



prayer • hospitality • community • sanctuary

Launde Abbey's

2023 ANNUAL SUMMARY REPORT

Registered Company Number: 07469311

Registered Charity Number: 1140918

CONTRIBUTORS

Chair of Trustees

Jennie Page CBE

Warden

Revd Alison Myers



CHAIR'S INTRODUCTION

Jennie Page CBE

In 2023, Launde Abbey Trust continued to develop its mission to further the advancement of the Christian religion and to operate the Launde Abbey estate as a Christian Retreat House and Conference Centre within the Anglican tradition, but with ecumenical outreach. In addition to serving the Church of England Diocese of Leicester and the adjacent Diocese of Peterborough, Launde welcomed individuals and groups from other dioceses around the country, and from different traditions and denominations.

Under our banner of 'Prayer – Hospitality – Community – Sanctuary' the Abbey welcomes individual and group retreats, courses and meetings, undergirded by a regular rhythm of shared prayer and worship at 19 services a week in our mediaeval chapel. The Abbey is indeed a sanctuary for the seekers entering the Abbey, but its influence is felt by many others: our flourishing café welcomes passing walkers and cyclists, and many locals, drawn by the beauty and holiness of the place, the friendly welcome and the good simple food. The Abbey's influence is also felt in the wider neighbourhood: the Abbey's Warden is incumbent of the nearby parish of Loddington, now part of the first Minster Community, and sits on the Bishop's Council. Launde is known and respected nationally.

A particular strength of the Abbey is the Launde Programme of residential and day retreats offered throughout the year. Just over a third of the 2023 retreats were designed and led by Launde clergy or members of the College of Chaplains. The remainder included sell-out repeat courses built around icon painting, photography and textile art, complementing those on devotional themes. Alongside these, we welcome groups organising their own programmes, and individuals seeking silence and the spiritual guidance provided by day Chaplains.

In 2023, rising costs for materials, food and energy and a limited labour market affected Launde as they did most organisations providing hospitality. In addition, some potential retreatants may have been constrained by the impact of higher cost of living, although later in the year residential numbers were higher than expected. Early indications in 2024 suggest that there is still an active market for the services provided by Launde.

Much management attention in 2023 was dominated by the introduction of Rezlynx, an on-line booking system widely used in the commercial hospitality industry. Rezlynx enables better service to guests and more efficient management of the housekeeping and catering functions at the Abbey, provides timely data to improve the Trust's responsiveness to business variations, and reduces opportunities for error between bookings, business operations and finance functions. This introduction was not easy: in addition to the teething problems expected with any new IT system, there were difficulties in tailoring an off the shelf system to the intricacies of a small charitable operation. Despite some integration issues ongoing to year end, the long term benefits began feeding in to the Trust's activities in the second half of the year.



Scarce management resources were diverted from planned activities to grapple with the IT problems and in consequence, some hoped-for development work did not happen, or was introduced more slowly. However, sufficient preparatory work was achieved to allow the adoption early in 2024 of a Management and Maintenance Plan for the built estate, and the introduction of the College of Chaplains and of the Launde Abbey Companions. 2023 also saw the completion of the reorganisation of the senior management structure with the arrival in August of Tristan Owen as Development Manager. Throughout the year, Launde's volunteers continued to provide valuable support to the staff, particularly in the gardens where the team increased in number and focus on improving the setting of the Abbey and enhancing both the beauty and usefulness of the setting under the guidance of our adviser, Jeremy Purseglove.

Throughout the year the staff and volunteers have provided excellent welcoming service to all who visit Launde and trustees are very grateful to the whole team for their skills and dedication to Launde.

Governance Matters

In the year no safeguarding issues were reported to the Board. The Finance Committee met five times and the Estates Committee six, including a visit to the GWCT Allerton Project at Loddington, to understand environmental issues surrounding the management of the estate. These two committees, each chaired by a Trustee (Jonathan Kerry and Adrian Trotter respectively), provide detailed scrutiny of operations and business within agreed delegations from the Board, which itself meets six times annually.



Conclusions

The trust had budgeted for a deficit in 2023 of around £40,000. For a variety of reasons, including higher than predicted income in traditionally low months, deferral of various maintenance projects for good practical reasons, and managed changes to staffing at a senior level, the end result was a consolidated surplus of £40,340. Despite this short-term improvement in results, current geopolitical and economic circumstances are not encouraging and trustees therefore continue to be cautious about long-term prospects worldwide. For Launde, we are focussed in 2024 on improved marketing to enhance knowledge and use of the Abbey and on further operational efficiencies to minimise costs as we seek our objective that the Abbey should be sustainable long term.

Jenny

Ms J A Page CBE
Chair of trustees

WARDEN'S REPORT ON 2023

Revd Alison Myers



We entered 2023 well placed internally to continue the re-shaping of Launde Abbey's work of ministry and hospitality. But externally, the cost of living crisis, in full swing as we began the year, provided unlooked for challenges. By the end of the year, we had achieved almost all we set out to do this year, and a few extra things along the way, as we continue working towards full long term sustainability as a retreat house of national reputation.

2023's Strategy

Our plan for the second half of 2022 and all of 2023 focused on a phase of work christened 'stabilisation to sustainability' which built on the earlier 'stabilisation' phase that ran post-Covid from late 2021 and through 2022. Goals for 2023 therefore included reshaping the organisation to have more focus on ministry and business development, reinforcing prayer and community life (two of our USPs) as central to our hospitality and implementing new hospitality software to increase automation and customer service, all whilst exceeding operating break-even. These goals were achieved, with the small exception of some final software integration work ongoing into 2024.



Initiatives for 2023

Initiatives in 2023 continued to emphasise our character as a place of prayer, hospitality, community and sanctuary, our priority areas for development defined in early 2022. A number of planned actions were achieved in 2023 across five key areas as shown in the figure.

GROWING THE ABBEY'S COMMUNITIES

Launch of the College of Chaplains

Launch of the Launde Abbey Companions

Recruitment of Communications Officer

BETTER SERVING MINISTERS CHURCHES AND SENIOR LEADERS

Development of Holy Listening Course

Pilot of Rooted and Grounded Retreat on Spiritual Practice

Full-year of Rural Mission Hub gatherings

SUSTAINING A THRIVING BUSINESS

New hospitality industry software with online bookings and payment

Recruitment at senior level with a focus on Business Development

Fabric maintenance plan in place

DEEPENING AS A HOUSE OF PRAYER

Successful pilot of Individually Guided Retreat

'Soul-Filled Meanderings' (contemplative walking) added to the programme

Expansion of permanent praying community

EMBEDDING CREATION SPIRITUALITY AND CONCERN FOR THE ENVIRONMENT

Estate Committee focus on sustainable land management

Gardens: composting & shredding; more meadow grass, development of east wall border

'Creationtide' observed in chapel

Launde Programme and the chapel

The Launde Programme taken as a whole is our single biggest hospitality 'client' and is significantly larger and more varied than many other retreat houses. We had 28 residential retreats in our programme in 2023 ranging in length from two to five nights. Nine of these were led by members of the permanent community and the remainder by invited leaders. Our day retreat programme consisted of 14 days of which six were run by the in-house team or members of what is now the College of Chaplains. In 2023, we added a more specialist individually guided retreat (IGR) to the programme for the first time in some years. Our biggest selling retreats were Celtic Spirituality led by internationally known speaker, John Bell, and Rooted and Grounded, a pilot run by a joint Renovaré and Launde Abbey team. Some of the smaller retreats are no less valuable such as 'Living with Loss', run twice in the year and which featured in January 2023 on BBC national television Songs of Praise.



“Hard to restrict [positive comment] to one thing! Valued the balance between led reflection and space to reflect, walk, rest and pray; and between silence and times to be sociable. Loved the Stations of the Cross. Grateful for generous hospitality, warm welcome and care and nourishment of body mind and spirit. Such a memorable and uplifting experience.” - 2023 Holy Week retreat

The rhythm of prayer that takes place daily onsite is the heart beat of the Abbey's life. We continue to hold 19 services a week in the historic chapel including a daily eucharist. Services are led by a member of the Abbey's permanent community or a member of the new College of Chaplains. All guests onsite are invited to participate and many do. The number of retreat and training groups that participate in our rhythm of prayer has increased slightly and we are increasingly joined by non-residents for midday prayer as part of their visit to the café. The 'Christmas lunch with carol service' was particularly well supported this year with over 600 attending carol services in the chapel and 715 enjoying a Christmas meal in the Abbey's dining room.



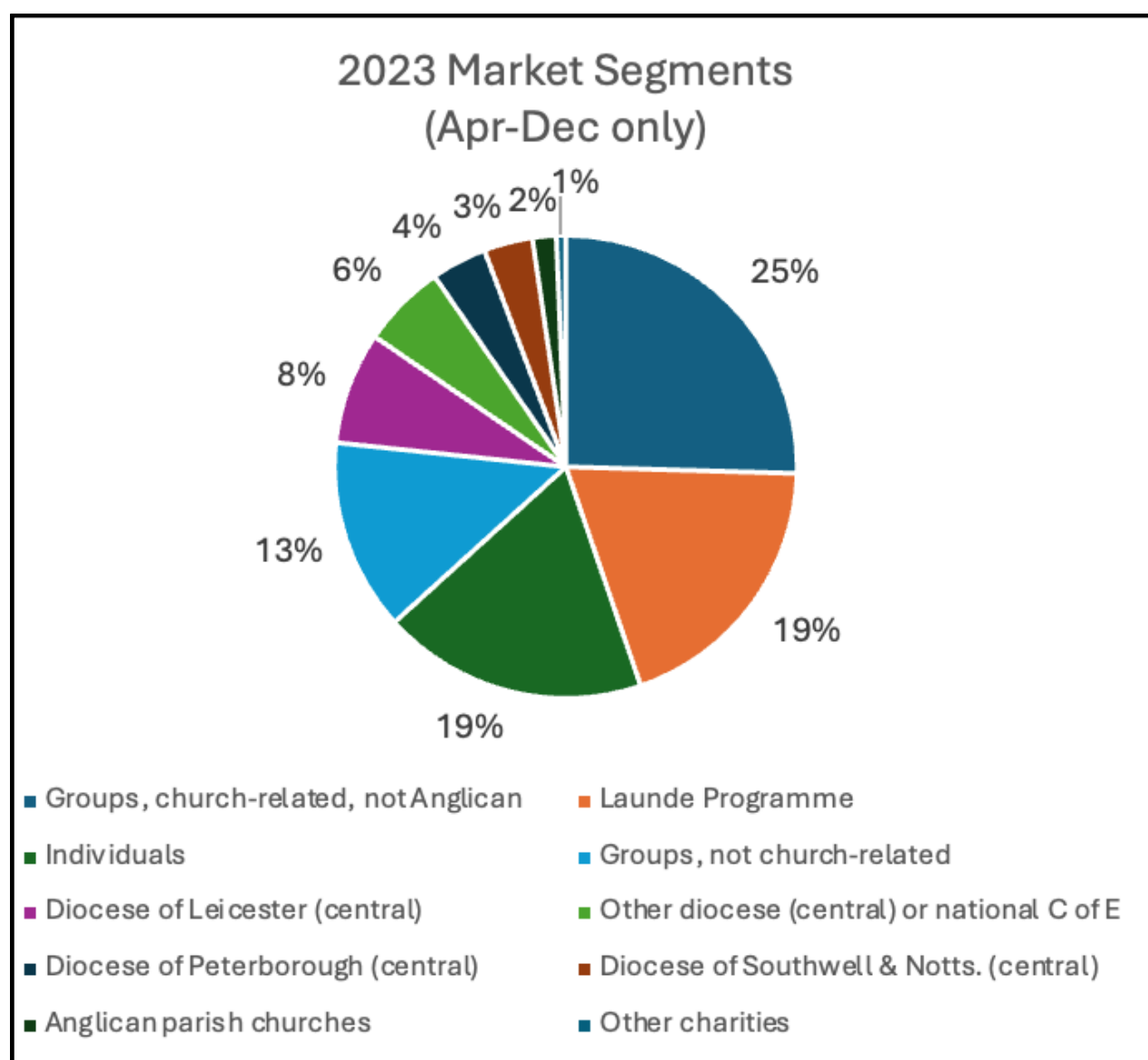
*“Chapel services
– so holy and relevant”.
Retreat participant, 2023*

Our Guests

Between April and December 2023, occupancy levels averaged at 67% and the average number of nights per stay averaged at 2.23. (Note that figures are only available for April to Dec, after the software change).



Although the Diocese of Leicester is still our biggest diocesan client, it represented only 8% of our income in 2023 and our client list included 8 or 9 other Anglican dioceses, as well as national and regional Church of England bodies. Typical diocesan stays are for curate or lay minister training, ministers' retreats or leadership team residentials. As the chart shows, we are also used by a wide range of church groups and denominational bodies from beyond the C of E and are actively encouraging this: regional Methodist probationer training takes place here and the number of Baptist linked groups is increasing. We benefit from being sited in the Midlands with a range of north-south and east-west rail and road links not far away, so are also considered an accessible home base for a number of para church national networks such as the Third Order of St Francis and the place for annual or bi-annual gatherings of groups such as 'Eagles in Flight'. Smaller groups include church retreat days or weekends – from a range of denominations - and charity board meetings.



New business, collaborations and partnerships

In 2023 we continued to explore a handful of collaborations to extend our reach and complement our expertise. Our regional Rural Mission Hub, part of a network underwritten by Rural Ministries, ran for its first full year of three practice community gatherings. Towards the end of the year we ran a very successful first pilot of a Rooted and Grounded retreat on learning about spiritual practice, in collaboration with Renovaré and this will be developed further in 2024. At the end of the year we launched the re-designed, and now wholly Launde-run, Holy Listening course, to train a cohort of 10 new spiritual directors each year via an overlapping two-year course starting in January 2024.

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*“I wanted to write and thank...the team there for accommodating such a beautiful weekend. My co-hosts and guests thoroughly enjoyed it; from the space we worked in, to the beautiful accommodation, the amazing food and the stunning grounds – we would struggle to find a more perfect venue, everyone left feeling relaxed and replenished and wanting more!!”
A new 2023 group leader, now rebooked for multiple visits in 2024.*

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We continue to benefit from a high proportion of repeat business. However, new groups we hosted in 2023 included writing retreats from both local universities, to be repeated in 2024, as we become known in a slightly different market. Other new bookings in 2023 included Leicestershire County Council, the Churches Conservation Trust, several Salvation Army groups and a large London-based Pentecostal church.

Garden, grounds and land

The garden, grounds and surrounding landscape are a huge part of the Abbey's attraction, and in 2023 we continued to build on the more intentional maintenance and development work started in 2022 including: preparing for a new deep herbaceous border to complement the stone of the east wall of the Abbey with significant onsite propagation of plants for autumn 2024; re-landscaping the garden on the chapel side of the Abbey to create a more welcoming quiet space; and piloting growing wildflower meadow in older uncultivated areas which we will extend in 2024. The addition of a heavy-duty shredder – paid for by the Friends of Launde - means that we are now creating and using our own compost and woodchip. The link between walled garden and kitchen was re-established: we can't grow all our own food but what we do grow is welcomed by guests, and this year included many of the brussels sprouts for our Christmas meals. The garden relies almost entirely on volunteers, the number of which has increased significantly over the last year.



The Estate Committee in 2023 started to learn about managing well the land owned by the Trust and currently let to tenants, and about its connection with the surrounding landscape, in order to develop a strategy over the next few years.

Fabric repair and maintenance

Roof repair works were completed on the Main House flat roof. Year 2 of a three-year programme to upgrade all of our fire detectors was completed. Across the estate selected external window and door frames were painted. Oil boiler control panels were updated from analogue to digital to give us greater control over our heating and hot water. Phase 1 of the upgrade to the deteriorating outdoor café furniture was completed, with the purchase of 52 outdoor chairs. We were pleased to be able to make a number of improvements to our disabled access bedroom facilities after a review of their use.

Software change

New industry standard software was introduced in April. This created significant upheaval in the organisation, however, at the end of 2023 we are now able to offer a streamlined bookings process with online payments, including fully online booking for Launde Programme retreats. We are also benefiting from much more comprehensive management data. In 2024, online booking will be extended, and financial data reporting will be automated.

Staffing

Significant this year was the recruitment of Tristan Owen as Development Manager, to work alongside Graeme Ostah, the Operations Manager, and Revd Chris Webb, the Deputy Warden (responsible for ministry including our retreat programme), and to complete the re-shaped senior management team. This, along with the recruitment of Kate Arthur as Communications Officer, has given us more capacity in sales and pre-sales and in our equivalent of product development.



The volunteer chaplain, Revd Alan Humphrey, living in the cottage onsite retired with his wife Lesley in 2023 and recruitment into that position was ongoing at the end of the year. Revd Dr Catherine Wright started in November as a partially resident, volunteer, part-time chaplain and is bringing valuable experience to the permanent in-house team. During summer 2023 we piloted complementing this small in-house team with volunteer day chaplains, and at the end of the year this was formalised into the College of Chaplains – a group of 6 - which will be further developed in 2024. During 2023 we increased the number of students that we employ to relieve seasonal bottlenecks and have recruited a casual overnight person to relieve the pressure on those who live onsite and staff the overnight on-call rota. At the end of 2023, we have 45 staff and 31 volunteers on our books.

Launde Abbey Companions

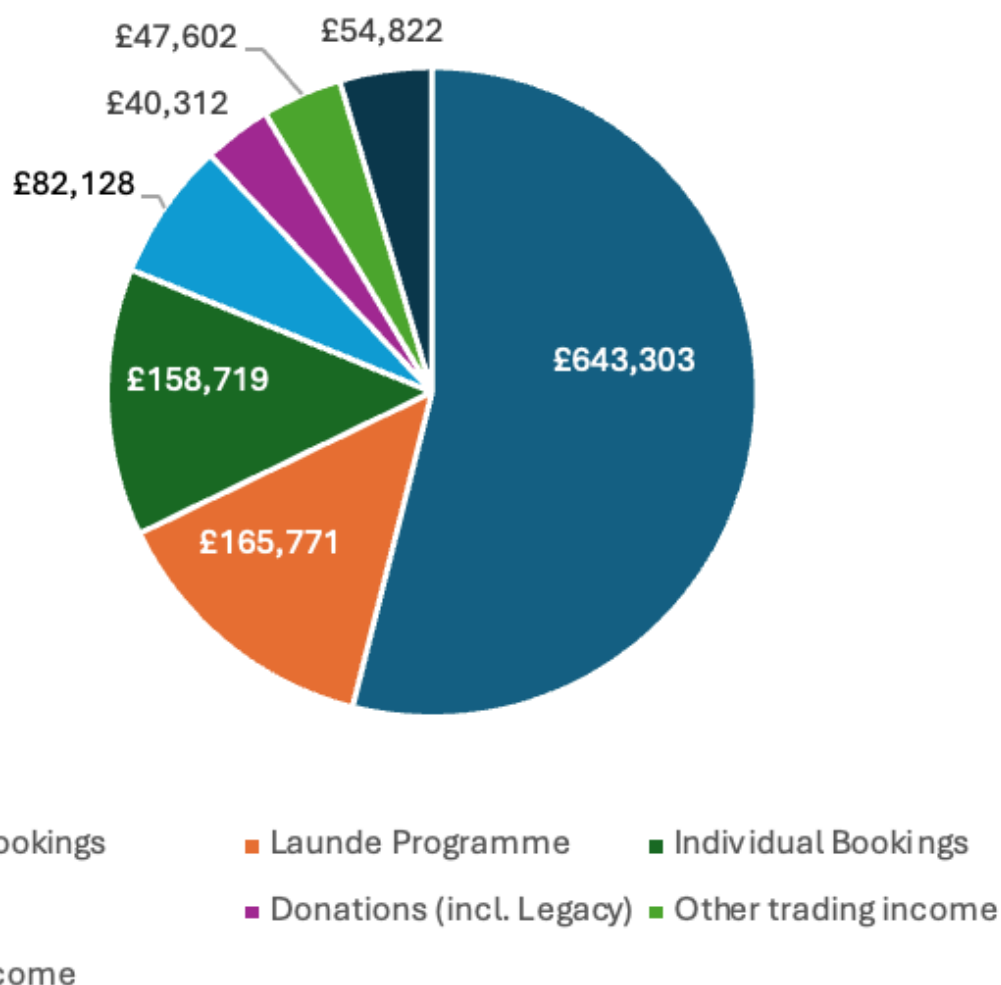
The Launde Abbey Companions scheme was launched in late 2023 to capitalise on interest in the Abbey and its work, and to give people a way of belonging to a broad based community connected to the Abbey. A small donation is invited annually, with volunteers being offered free honorary membership. The scheme is being publicised to all who visit or stay at the Abbey. It is envisaged that it will increase financial, volunteer and prayer support as numbers grow, and its shape and scope will be developed further in 2024/5.



Finance

Income

Launde Abbey 2023 Revenue Split



The Abbey's income for 2023 was £1.2m, up from £1.13m in 2022. By far the largest part of our income – £960k - came from the core business activities of running our own programme of retreats and of hosting groups – largely church or church-linked. The café's income was just over £80k, a small proportion of the whole. However, its overall value includes local visibility, recruitment of volunteers, promotion of fundraising events, community relations and making good use of dining and kitchen staff time and skills in between their focus on serving meals to residents.

Revenue from our own Launde Programme retreats was £166k up slightly from £160k in 2022 and from £127k in the post-Covid year of 2021.

Expenditure

The Abbey's expenditure in 2023 was £1.15m split as illustrated with our largest costs being staff, food and utilities. Some staff and utilities costs and all food costs are directly related to the number of guests at the Abbey.



In 2024

As we go into 2024, we will develop further many of the projects launched in 2023 including the Launde Abbey Companions, and the College of Chaplains. The pilot collaboration with Renovaré is likely to be extended, and a further potential collaboration will be assessed during the course of year. We expect to be exploring a greater degree of active partnership with one or two dioceses as well as further strengthening our relationships with other denominational bodies.



College of Chaplains, Revd Alison Myers and Revd Chris Webb at Launde Abbey

With the Business Development team now properly in place, we enter 2024 with the infrastructure we need to push bookings up both in 2024 and in subsequent years for those already booking into 2025 and 6. During the course of the year, we will be exploring some targeted publicity campaigns to extend further our network of relationships. Aware that, whilst inflation has slowed, food, wage and utilities costs continue to be a high proportion of our expenditure, we will also continue to push down on operating costs in all areas of the business. Extending online booking will make it easier for guests to book and we will continue to embed the new software and further leverage its capabilities to streamline internal processes and release capacity.

A land asset audit will provide input into discussions requested by our most immediate land- owning neighbour – the Diocese of Leicester – as well as inform decisions about managing our own land and grounds. Our gradual programme of upgrading and refurbishing infrastructure will continue with a new telephone system and the installation of solar powered outside lights on the list of projects.



As we begin 2024, challenges continue with rising prices and shrinking budgets amongst some of our traditional clients. However, with the consolidation work of 2023 behind us, I believe the Abbey to be in a strong position to retain and build on our current core business and extend it to a broader constituency, responding to the increasing need for spiritual places of community and sanctuary in an anxious and busy world.

Alison

Revd Alison Myers
Warden

