

Missional opportunities

St Mary's Church in Fishguard is the second most-visited place in the town after the famous Last Invasion Tapestry. Statistics may not be everyone's cup of tea, but Jeremy Martineau extrapolates much to be celebrated from the latest survey of visitors to the town

Open every day from 10-4, many come to St Mary's to see the stained glass or the memorial stone to Jemima Nicholas, an unlikely heroine in the defeat of the French invasion of 1797.

Donations from visitors contribute 5% to the church council budget. Representations have been made to the Welsh Government that tourist attractions like St Mary's, that are not businesses, also need support.



In summer 2019 a Masters graduate intern from Bergamo, Arianna Sella (pictured left with the author), conducted a survey of visitors to Fishguard. This showed that over 10% had travelled by train and 25% came from overseas. Visitors who leave their mark in the church visitors' book express warm appreciation for it being open, and enjoy the wide variety of stained glass. Nearly 40% are over 65years old, 37% between 40 and 65, 14% between 21 and 49 and 9% under 20. These data mirror the visitor data from the wider survey which also reports that over 16% of all visitors had their stay in the area enhanced by their visit to the church.

The survey also set out to test a hypothesis that the area attracts a particular personality of visitor as the north of Pembrokeshire is very different from the more popular south. An earlier PhD study by Revd Dr Jennie Annis had surveyed visitors to St Davids Cathedral. The Fishguard survey used the same tool and came to a similar conclusion suggesting that visitors to both cathedral and Fishguard share a predominant personality. They are likely to be introverts, they like to be well prepared before they set out and prefer practical engagement and factual materials.

St Mary's is currently engaged on a small building extension to provide toilet, servery and vestry. Once that is completed more attention will be given to how the church is presented to visitors, for the church council recognises that Christ's mission is to all comers, not just those who sit in the pews at times of worship. A small display of leaflets will be provided and maintained by Pear Distribution, the largest such company in Wales. Members of the congregation on cleaning duty or practising music find themselves in conversation with visitors. We are all in the front line of mission.