

Community Builder Neighbourhood Profile

St Thomas 2021-22



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.



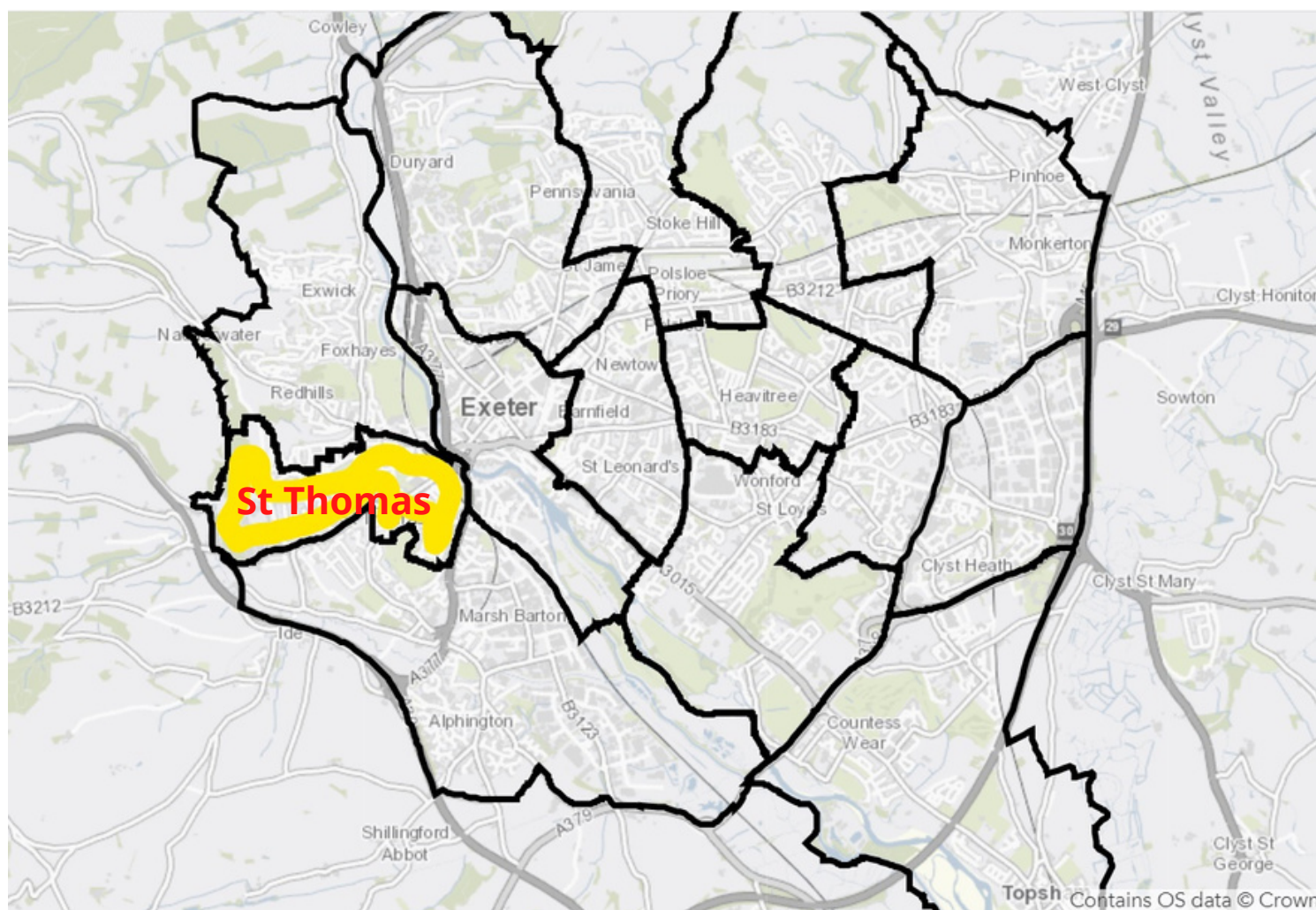
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Picture Of A Place

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.



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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 too. The churches also have rooms for community use and outside facilitators run groups there too.

Cowick Street is the main throughfare 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.



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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 delivering volunteer-led circuit-style, started here, and a charity fun run has been held here on several occasions. Freemoovement has also offered free family summer play sessions, both here and in St Thomas Pleasure Ground.

Pinces Gardens - italianate, 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, plus a fantastic garden maintained by Devon Garden Trust as it was the site of Willian Lucombe's nursery almost 300 years ago. Its 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 new Friends organisation, Cowick Roots & Regeneration, 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 is interested in maintaining and improving the park's assets, planting and wildlife, and in addressing concerns about anti-social behaviour in the park, including drug-use, littering and dog fouling.

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 dog walkers, 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. The Community Garden established here has recently received funding from a City Council ward grant.



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Merrivale Park - The Friends of Merrivale Park was formed in 2018, aiming to encourage local use of a currently unloved open space, organise events and 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, and there are hopes for further improvements to equipment. Premier League Kicks holds free football sessions for 8-19 years olds in the MUGA, which have been very positively received, and have continued in various forms in and around the covid restrictions, though in winter this is often hampered by poor lighting in the park. The park however still suffers from significant anti-social behaviour – drug-taking, late-night noise, and litter.

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.

St Thomas Library holds events for a range of interests and ages, advertises and supports local events, low-cost space hire and has a Friends group of volunteers to help with events. It hosts a range of talks, pre-school sessions, art classes, a local history day, even a series of acting workshops.



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St Thomas Parish Church has a hall which is set back from the road on Cowick Street. Hosts a wide range of groups and classes, some church-led, but many run by outside organisations: AgeUK groups, ladies' lunch club, 'Remember that song' group, parent/toddler group, peer breastfeeding group, embroidery, keep fit such as seated exercise, Tai Chi and Zumba, theatre groups and social groups e.g. older people's Young at Heart Group.

St Thomas Methodist Church - the Church Hall hosts a wide range of groups and classes, some church-led, but many run by outside organisations: 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, and currently a series of cookery classes, jointly with Westbank. 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 Headquarters) - 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, a monthly carers group, and a 'natter club' for people to bring craft activities every Wednesday.



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St Thomas Community Association has its roots in efforts to organise community events in St Thomas Pleasure Ground in 2012, which evolved into popular St Thomas Festival, held most years in September. The group also organises the local Christmas lights, and in July 2018 they also successfully piloted St Thomas Together, a celebration of local diversity, but its capacity has been limited by a lack of volunteers. The Association previously acted as an umbrella organisation supporting other smaller groups, but this has proved difficult to sustain, and recent changes have confirmed a focus on the festival and lights, building a strong committee, and aiming towards being a carbon-neutral organisation.

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 – a friendly café, which is a recycling hub for plastic, in conjunction with residents to support Ellie's Fund children's cancer charity. This café has a great atmosphere and is a very popular community meeting place.

Family Garden – a family café on Merrivale Road, styled as a 'birth and parenting hub', hosting a sling library, a range of baby and pre-school classes, activities for mums, and Woodcraft Folk for older children.

Bowhill School - a 'school gates group' of mums meet to go running every Tuesday morning which is open to all. The school also hosts also the La La Choir.



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Lucombe Oak Pub - serving 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 pub's back room.

Riverside Church - 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 and teens group and a youth band which are very popular.

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.

Railway Club - traditional members social club with live acts, bingo, darts, etc.

St Thomas Sports & Social Club - traditional social club with live acts, bingo, darts, etc.

St Thomas Health Centre - Freemoovement Light now runs twice weekly walking groups from the centre.

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 Pines Gardens.



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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 Coop supermarket and other local shops/cafes are usually happy to take posters. St Thomas Library advertise their and others' 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.

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.

Some residents have met to discuss the possibility of a St Thomas Farmers' Market, but no concrete plans have yet been made.

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, and there remain few options for those with additional needs. The pandemic has affected pre-school groups in particular; levels of provision have been slow to reach pre-pandemic levels.

