



Neighbourhood Profiles: St Thomas

Introduction

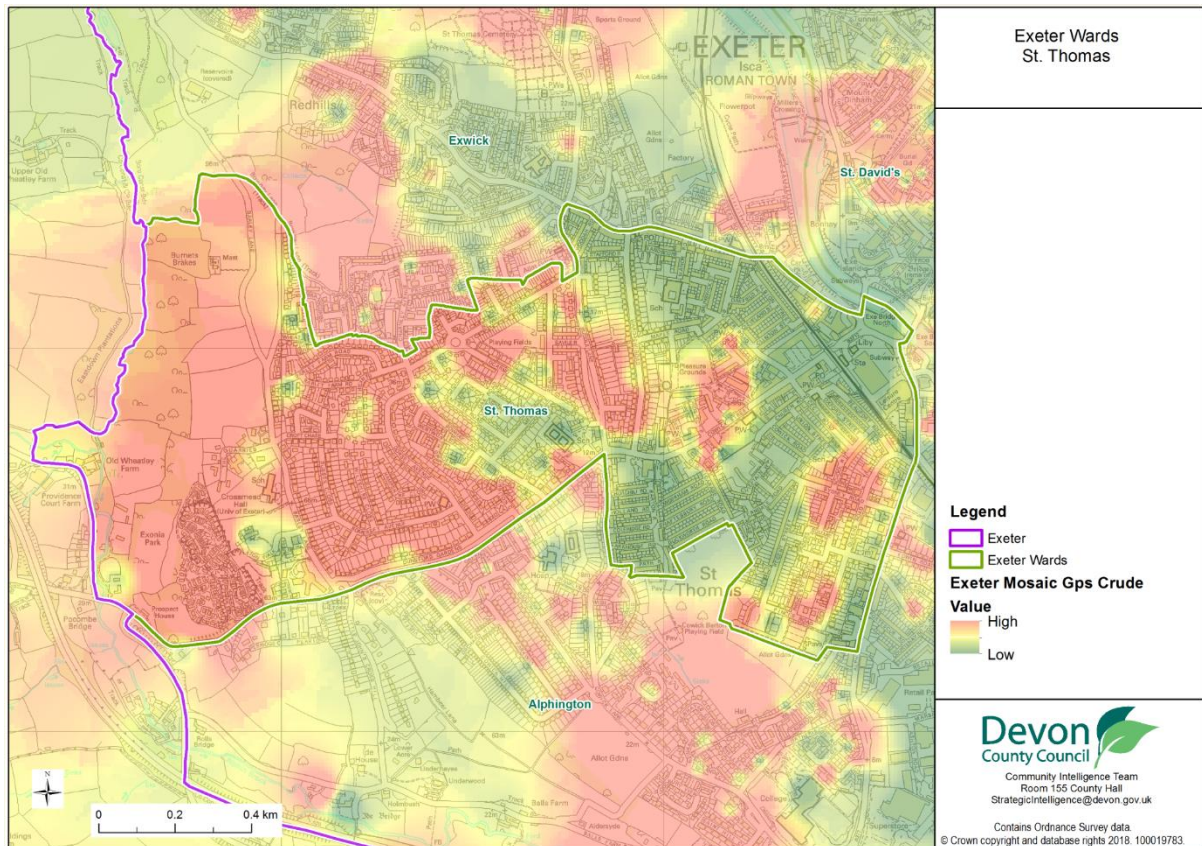
Welcome to St Thomas! This neighbourhood profile draws on the work of the Wellbeing Exeter community builder in St Thomas, to bring you a community's eye view of the neighbourhood and what happens in it. You'll not find statistics here on demographics, health, education, etc. Please read this alongside the fantastic [JSNA Community Health and Wellbeing profiles](#), 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 is there; where are the important community focal points; 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 its not-so-strengths, and to provide an informed commentary on the health of community life. We've included some brief case studies from the work of the community builder, to give a sense of what this work can involve and highlight the kind of community action going on in St Thomas. We hope you find it useful.

As community builder and resident of St Thomas myself for over a decade, I have built up a reservoir of knowledge about St Thomas both factual and anecdotal; yet it's been fascinating to get to know things/people/organisations that I previously wasn't aware of to enrich my own knowledge, which I can then share with others. My role is to listen to the community, to support residents and to connect people with each other and with organisations that can benefit them. Another key task in my role is to support and signpost residents when/if they have an idea which will benefit their community i.e. starting a group or holding an event. I contact residents at events, knock on people's doors and ask them about living on their street and whether they know their neighbours, in order to gain a street-by-street insight into St Thomas. The residents themselves often contact me with ideas or simply for me to link them with others.

Picture of a Place: Natural communities vs ward boundaries

In describing St Thomas, most people agree that the positives far outweigh the negatives; with many people immediately saying it is a 'great community', 'friendly' with 'lots going on', and that 'I moved here especially', when talking about the area. Naturally there are drawbacks, which most people state are 'not much to do for younger people' and 'it's a bit scruffy/rough looking'.

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, Exwick and Alphington community builders around activities in this western segment, as residents do not view the ward boundary as defining community at this point. Below is a heat map for St Thomas showing risk stratification for predicted levels of frailty, as developed and used by the public health team at Devon County Council. The map also shows the ward boundary (in green and purple).



Unlike many arterial roads in urban areas, which can divide communities, Cowick Street is a thoroughfare that attracts people from across the city and region, as well as bringing together local residents. Due to its unusual combination of being on one of the main routes into Exeter, next to a railway station (St Thomas) and many bus stops, St Thomas Precinct and Cowick Street are well placed to serve rural communities as their first port-of-call when they enter Exeter. There are several cafes, pubs, a supermarket and a post office, 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', with 'good access to amenities' and 'central'. Residents have described how they can get everything they need within 5 minutes' walk and when mapping the area, I spoke with multiple people who come to the area especially to shop due to its convenience, atmosphere, location or specific range of facilities. The downside is that commercial rents are expensive, so charity shops and chains/franchises are overrepresented, and there are fewer independent shops. 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.

There are three primary schools in St Thomas, and another on the boundary, plus one large secondary school (Westexe School) on its boundary with many families of children attending it living in St Thomas. There are also five pre-schools, including one run by a church and one by a children's centre.

The four churches are well-attended and active in the community; the congregations tend 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 (see below).

St Thomas is a diverse place to live by Devon's and even Exeter's standards; around 10% of St Thomas residents were born outside of the UK. The children of many non-UK nationals attend the local schools and integrate very successfully. Although schools do not have large designated English as an Additional Language teams, children from non-native English-speaking backgrounds perform well and their families contribute to the community and economy.

St Thomas has a number of people with special and complex needs including mental health problems, which may affect someone's capacity to contribute to community life without support. Some people with complex needs live in sheltered accommodation – there are several independent and supporting living residences in the ward, including some for older people. Exeter has a high level of street-attached/homeless people, many of whom gravitate towards St Thomas as a result of increasing hostility towards them in the city centre. More than half the ward is designated 'red' in the heat map, meaning high frailty risk. This means the ward has a vibrant yet vulnerable population. This can lead to problems between neighbours, police involvement and other social issues.

Green/public spaces

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

Cowick Barton Playing Fields (though this has recently become outside the ward boundary, it is seen very much as 'belonging' to St Thomas). CBPF are famously the places for young people, families, dog walkers, exercisers of many types/ages and people generally feeling the need for some green space go to relax. Funding was made available to local community to develop an activity trail. A community orchard was planted and cared for by Bloomin' St Thomas. The 'Bloomers' have also created a St Thomas Tree Trail, taking in many of the local green spaces within half a mile of the railway station. The Friends of Bloomin' St Thomas meet a few times a year to do mulching, pruning and wildflower-planting in designated places in the Fields.

In 2017, Freemoovement, an inclusive, free, community fitness programme delivering volunteer-lead circuit styles sessions, started here, and is now also in St Thomas Pleasure Ground Park. This was a result of the 'trim' /activity trail with increased levels of physical

exercise due to an extensive running and walking track and activity bars installed in the park. There is potential for this successful model (and others) to expand further, and include even more people needing to move more.

There is a bowls club and refurbished tennis courts with public and low -cost access to tennis courts and a coaching programme 'Tennis for Free' to encourage people to take up the sport. Additionally, there are multiple sports clubs, football teams and running groups who use the park in the evenings and at weekend, especially in the summer months. Around 500 children per day heading from St Thomas to the secondary school walk through Cowick Barton Playing Fields.

The site is beloved by many nature enthusiasts with several ancient oak and other trees lining the park; making them a haven for wildlife and children alike. CBPF also hosts an annual charity fun run in October which has been supported by several local businesses and charities such as Exeter City Football Trust.

The Italianate **Pinces Gardens** is a small but well-kept area within the boundaries of St Thomas, leading from CBPF. This space has an allotment adjacent to it, a bowls and croquet club pavilion, plus a fantastic garden maintained by Devon Garden Trust as it was the site of William Lucombe's nursery almost 300 years ago; it has a famous and well-loved feature which is its wisteria tunnel. For the last three years, the flowering of the wisteria in May has inspired residents to hold a free Pinces Garden Tea Party aimed at families, involving St Thomas in Bloom, St Thomas Community Association and local community groups.

Merrivale Park. The Friends of Merrivale Park is a small, recently formed group of volunteers supported by the community builder, aiming to encourage local use of a currently unloved open space, and to advocate for improved facilities in the park. The group officially formed a year ago in January 2018 and since then have held six events, several meetings and applied successfully for grants. They have put together two surveys to assess who uses the park, and what facilities residents would like to see and would use. The Friends have gained a Grassroots Community Grant from Exeter Community Forum/Exeter City Council which will help refurbish some of the equipment in the park.

Freemovement held sessions there but found after a year that the sessions weren't as well attended, so stopped them as they hold other sessions in the two other St Thomas parks. **Premier Kicks** also hold weekly sessions to get young people active for free playing football in Merrivale Park for 8-19 years olds in the MUGA. The reaction from local families to this has been overwhelmingly positive, with people appreciating a free, local opportunity, which is friendly and accessible, and good way to meet others living nearby who don't necessarily go to the same school.

St Thomas Pleasure Ground. Has a large children's playground, and the popular splashpad which is open from April to September. The park is very well used by dog walkers, teens, families and community groups. Freemovement hold their weekly session on a Saturday, regularly attracting twenty residents, some of whom are accessing exercise for the first time or after a pause. St Thomas Festival holds their annual festival at the Pleasure Ground and it also hosts community fun days led by Riverside and other churches and Age UK. The park

has become a place known for anti-social behaviour, which sadly mars its reputation for some families or elderly people, especially in the evenings/winter.

Spreading the word: how do people connect?

Conversations are currently in progress regarding setting up a newsletter for St Thomas; some key residents are researching publication, writing, collation and distribution. However, it is a time-consuming activity so there are concerns it won't get off the ground or won't be sustainable. As with most things, momentum is gained once people see there are already others involved.

Friends of Merrivale Park have an occasional newsletter 'Merritale' which was fantastic but limited to around 500 copies.

St Thomas, Exeter Facebook group has 2670 followers, and many of the groups mentioned here also make active use of Facebook. **St Thomas Community** on Facebook has 2545 members.

Noticeboards

For some (especially 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 (they will put up posters for local events). The Coop supermarket and other local shops and 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 – especially Facebook for their own events.

Primary Schools – there have been times when primary schools will let parents know about community events via text or email, but this is rather sporadic.

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.

St Thomas has become creative in its use of space and hubs as there is no single hub; rather an organic, sometimes fragmented, collection of places that people congregate in. The main 'bumping places' are St Thomas Pleasure Ground, Cowick Barton Playing Field (not in St Thomas, but on its fringes), St Thomas Library, St Thomas Methodist Church, St Thomas Parish Church, Age UK (which, incidentally, does not automatically appeal to everyone of the over 50s demographic), Jimmy's Coffee and Café 36. The absence of a community centre has not particularly held people back. The noticeboards are well used and the spaces are well used. However, they are expensive and hard to hire as they are busy, making new groups difficult to start with space at a premium.

- **St Thomas Library** – holds events for a range of interests and ages, advertises and supports local activities, low-cost space hire and has a Friends of group of volunteers to help with events. Hosts a range of talks, pre-school sessions, art classes, a local history day, even a series of acting workshops.
- **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: Age UK groups, ladies' lunch club, 'Remember that song' group, Parent /toddler group/peer breastfeeding group, embroidery, keep fit such as Tai Chi and Zumba, theatre groups and social groups e.g. older people's Young at Heart Group.
- **St Thomas Methodists Church** - The Church Hall hosts a wide range of groups and classes, some church-led, but many are run by outside organisations: Slimming World, Rainbows, Brownies and Guides, baby and toddler group, a Friday café for parents with young children, Boys' Brigade... There are also craft and games sessions and coffee mornings. They also host the successful Exeter Gospel Choir, which is a welcoming, informal group. The hall 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.
- **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 to 12 years old, young adults and teens group and a youth band which are very popular.
- **Jimmy's Coffee** – A friendly café, hosting St Thomas Depression and Anxiety meet up group and 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, styled as a 'birth and parenting hub', hosting a sling library, a range of baby and pre-school classes, activities for mums (including ballet and meditation), and Woodcraft Folk for older children.
- **Age UK Exeter** have their HQ on Cowick Street, offering a community café, and activities for older people including exercise, art, massage, hairdressing and singing groups and a computer tuition service.
- **Bowhill School** A 'school gates group' of mums meet to go running every Tuesday morning which is open to all, also the recreational La La Choir.
- **Montgomery school** has instructor-led exercise classes such as Zumba and adult fitsteps, as well as parent and toddler group on Thursday mornings.
- **Lucombe Oak Pub** Hosting band nights, quizzes, darts, sport and the like. The owner is key in the community and 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.
- **Trefoil Lodge** Hosts Brownie, Guides groups, external- organisation groups such as Pilates, Jumping beans children's music and movement and charity groups. Friends of Merrivale Park also use the space to hold meetings and events.

What else is happening?

- **St Thomas Community Association.** They have around 85 members and were set up in 2013 to run the St Thomas Community Festival, a free event running annually in September on the Pleasure Ground. In July 2018 they also piloted St Thomas Together, a celebration of local diversity (see below). Bloomin' St Thomas, Pinces Garden Tea Party and The Friends of Merrivale Park are all supported by St Thomas Community Association. The Association is not currently able to reach the diverse groups that exist in St Thomas. Its appeal has widened with the recent AGM but more work needs to be done to represent a larger cross section of the population.
- **Westbank Health Walks** although the group meet on Exeter Quay, the area is accessible for people living in St Thomas. The group is run by Westbank based in Exminster, but provides free, easily accessible along Exeter Quay on Monday afternoon (grade 2) and Thursday (grade 1).
- **Westex Children's Centre** Formerly a hub for families, now less so with restructuring of services for families. Hosts a preschool and parents' groups.
- **St Thomas Health Centre.** Carers Support lunch club which meets weekly on a Tuesday at a local venue. Outreach groups which meet at Trefoil Lodge on Monday and Wednesdays for craft and socialising.
- **Railway Club and St Thomas Sports and Social Club** Traditional members social club – live acts, bingo, darts, etc

Councillors' Support in St Thomas

Local councillors have been very generous in supporting community building and the establishment of small community groups.

Examples of Councillors' grants:

- Noticeboards for Merrivale Park and Cowick Barton Playing Fields.
- To help St Thomas Methodist Church group raise the beds outside St Thomas Methodists Church Hall.
- Funding for a site-specific theatre organisation Squilometre to do a community-based performance for 2018's Pinces Garden Party.
- To allow allotment-holders at Newman Road to meet and hold public events.
- Contributions towards Freemoovement's start-up costs and equipment.
- Running costs for St Thomas Festival each year.
- Funds to help volunteers start and maintain groups for people with depression and anxiety to meet as well as new mothers needing peer-breastfeeding support at St Thomas Parish Church's parents' group.
- Support for Friends of Merrivale Park to enable them to run events, fundraise, and recruit volunteers.

Where are the gaps and concerns? What potential for the future?

St Thomas people are concerned about losing their green spaces. They also report concerns about levels of crime and antisocial behaviour, and lack of facilities and services for young people. Many young people who don't attend clubs or do sports activities don't necessarily have their needs catered for. Space (formerly Devon Youth Service) have run a detached-

youth club in Cowick Barton Park for a number of months which engages a number of young people; however, many people state they would like to see more provision for young people, especially as Riverside Leisure Centre no longer has a pool for people of all ages to use.

Residents suggest they would like to set up a stay and play group for after school in the winter for young families, and some walking or beginners fitness groups in the park. People regularly mention wanting a community centre, however, with little land available to build onto and without organisational framework to build or refurbish and existing space, the community is managing at present, without a physical community centre – instead dispersing community activity over several places or ‘hubs’. The lack of one physical structure has its pros and cons; yet, groups thrive regardless, encouraged by community building, social media and councillors’ grants.

The lively, accessible fitness scene in St Thomas has been a trailblazer for the city, and has potential to continue to expand, and increase levels of community fitness for everyone. Key areas are potentially getting mums active, older people, cycling and people re-starting exercise after a period of illness or inactivity.

In order to celebrate and recognise the area’s increasingly multinational population, St Thomas Community Association organised the first celebration of diversity, St Thomas Together, in July 2018 which was attended by 100 or more people. There was international food, music, history and activities. The event was free and will continue for a second year in spring 2019. Local resident, volunteer, parent and Syrian refugee, Khaled, was one of the organisers. He says:

‘The International celebration of St. Thomas together came about as a way to bring people together regardless of religion, race, political backgrounds and nationalities. The main goal is peace and love, creating strong ties between members of the community living in one land. This is what makes peace around the region. As well as the exchange of cultures, heritage, food, sweets and music from around the world. And entertainment in a way that makes you make new friends with a pure heart. They respect you as a human being not as a saint, or a priest. In addition to providing an opportunity for people to express their views and spread the cultures of their countries in all their forms.’

Khaled, as a devout Muslim believes in helping others voluntarily, yet he is also driven to help others to give back to the country and city which has become home to him and his family. He has made friends with people from many walks of life in Exeter and the UK. Khaled dreams of peace and works hard to build good relations with Exeter citizens, embodying community spirit and neighbourliness.