

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24



Introduction

Welcome to St Thomas! This neighbourhood profile draws on the work of the Wellbeing Exeter Community Builder to bring you a community's eye view of the neighbourhood and what happens in it. You'll not find statistics here on demographics, health, education, etc. Please read this alongside the [Joint Strategic Needs Assessment](#) tool from Devon County Council, which provides a wealth of quantitative data.

Our focus here is on local knowledge: what is it like to live here; what informal community activity there is; where the important community focal points are; and what's missing, or of concern to local residents.

This is a snapshot rather than a directory, so may not have exhaustive listings (although we've done our best to avoid errors and omissions). It aims to highlight community strengths and areas for growth. It also aims to provide an informed commentary on the health of community life.



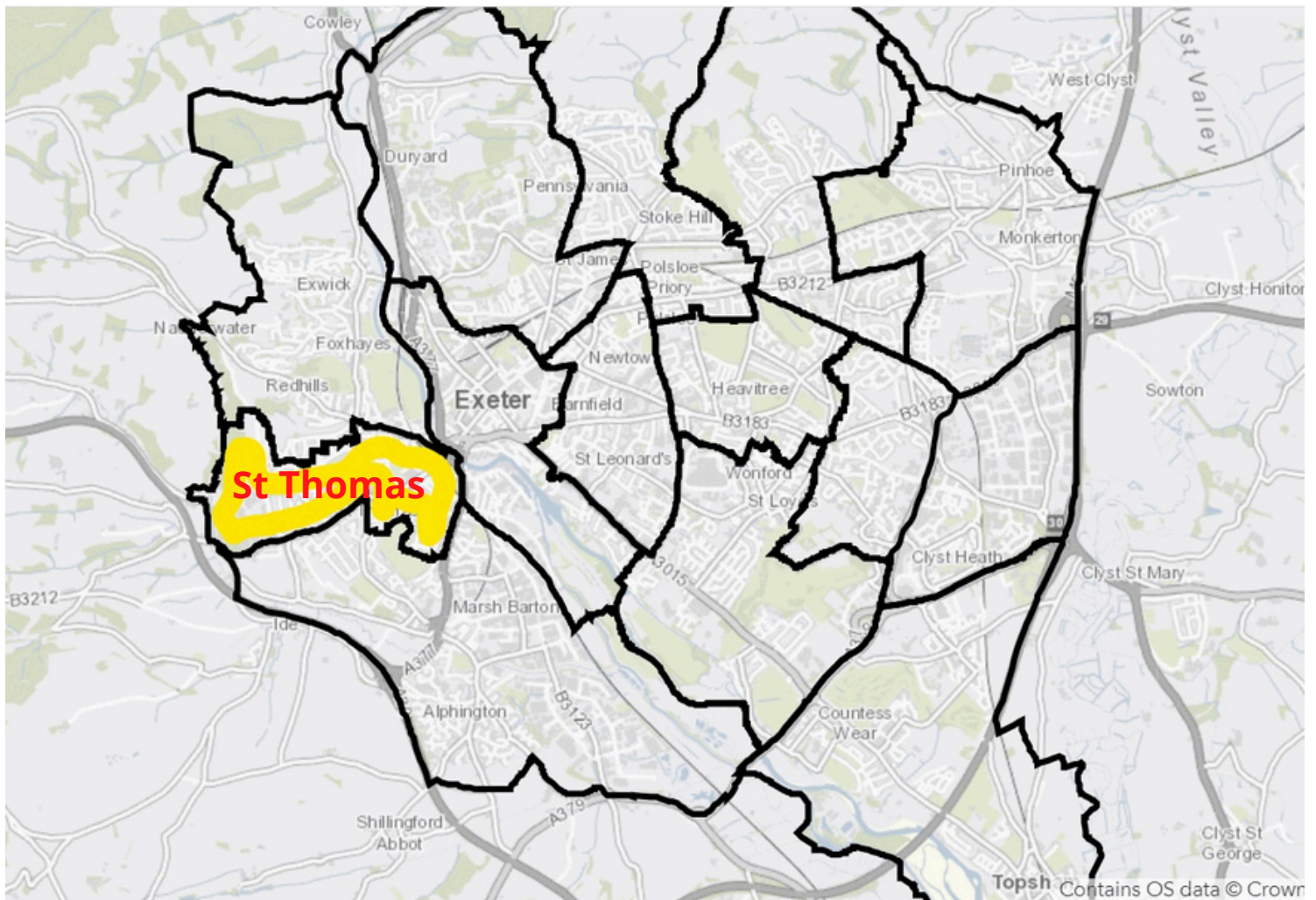
Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

Picture Of A Place

The ward is effectively bisected by Buddle Lane. The eastern segment runs from here down to Exe Bridges, and either side of Cowick Street, the main thoroughfare and shopping street. West of Buddle Lane is an area of mostly social housing, including Merrivale Park. There has been a fair amount of collaborative work between the St Thomas and Exwick Community Builders around activities in this western segment, including joint events in local parks and schools.

St Thomas has three primary schools and a large secondary school (Westexe) on its boundary edge. There is a one more primary school on its boundary too, with many of those families also inhabiting this ward. There are five preschools, plus two more, run by a church and a children's centre respectively.



Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

The four churches are well-attended and active in the community; the congregation tends to be older but with youth groups as well as families with young children in attendance. The churches also have rooms for community use and outside facilitators run groups there too.

Cowick Street is the main thoroughfare through St Thomas, with shops, cafes, pubs, a supermarket, pharmacy and a post office. Being on one of the main routes into Exeter, next to a railway station (St Thomas) and many bus stops, St Thomas shopping precinct and Cowick Street are well placed to serve rural communities as their first port-of-call when they enter Exeter. There are several charity shops, fast food outlets, a bakery, Polish shops and a health food shop. The street and precinct are also only a short bus ride, cycle or walk from the city centre and River Exe. Residents often describe St Thomas as 'self-contained' with 'everything you need' 'good access to amenities' and 'central'. Residents have described how they can get everything they need within five minutes' walk; many people come to the area especially to shop due to its convenience, atmosphere, location or specific range of facilities. However, commercial rents are expensive, so charity shops and chains are over-represented. There is also a 'second wave' of shops and facilities further up Cowick Street, with two churches, several barbers/hairdressers, a pub, café, supermarket and new-build flats with new shops.

Riverside Leisure Centre swimming pool and gym was closed following a fire in 2017; its re-opening in July 2021 was welcomed by local people, whose access to swimming and gym facilities, especially for those without their own transport, had been seriously compromised.

Green Spaces

St Thomas is within minutes' walk of the green circle walking route and its boundary lies next to a nature reserve at its upper point going westward.

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

Cowick Barton Playing Fields (though these are no longer within the ward boundary they are seen very much as 'belonging' to St Thomas). There is a bowls club and refurbished tennis courts with public and low-cost access to tennis courts and a free coaching programme [Tennis For Free](#). Several sports clubs, football teams and running groups use the park, as do the Air Cadets. [Freemoovement](#), an inclusive, free, community fitness programme started here, and a charity fun run has been held here on several occasions. Freemoovement also offers free family summer play sessions, cycle trips and running groups both here and in St Thomas Pleasure Ground and surrounding areas, Freemoovement have also started up a youth park run.

Pinces Gardens is an italianate garden adjoining Cowick Barton. This small but well-kept area is within the boundaries of St Thomas with adjacent allotments, a bowls and croquet club pavilion and a garden maintained by [Devon Gardens Trust](#), as it was the site of Willian Lucombe's nursery almost 300 years ago. It's historic wisteria tunnel is a famous and well-loved feature, and has been the focus for regular community events in spring, organised by St Thomas in Bloom and the St Thomas Community Association.

There is considerable community interest in the space: A friends organisation, [Cowick Roots & Recreation](#), was constituted in July 2021, combining the well-established Bloomin' St Thomas, which has worked for several years in Cowick Barton, with other interested residents. The new group hosted the Wisteria Garden Party in May 2024 with 1500 residents attending. There were stalls, craft and children's activities, music, dancing and food.



They have planted an orchard, have regular pruning events and monthly meetings. They are hoping to create a community garden and continue to improve the park's assets, planting and wildlife, and are addressing concerns about anti-social behaviour in the park, including drug-use, littering and dog fouling.

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

The Birdhouse Cafe opened in the old gate house. It is run as a project of the Exeter-based social enterprise The Garland Trust, who provide employment and volunteering opportunities for adults with disabilities. The Birdhouse has a new Community Builder who organises community events using the small rooms adjoining the cafe. There are mini craft markets, coffee mornings, kids holiday crafts, Halloween trails and Christmas carols.



St Thomas Pleasure Ground has a large children's playground, and the popular splashpad, which is open April to September. The park is very well used by dogwalkers, teens, families and community groups. Freemoovement hold a weekly session here on a Saturday. St Thomas Festival has been held here, as well as community fun days led by Riverside and other churches and Age UK. **St Thomas Community Garden** established here has recently received funding from a City Council ward grant.

The **Friends of Merrivale Park** was formed in 2018, aiming to encourage local use of a currently unloved open space, organise events, fundraising and advocate for improved facilities in the park. They have surveyed residents and worked with Exeter City Council to secure the installation of picnic benches and a security gate. More recently, improvements have been made to play equipment. Premier League Kicks holds free football sessions for 8-19 years olds in the MUGA, which have been very positively received, though in winter this is often hampered by poor lighting in the park.

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

Through conversations with residents and funding from Live & Move, the Community Builder and CPAO have hosted events in the park to encourage more physical activity, offering free exercise and yoga taster sessions for adults.

Residents asked for more children's activities and [Exeter City Football Club](#) and the [Football Fun Factory](#) were contacted. They have delivered a series of free summer football sessions on Monday nights and Saturday mornings. Attendance varied from 20-40 children at the sessions.

Another local initiative, [Zero Mile Gardens](#), are hoping to start a community garden in the park in 2024/25.

The park, however, still suffers from significant anti-social behavior – drug taking, late night noise, and litter. The litter and dog fouling has been a particular issue before football sessions with coaches having to allow 30 minutes to clear the pitches and grass to make sure it is safe and usable for the children.

Community Hubs and What Happens In Them

Community hubs can be buildings, spaces, organisations, even people. They can be community-owned and run, council property, and commercial businesses. What they have in common is that they bring added value to the activities and energy associated with them by bringing people together in ways they might not otherwise do, being a focus for local expertise and connection, and facilitating the casual encounters that fuel fantastic community action.

Despite not having a community centre, there is a remarkably large number of events and activities going on in St Thomas. The recent closure of the AgeUK Exeter building on Cowick Street has limited options for older people, though there are moves to fill the gap this has left in other ways.

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

St Thomas Library lost its premises in 2023 due to the landlord selling the building. This caused a great deal of uproar in the community, who valued the space. The library has found a temporary home with Theatre Alibi.



Although they have lost space and the community computer area, they still advertise and support local events as well as holding some events and activities for a range of interests and ages. It is hoped the library will be able to find a new permanent home in St Thomas as it is an important community asset.

A new green initiative, **Zero Mile Gardens**, has set up in the grounds surrounding the library offering volunteer opportunities and selling locally grown food.

Love Food CIC is a new vegan community food hub on Cowick Street. It houses the community fridge, provides a mixture of free and low-cost vegan cookery lessons, foraging walks and a weekly lunch club. The space can be hired out by the community for community workshops, events, and meetings.

Brillsville Market was set up in 2022 in the car park at the back of the Kings Arms pub on Cowick street. It runs on the second Saturday of the month. The committee has grown from one to five individuals who are all local to St Thomas and regular stall holders. They are turning the market into a Community Interest Company (CIC). There is a repair cafe, food and drinks vans and a craft activity/entertainment for children.

St Thomas Parish Church has a hall which is set back from the road on Cowick Street. It hosts a wide range of groups and classes, some church-led, but many are run by outside organisations such as Ladies' Lunch Club, Remember That Song group, parent/toddler group, peer breastfeeding group, embroidery, keep fit such as seated exercise, Tai Chi, zumba, theatre groups and social groups, e.g. older people's Young at Heart group.

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

The church are putting together a series of mindfulness walks that will be free to the community. The church has also allowed the community to use the grounds for the extremely popular [St Thomas Winter Market](#) and temporarily hosted the community fridge until it moved to the Love Food hub.

St Thomas Methodist Church's hall hosts a wide range of groups and classes, some church-led, but many run by outside organisations such as Slimming World, Rainbows, Brownies and Guides, baby and toddler group, Boys' Brigade, exercise groups etc. There are also craft and games sessions, lunch clubs and coffee mornings. They also host the successful Exeter Gospel Choir, which is a welcoming, informal group. It is often used for community events and meetings.

St Thomas Baptist Church holds events, classes (exercise, church, bible study, two parent and toddler groups) meetings for community groups. A club for young people in school years 1-10 runs here on a Friday evening.

[Trefoil Lodge](#) (Girlguiding HQ) has been newly refurbished. The lodge has two large meeting rooms which can be hired independently and are popular with local groups as well as the Guides. There is a kitchen and an accessible toilet, and a large garden. An activity hub has been created which includes computers and activity equipment groups can borrow. In collaboration with Friends of St Thomas Surgery, the Lodge hosts a weekly chair-based exercise group, a lunch club and a monthly carers group.



Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

What Else Is Happening?

The Club is a community focused group who help bring adults with mental health difficulties together based in Locarno Road. It supports a group of people with long-term mental health difficulties in a social way with meals, games, gardening, day trips, benefits advice and enabling, three to four times a week. It is funded through grants and subscriptions from members' benefits. The group has a weekly Open Art session, for community members to join.

[Jimmy's Café](#) is a friendly café and is a very popular community meeting place.

[Family Garden](#) is a family café on Merrivale Road, styled as a birth and parenting hub, hosting a range of baby and pre-school classes, activities for mums, and Woodcraft Folk for older children.

Bowhill School has a school gates group of mums who meet to go running every Tuesday morning, which is open to all. The school also hosts [La La Choir](#).

The St Thomas Stakeholder Group, formed off the back of Covid, is a collective of community-minded individuals, groups, church, school and business representatives that meet quarterly to share information, collaborate, and discuss community news, events and opportunities.

St Thomas Umbrella is a newly forming group made up of residents who are interested in improving St Thomas, supporting new initiatives, running community events and promoting what's on. The Community Builder is working alongside the group who want to fill the gap of a Community Association, but who want a more modern model (CIC) that will not run into the same issues the previous Community Association had.

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

Flourishing St Thomas is a WhatsApp group set up by the Community Builder in 2024 to link the growing number of green groups and projects in St Thomas. It is a platform for people to share resources and knowledge. The projects span growing initiatives, wildflower planting, community gardens, orchards and individuals who are looking for volunteering opportunities.

The Lucombe Oak pub serves the local community with band nights, quizzes, darts, sport and the like. The owner is key in the community - he organises events and puts Christmas trees up in businesses in Cowick Street, helps coordinate St Thomas Festival and allows meetings in the pub's back room.

Riverside Church is a large space with numerous rooms and church-related organisations, events, bookable spaces and a café. The ministry run youth clubs for children aged 7-12 years old, young adults, teens group and a youth band.

Montgomery School has instructor-led exercise classes such as Zumba, Dance Dynamix (dance routines with music) and adult fitsteps, as well as parent and toddler group on Thursday mornings.

Great Western Railway Staff Association (GWRSA) railway club is a traditional members social club with live acts as well as bingo and darts.

St Thomas Sports & Social Club is a traditional social club which has live acts as well as running activities such as bingo and darts. They are currently in the process of trying to save their car park from development.

The Manager of St Thomas Health Centre is very community minded and runs groups for residents at Trefoil Lodge. They also allow St Thomas Community Emergency Group to use a room for free, for monthly evening meetings.

St Thomas Community Emergency Group is a group for individuals concerned with the risk of flooding or emergency events in the St Thomas area who want to create a network of residents to respond to local emergencies and increase the resilience of the community.

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

The [St Thomas Winter Market](#) is a community festival run by volunteers, held in the grounds of St Thomas Parish Church. It has an impressive footfall of over 3,000 people. It provides a place for local crafters and businesses to sell their goods, free craft and kids activities, storytelling, food, drink and music.

[Exeter Foodbank](#) have set up in what used to be a polish supermarket at the end of Cowick Street, by Exe bridges roundabout. They are open 5 days a week to serve the community. People must be referred to be able to use the foodbank, there is no walk in service.

[St Thomas Food Fight](#) and The Baked Potato Project are other food poverty projects run by local residents. They provide free bags of food on Sundays in St Thomas precinct to the homeless or anyone who is in need. The Baked Potato Project is run by a local baker who uses the residual heat from her baking oven to cook jacket potatoes to go into the food bags or community fridge.

Spreading The Word: How Do People Connect?

St Thomas, Exeter and St Thomas Community Facebook pages both have several thousand followers. Many of the groups mentioned here also make active use of Facebook.

During the pandemic many neighbours formed Whatsapp groups and similar. This proved an effective way to meet new neighbours (even if, at the time they couldn't meet face to face), share news and resources and help each other. Many of the groups remain in use, even if less frequently and urgently now. A good recent example is a resident asking people on her street to help her 'guerrilla garden' to tidy up a patch of ground near Pinces Gardens.

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

For some people (including those with young families), posters, flyers and word-of-mouth are still strong ways to find out about local events. There are noticeboards in Merrivale Park and Cowick Barton Playing Fields as well as two noticeboards on Cowick Street itself supported by St Thomas Library (outside Luxtons) and Cartridges Solicitors. The Co-Op supermarket and other local shops and cafes are usually happy to take posters. St Thomas Library advertise theirs and other local events, displayed on windows, display stands, on tables and on their social media. With the exception of the Cowick Street noticeboards, these have not been much used since the pandemic.

The Community Builder has recently had discussions with many of the local groups who are keen to get more noticeboards in St Thomas and to bring others back into use. The Community Builder plans to create a map of all the noticeboards in the area to help promote their use. The newly forming St Thomas Umbrella Group aspire to have a what's on and events listing for St Thomas on a local website.

There has been ongoing interest in the production of a St Thomas newsletter for several years, and a pilot edition, published by Pinhoe Community Press in September 2021, was well received. However, this is a heavy commitment for community members and so far no feasible way has been found to manage an ongoing publication.

Where Are The Gaps and Concerns? What Potential For The Future?

Affordable bookable spaces for community use continue to be lacking in St Thomas, with some groups having to remain Zoom-based, not as a result of the pandemic, restrictions, but because they cannot find a suitable physical venue. Residents feel an established organisation would be needed to take any plans forward, and it would need to be financially viable. A number of possible sites have been suggested for renovation/building as community space, including the units under the railway arches on Cowick Street, renovation of St Thomas Parish Church, or an existing or new building in Cowick Barton Playing Fields.

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2023-24

Provision for young people, especially children aged 9 to 16, has reduced further due to the pandemic. Children have to attend youth clubs in Countess Wear and Newtown, as there is no more local provision. There are few options for those with additional needs. The playgrounds and the need to update the play equipment in all three of the St Thomas parks are frequently mentioned on social media. The Community Builder is hoping to bring residents together to discuss if there are options to improve the parks and youth opportunities.

Many groups and community events struggle for long term funding or to cover basic yearly insurance and public liability costs. The competition for funding and funding pots are decreasing every year. This is, however, making some groups investigate more partnership or collaborative working to reduce costs.