there is the notion people have – backed up by watching too many episodes of Miss Marple and Midsomer Murders – that the focus of a vicar's life is on the church buildings, whereas what we are focussing on here is ministry, especially to the unchurched.'

Revd Matthew Stafford, Team Rector for the Wenlock Team Ministry

(All Saints and St Margaret - Berrington with Betton Strange, St John the Baptist - Church Preen, St Peter - Cound, Christ Church - Cressage, St Peter - Easthope, St Mary - Harley, St John the Baptist - Hughley, St John the Baptist - Kenley, Holy Trinity - Much Wenlock with Bourton, St Peter and St Paul - Sheinton, St James - Shipton, St Michael and All Angels - Stanton Long)

Church Army trained, Matthew wanted to be a vicar from the age of 5 and loves nothing better than a good church wedding. He previously worked in urban areas before jumping at the chance to be a rural rector in one of the diocese's most northerly – and picturesque - parishes. He's the biggest fan of Much Wenlock since moving there three years ago and is determined to put the market town on the map, even if that means getting the Bishop – in full regalia plus hard hat - to bless the new nave roof whilst aloft in a cherry picker.

'I wanted viewers to see we are ordinary people, who are down to earth and who have similar joys and sorrows as anyone else, we just happen to be parish priests.

'The Church of England and the Diocese of Hereford is full of church communities just like ours in Much Wenlock, who are meeting people where they are, welcoming them and demonstrating the love of Christ in both word and action and I hope this programme has shown that very real and positive experience of the Church.'

Revd Ruth Hulse, Team Vicar in West Hereford

(All Saints - Hereford, St Michael - Breinton, Holy Trinity - Hereford, St Nicholas - Hereford)

Ruth was brought up a Baptist in the East Midlands and describes herself as 'the good Christian girl at school'. She felt called to ministry in the Church of England while attending the festival, Soul Survivor before going home to tell her husband, John. She can't imagine being a vicar anywhere else but Hereford and loves the distinctiveness of all the churches in which she serves. With a heart for people, she supports her terminally ill churchwarden and parish stalwart, Barbara in her final days before stepping in to help a youth training centre, which is in danger of closing.

'As clergy we are all about the people God has called us to serve and support. By taking part in this series I hope to show how God's love touches people's lives and how as a Church we help people to grow in their faith.'

Father Matthew Cashmore, Assistant Curate

(All Saints - Hereford, St Michael - Breinton, Holy Trinity - Hereford, St Nicholas - Hereford)

Father Matthew is fresh out of college and full of ideas - he wants to change the world or at least Hereford. Giving up a successful executive career, he sees God's spark in everyone and wants to help people find it for themselves. Determined to wear his ankle-length black cassock at all times, he's spent his first few months providing practical help and love to some of the most vulnerable and marginalised, including a homeless woman who had resorted to living on a roundabout and taking the fruits of the parish's harvest festival to the soup kitchens of the Calais refugee camps.

'Being part of this documentary has allowed me to show people the breadth of the action and love that the Church of England offers. Practically and spiritually the Church is at the heart of rural communities and any opportunity to let people share in that love is to be taken by the horns!'

Catherine Cashmore

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