

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

ST MARY BEACHAMWELL



Text, design and photography

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**REACH Ely (Reimagining Churches as
Community Assets for the Common Good)**
is a multi-partner research project that
aims to help communities make fuller use
of their churches.

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The project is implemented by

**Centre for Social Innovation at
Cambridge Judge Business School
and the Diocese of Ely**

*with the generous support of Allchurches Trust
and Historic England*

www.reachely.org

The challenges facing church communities and their buildings have been extensively studied in the light of declining church attendance in the United Kingdom over several decades. REACH Ely aims to address the less-well-understood opportunities for churches to engage and reconnect with the 97.7 per cent of the local communities in the Diocese of Ely who do not attend their parish churches.

With the absence of universal determinants of success and failure of churches in the community engagement context, the REACH Ely project will provide an understanding of the relationship between communities and wider use of church buildings as well as the contribution that churches make to the common good. The project will determine community values, needs and opportunities that can be used in the most effective way to ensure a win-win outcome for communities and sustainable future of church buildings.

The **case study series** is based on in-depth interviews and observations about church building use with informants from a subset of deaneries and parishes in the Diocese of Ely, supplemented with secondary information about the communities they represent. The purpose of the case study is to unearth various church experiences in renovating and envisioning their buildings as missional and social spaces, engaging with local and wider communities, addressing current challenges, and learning from their practice.

The **Glossary** is a separate document that accompanies the case study series. It is available as a download from the project's website www.reachely.org

On the cover: Piscina in the south wall of the church containing a bust of St Mary the Virgin.

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ST MARY BEACHAMWELL

Church Category: Rural

Deanery: Fincham and Feltwell

Address: The Green, Beachamwell,
Swaffham PE37 8BB

Website: [www.norfolkchurches.co.uk/
beachamwellmary/beachamwellmary.htm](http://www.norfolkchurches.co.uk/beachamwellmary/beachamwellmary.htm)



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Festival church; Grade I listed building; 11th-century round tower; Small walled churchyard; Thatched nave and chancel roof; North porch with brick gables; Wall graffiti carvings; Piscina niche with St Mary's bust; Open-backed pews; Stained glass; Brasses; Wall plaques; No WCs and kitchen facilities

Congregation to Population Ratio: 11 / 339

Fundraising: Grants and match funding; Open Gardens; Half marathon; Concerts; Friends of the church

Income Generation: No regular income generating activities

Communications: Website; Facebook groups; Newsletter; Email; Print and electronic Visitors' Books; Booklets; Postcards and notelets; Parish noticeboard

Community Engagement: Local group activities in the village hall; Coffee in the church; Social events; Afternoon teas; Harvest supper; Community public meeting; Flower and brass rota.

ROOTS



Profile

The small village of Beachamwell (population 339 in 2011 including the hamlet of Choseley) lies at the edge of the Brecks in Norfolk. It is situated 8 km (5 miles) to the south-west of Swaffham and 16 km (10 miles) east of Downham Market – its nearest railway station. As well as Beachamwell, the parish also includes the hamlets of Shingham and Drymere.

Beachamwell today is a quiet and pleasant village that sits in a very rural district with few major roads running through the area and no public transport, aside from a Dial-a-Bus service. A mobile post office visits the village four times a week. At one time, the village had four churches. Two of these are now in ruins whereas the third (St Botolph's) is closed and only opens for special occasions. A former Wesleyan chapel has been converted into a private residence. Beachamwell has a village hall, which is used by the Women's Institute as well as a number of clubs and exercise classes. Beachamwell's public house operates as a bed and breakfast and is open only infrequently to the public. A pop-up public house has occasionally been held at the village hall.

The village school, which used to be a church school until the early twentieth century, closed in 1996. Similarly the rectory in Beachamwell and the one in Shingham, were closed and sold many years ago.

Beachamwell is known for its own variety of apple, the Beachamwell Seedling, originally Motteux's Seedling. Mr Motteux of Beachamwell, in Norfolk, raised it, probably in the mid-18th century. The fruit is small with a dark green skin, ripening to pale yellow, tinged red on the sunny side, with occasional russet but it is now considered a rare variety.

The parish church of St Mary is picturesquely situated at the centre of the village, adjacent to the large Village Green. The village hall and the public house are also built on the edge of the Village Green, which is surrounded by Georgian cottages. This part of Beachamwell is a conservation area.

At present, the church is not technically closed although it is currently not accessible for health and safety reasons. Once the repairs are done to roof, thanks to 3 grants amounting to just under £30,000 (*see Fundraising*), it is hoped the church would be able to open for various activities and services.



Top: South-east view of St Mary's with churchyard; Bottom: North-east view of church building.

Building

St Mary's is a Grade I listed medieval church, the only one in the parish, with later additions. It sits at the western end of the village green, surrounded by small walled churchyard, in an attractive conservation area. The churchyard is now closed.

The church is mentioned in the Domesday Book (1086) when there were two manors – Bycham and Wella. Small church building was constructed from flint, mainly rendered with ashlar and some brick dressings. St Mary's has an attractive round tower – one of the earliest in Norfolk – dating to the early 11th century, which is tapering from a broad base to a narrower octagonal 14th-century bell stage, built with intricate flush flint work.

The building also comprises the nave with north porch, south aisle, extended in 1832, and chancel. The church has a four-bay arcade, two of which are plastered, and a 15th-century north porch with its brick crow-stepped gables, which is rarely found in a country church.

St Mary's church has great charm and features in most guidebooks on Norfolk churches, attracting visitors from all over the world. It has a thatched roof to its nave and chancel, as were most East Anglian roofs in medieval times.

The church has little in the way of facilities: there is no running water, hence no WCs nor kitchen. The current heating system is largely ineffective. The PCC had investigated the installation of a ramp to allow for disabled access, but the construction of the building meant that it was not possible to do so.

The leaded roof to the aisle was stolen in May 2019 will be replaced with a new lead roof in mid-2021. The theft of the lead roof caused a significant shock to the village community. Fortunately, its replacement was covered by an insurance claim. Fundraising had been carried out for some time for repairs to the thatched portion of the roof, which will cost in the region of £30,000. There has also been storm damage to the round tower and restoration has been carried out to the windows, bells and porch and the walls have been repointed in recent years.



North porch entrance to the church.



*Top: Round tower of St Mary's church; Middle: Belfry window in the tower and church clock;
Bottom: Views of the church from the east.*



Pages 6-7: Panoramic view of the nave and the chancel.

Festival church. Since April 2019, the church has operated informally as a festival church and the Friends group are in the process of applying for formal status (see *Team*). Although St Mary's church has only six services per year, under normal circumstances a team of volunteers opens the church daily from dawn to dusk. The building can comfortably accommodate eighty people. Social events are generally held in the village hall opposite St Mary's and the PCC is keen to use this facility rather than to try to compete with it.

Artefacts

St Mary's most notable artefact is its graffiti, considered to be among the most interesting in England. The westernmost nave column on the north side of the aisle bears fascinating carvings that are the main reason people will come to visit St Mary's. The graffiti depicts a lady in a wimple. The upper of the carvings is an inscription which appears to be a list of building materials and prices, probably inscribed by the mason responsible for construction on the site. The lower 14th-century carving depicts a grotesque devil, known as the Beachamwell Devil,

which is the source of several local legends. This particular carving has been described as one of the most important medieval carvings in an English church. Parts of the carving are faded, but it has been placed behind a Perspex screen to prevent further deterioration. In 2018, HRH Prince Charles paid a visit to Beachamwell church to see the graffiti.

There are also some weights and measures in a list, which appears to be some kind of reckoning table. The piscina niche in the aisle wall contains a bust of St Mary which was given to the church. The Victorian open-backed pews are unremarkable but the team at St Mary's has no plans to replace these with chairs. The church has two Victorian stained glass windows, two brasses in the floor near the altar, and wall plaques, two of which memorialise pre-Reformation Catholic priests. A third plaque is dedicated to Robert Cubitt Nightingale, an incumbent who died in 1915, having 'endeavoured above all to cheer and ameliorate the condition of the poor and labouring'. The floors of the church are unusual and particularly attractive being largely composed of small hexagonal tiles and locally made bricks.



Open-back pews in the nave; South aisle with pews.

RUNNING

Team

The church is a member of the Wissey Valley Benefice that comprises Barton Bendish, Boughton, Methwold, Wereham, West Dereham, Whittington, Wretton with Stoke Ferry and Beachamwell with Shingham. The Priest in Charge currently serves eight parishes and has a thriving ministry team. The parish of Beachamwell/Shingham currently has neither officers, nor churchwardens, but there is an informal treasurer.

Religious Services

Services were held for all the major events in the Christian calendar. The Christmas service with Carols was particularly popular making the small church packed out.

Festival church. With an ageing congregation in single numbers, St Mary Beachamwell was facing closure in the late 2010s. A meeting, attended by 30-40 residents, was held to gauge village views on the future of the church building. The meeting confirmed that residents were keen for the church to remain open and that sufficient support would be forthcoming for it to do so. An informal group, the Friends of St Mary's, established in 2017, will oversee its transition to a festival church.

St Mary's church, unfortunately, has been physically closed for 2 years, mainly due to the lead roof not yet being repaired due to bat infestation in the belfry. The repairs are now due to start in 2021. The members of the Friends and the Priest in Charge are cautiously exploring the various legal requirements as the rules surrounding the new status evolve within the Church of England. A minimum of six services a year are required to gain the festival church status.

Covid-19 impact. During the 2020 lockdowns due to the pandemic, the Benefice streamed services via **Zoom** on a Sunday mornings at 9.30 a.m. A **Holy Communion service** was provided on the first Sunday of the month and **Services of the Word** on the remaining Sundays. A **Deanery Communion service** was provided on Thursday mornings, also via Zoom. Congregation members also kept in touch via **email** and **phone**. As there are now no church officers this has, unfortunately, had to cease.

Parish Share

The church had previously met its parish share of £4,000 from its reserves. This would be renegotiated when an application goes forward for Festival Church status.

“My personal opinion is that no church should be closed. There are ways to integrate a church into a community, worshippers and non-worshippers alike. It is a wonderfully historic Holy place and there are other options to closure – if the community are serious about helping with the running and upkeep of the building. A festival church is one and in my opinion is the best option for St Mary’s. The community can celebrate all the main church festivals – Christmas, Easter, Remembrance, Harvest etc. And in addition, they can also celebrate or commemorate baptisms, weddings and funerals. I have a deep feeling that the majority of the villagers love their church, and I am hopeful that they will work with me and the Friends to make the dream of a festival church a reality.

Revd Carol Nicholas-Letch

Priest-in-charge, Wissey Valley Benefice



1st row: Open Gardens at the rectory in 2012 (Photo by Nick Ford, www.flickr.com/photos/nickpix2008/);
2nd row: Community members meet in the church; Beachhamwell Parish council's initiative to help residents in an emergency (Photo by Beachamwell Parish Council); 3rd & 4th rows: Egg throwing game, BBQ, dog show and sheep race at the Beachamwell fete (Photos by Beachamwell Village Hall).

Fundraising

The village has been engaged in fundraising for the restoration and maintenance of the church for some 20 years. This has been a major factor in being able to keep the church open – two other churches within the deanery with no history of fundraising have been forced to close.

Grants and match funding are seen as a useful way of raising substantial sums for the more major work required to the building and its artefacts. The organ had been repaired using such a grant. Three grants, one of which is substantial from the Heritage Lottery, have also been received to repair the thatch on the south side.

Open Gardens is one of the biggest events of the year, having been running since 1992. The profits go to St Mary's General Fund and are usually in the region of £1,700. The event has typically involved 13 gardens, and the church is open to visitors with sales of tea towels, cards and other items, supplementing funds raised. It is usually held at the beginning of June, the date being chosen so as not to clash with other parishes within the benefice that also hold Open Gardens Days. Festivities include the Hilgay Silver Band playing on the Village Green, organ recitals in the church and Molly Dancers performing at the Old Rectory. Ploughman's lunches, afternoon teas and strawberry teas are served as well as the usual stalls and raffles.

Half Marathon is a popular event in Beachamwell and has run for 17 years. Participants are sponsored to run, cycle or ride (or even walk) a 13-mile course mainly along public footpaths through the fields of local farmers. A large proportion of villagers and almost all the congregation of St Mary Beachamwell help in one way or another. Funds raised have been matched by Barclays Bank in the past and these have been used to repair the fabric of the building. An average of £1,000 is raised. One of the north windows was restored three years ago solely from the proceeds of one year's Half Marathon and now all money is going towards restoring the bells in the tower and all the involved associated work.

Concerts. A series of classical concerts have taken place at St Mary's, performed by professional musicians from BBC Symphony who have typically donated all the takings to the church. Refreshments are served afterwards in the village hall, which receives the income from the event.

Friends of the Church. A Friends group was established in October 2017 to galvanise the community.

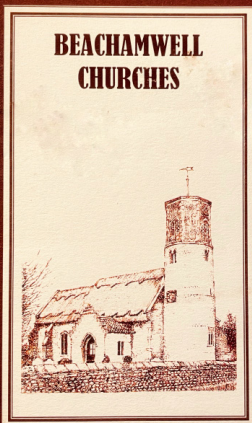
Income Generation


It has not been possible to rent out the church to groups or clubs given the lack of facilities and the team is careful not to compete with bookings at the village hall. The small number of regular worshippers meant that parish giving is quite low and services have now ceased altogether.

Communications

St Mary Beachamwell has a section on the Group 4 News **website**. Wissey Valley Benefice and Beachamwell Parish Council share news and updates on their **Facebook groups**. A **newsletter**, *Group 4 News*, is distributed in four local villages and includes updates from the Deanery as well as regular information on fundraising and planned changes. **Email** is also used to share updates about meetings and events. **Word of mouth** is also effective for spreading the word in this small community.

The church maintained a well-used **Visitors' Book** as well as a virtual Visitors' Book on its website. **Booklets** on church and village history, **postcards** and **notelets** relating to St Mary Beachamwell were on sale in the church and could be introduced when the church reopens. A volunteer from a neighbouring village reproduced a collection of old **photographs** of Beachamwell, which can be borrowed for viewing. Outdoor church **noticeboard** where parish news are posted is set to the east of the church.





“The congregation has slowly decreased and aged over the years and can no longer afford to continue as it is. Once news circulated that there was a threat to the building, it was amazing that people who have shown little or no interest in the church suddenly decided they wanted it. Basically nobody wants the church to go like the other two churches [All Saints and St John’s]. This church is in the centre of the village and it’s the village church. No one wants to see it sold off or just simply left to rot. At a village meeting, which was well attended, a number of alternatives for the church were presented and the Festival Church was the most popular choice.”

Revd Ken Waters
Former priest-in-charge

REACH

Community

The goodwill and support of the community has been essential in keeping St Mary's open. The majority of social events take place at the village hall, including events organised by the PCC and Friends of St Mary's. Public meetings are also generally held at the village hall, which are used to inform residents of any changes to the running of the church. The village hall is well used by local groups, for example, the art group, yoga class, book club, etc. Prior to the closure of the village school, St Mary's church had organised services for pupils and an annual Easter Egg hunt.

Activity groups. The village hall is well used by local groups, for example, the history group, the art group, crafts, yoga class, book club, and others. Prior to the closure of the village school, St Mary's church had organised services for pupils and an annual Easter Egg hunt.

Coffee in the church. Coffee was served in the church after services, but everything had to be brought in given the lack of facilities within the building.



Events

Social events held at the village hall include quizzes, Christmas pudding, an antiques evening, a soup lunch and pop-up pub.

Afternoon teas were held on the third Wednesday of the month, with residents donating cakes. This was a social, rather than a fundraising event but a donation box was available to help meet ongoing costs. The idea of providing somewhere for villagers to meet and socialise over a cup of tea and cake was suggested as part of St Mary's Mission Action Plan. The event also brought participants from neighbouring villages.

Harvest supper was organised within the Benefice and rotates around the churches from year to year.

Engagement

The views of the community were sought when St Mary's church was threatened with closure by means of a public meeting attended by around 40 residents. The church is aware of the importance of regular communication of planned changes and uses various methods to do so, including the village newsletter and email.

Flower and brass rota. There was a rota of volunteers from the village who are responsible for opening the church to the public and ensure that there are always fresh flowers in the church and that the brass is kept clean. The cleaning of the church was done on ad-hoc basis.



View towards the chancel from the nave; One of the wall carvings in the church.

REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Asset management

St Mary's is a historic Grade I listed medieval church that requires ongoing maintenance and repair. The structure and historic importance of the building mean that modern facilities cannot readily be installed, including WCs, kitchen facilities or ramps for wheelchairs. It is difficult to obtain grant funding for repairs to the building but grants have been obtained for repairs to the south slope of the thatched roof through the hard work of the Friends. An insurance claim covered the replacement of the lead roof, stolen in 2019.

Income generation

The options for generating income from use of the building are restricted to the occasional concert, given that there are no WC or kitchen facilities for groups or events to be held within the church. The size of the congregation has meant that the parish share has been paid from reserves in recent years. Funds will, however, need to be raised to cover insurance and electricity costs as well as ongoing repairs.

Church congregation decline

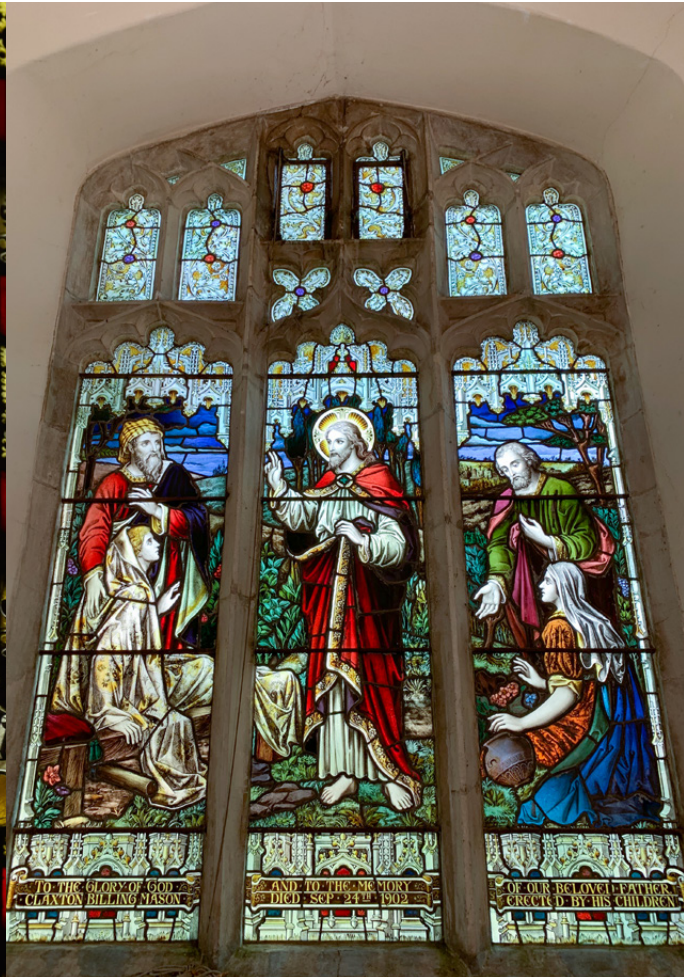
The declining numbers attending regular services has led to some difficult decisions being made about the future of the church. The church lies at the heart of the village and the community is keen to see it remain.

Youth engagement

The small congregation was of retirement age and there are no signs of a younger generation following on. Beachamwell is popular with those wishing to retire to a peaceful village setting, although there are some families living in the larger homes that have been built.

Vandalism

The community was shocked by the recent theft of the lead roofing to the church and rallied round in support.



Clockwise from top-left: Detail of the stained glass in the east window in the chancel; East window in the south aisle (1903) in memory of Claxton Billing Mason and depicts Jesus Christ healing the sick; Details of stained glass in the top section of the east window; South window.

Lessons Learned

To be open and responsive to change

The formation of a Friends group is a positive step towards developing the income stream that will be needed to maintain this ancient church and to allow it to continue to serve the village as a festival church. The Friends are watching developments carefully within the Church of England before taking the necessary steps for full transition to the festival church status.

To increase opportunities for further church and community integration

The team has been proactive in including residents in the village in their plans for the future of St Mary's, holding public meetings and communicating regularly via emails, newsletters and social media. Marketing is seen as an important tool in the success of the church.

To apply transferable skills in church management

There are now no churchwardens or PCC members but the church is now able to draw on the knowledge and experience of its Friends and the village community.

To apply transferable skills in church management

The PCC has dwindled in size but the church is now able to draw on the knowledge and experience of its trustees and Friends.

To promote and popularise local heritage

The historic graffiti carvings, the unique round tower, and the thatched roof of the church are some of the artefacts that have attracted experts and public figures to visit St Mary's. There is a potential of organising public events in the future, such as exhibitions, workshops and talks by historians and architecture experts in this field, which could generate public interest to local heritage.

To invite the community to use the church buildings for non-religious purposes

Church and community members agree on the idea of utilising the church building for non-religious events. Their vision is that such events, for example, arts and concerts, will be complementary to the village hall which hosts various social events.

“I think we could do activities here which would complement the village hall. So, no competition, the village hall could always be used for yoga and that sort of thing. But concerts and other things that are more fitting into this kind of building. I think they could be complementary.”

Local community member



TO THE HONOURED MEMORY OF
BEACHAMWELL & SHINCHAM MEN
WHO FELL IN THE GREAT WAR
1914 - 1918.

W. C. BILLMAN	E. C. HOWARD
A. BURRELL	J. W. JOHNSON
C. BURT	F. NICHOLLS
E. J. BUTTERS	B. E. PATTERSON
J. A. BUTTERS	R. H. SECKER
W. J. COUZENS	N. WATTS

"THEIR NAME LIVETH FOR EVERMORE"

IN LOVING MEMORY OF
LT. COL. MARK PENNELL O.B.E.
CHURCHWARDEN OF ST. MARY'S
BEACHAMWELL 1916 - 2003
IN RECOGNITION OF HIS WORK IN
CONNECTION WITH THE RESTORATION
OF THIS CHURCH

ALSO OF

SGT. JOHN F. HOWES	THE ROYAL AIR FORCE
PTE. ALAN M. LAMBERT	THE ROYAL NORFOLK REGT.
PTE. STEPHEN A. OSBORN	THE ROYAL NORFOLK REGT.
PL. IVY WATSON	A.T.S.

WHO GAVE THEIR LIVES FOR FREEDOM IN THE WORLD WAR OF
1939 - 1945



“Together, I am sure, that the community and the church can resurrect St Mary’s for the Glory of God, as a beacon of hope, a place for reflection and peace for the village, and an asset for the whole of the community.”

Revd Ken Waters

Former priest-in-charge

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