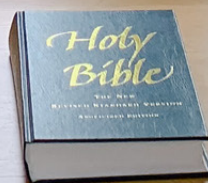


Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets  
for the Common Good

# ST MARY MARCH



*Text, design and photography*

**Dr Timur Alexandrov**

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation  
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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](http://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](http://www.reachely.org)

*On the cover: Church window with the cross, candles and the Holy Bible at St Mary's, March.*

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# ST MARY MARCH

**Church Category:** Market town

**Deanery:** March

**Address:** Wisbech Road, March,  
Cambridgeshire PE15 0BA

**Website:** [www.stmaryschurchmarch.co.uk](http://www.stmaryschurchmarch.co.uk)

**Changing Market Town project:**  
[www.elydiocese.org/changing-market-towns](http://www.elydiocese.org/changing-market-towns)



## Summary

**Buildings and Artefacts:** Grade II listed building; Church hall; Refurbished building after the fire; An apse with a south facing altar; Church doors with a sloping ramp; Balcony; Meeting rooms; Storage, kitchen and WC facilities; Sophisticated sound and heating systems; Modern organ; Open-back wooden pews; Stained glass memorial; The only open and large churchyard in March; Church hall with a function room, kitchen, and WCs with disabled access; Wi-fi; Car parking

**Congregation to Population Ratio:** 37 / 448

**Fundraising:** Flower Festivals; Concerts; Open Gardens; Coffee mornings; No major fundraising events since donations after the fire

**Income Generation:** Church hall rental

**Communications:** Website; Weekly news sheet; Joint magazine between St John's and St Mary's churches in March; Collection of media clips and photographs; Visitors' Book; Church noticeboard

**Community Engagement:** Coffee mornings; Flower festival; Mother and toddler group; Foodbank; Mothers' Union; Churches Together in March.

# ROOTS



## Profile

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March is a large fenland market town and civil parish in the Isle of Ely area of Cambridgeshire. The town sits at the centre of the Fenland District; approximately 71% of Fenland's population live within the four market towns of March, Chatteris, Wisbech, and Whittlesey. March has three wards – east, north and west. The town is 14km (9 miles) miles south of Wisbech, 22km (14 miles) to the north-west of Ely and 47km (29 miles) north of Cambridge.

Like many fenland towns, March was once an island surrounded by marshes. As the land drained, the town grew and prospered as a trading and religious centre. The town is situated on the banks of the navigable old course of the River Nene, which today is mainly used by pleasure boats. Historically, March was known as an early centre of nonconformity, with 139 dissenters and one papist in 1676. In the 19th century, the town grew rapidly by becoming an important railway centre and a main junction station on the Great Eastern and Great Northern railways, 140 km (88 miles) from London by rail. In 1921, the Isle of Ely had a greater proportion of railway workers than any other county except Cumberland and the Soke. At present, March is served by regular railway services with connections to the north and south of the country. There is also a western bypass to take the A141 and some of the traffic away from the town centre. The B1099 and B1101 roads pass through the town.

March is a participating research site of the Diocese of Ely's five-year project **Changing Market Towns**, an expression of one of the Levers for Change within the diocesan Ely2025 Growth Strategy, that focuses on enabling and sustaining church growth ([www.elydiocese.org/changing-market-towns](http://www.elydiocese.org/changing-market-towns)) (See also REACH Ely case studies *Huntingdon, Littleport, and Wisbech*).



*Top: View of St Mary's church from the churchyard. Bottom: South view of the church building with an apse.*

According to the 2011 census, March had a population of 22,298. Out-of-town development has taken place at the Meadowland retail park opened in 2008 to the north of the town centre. There has long been a market in March, and market days are Wednesday and Saturday. There is one secondary school (no Church of England secondary school in town) and four primary schools, one of which is All Saints Academy – an inter-church school that celebrates the traditions of both the Roman Catholic and Anglican faith. March has a non-league football club, March Town United F.C.

There are four major supermarkets in the town, including Tesco Superstore located not far from St Mary's church, and many food processing factories in the area. The town centre has many independent shops and retailers, a community centre, a museum on the High Street, and a number of bars and restaurants. HM Prison Whitemoor, a maximum security prison for males, opened in 1991 to the northwest of the town. There are a number of packing factories which employ both significant numbers of local and migrant labour. With some of the lowest house prices in the region, the town receives many people who relocate here for retirement or to be near family.

As well as the four Anglican churches of St Mary, St Wendreda, St John, and St Peter, there is a joint Methodist and United Reformed church (Trinity Church), a Centenary Baptist Church (founded 1700), a Grace Baptist Church (Providence Baptist), an Independent Pentecostal Church and a Fenland

Community Church, which focuses on people with learning disabilities. There is a Roman Catholic church in March, whose priest lives in March and serves the mass centre in Chatteris.

### **Buildings**

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The church of St Mary is located in the north-west of the town on the busy A141 in an area known as Westry, a less prosperous area of the town, close to the retail park on the edge of the town and not far from HMP Whitemoor. The parish, which was formed in 1868, extends to just over 2,800 hectares (7,000 acres). The church was built in 1874 to a design by Thomas Henry Wyatt (whose other works in March are the churches of St John's and St Peter's). The Grade II listed building is made of stone in the Decorated style of the 14th century, with chancel, nave, south porch, vestry, and a western turret with one bell. It has rock-faced rustication with sandstone bands and steeply pitched tiled roofs. St Mary's church is unusual having an apse with a south facing altar.

Historically, St Mary's was a farmers' and agricultural workers' church, with the congregation living close to the church in tied cottages. In the past, a constructed rectory was behind the church. This building was sold off in the 1970s and later burned down on 21st May 1978. In 1891, a chapel of ease was erected in West Fen. Dedicated to St Mary Magdalen, this small stone building fell into disuse and was demolished in the 1970s. In August 2009, work was completed to provide easy access by the provision of a gently sloping ramp to the church doors.



*Top: South facing altar of St Mary's church. Middle: Communion Table; View of the nave from the balcony.  
Bottom: Rows of open-back pews and chairs; Kitchen and WC facilities in the back of the church.*

On 15th March 2010, St Mary's church was devastated by fire following an arson attack. After the fire, only the four outside walls were left standing. Some of the arches had to be completely rebuilt because they were destroyed by the high temperatures of the blaze. Specialist masons and carpenters replaced the original ornate roof and stonework.

The space within the church was reconfigured to include a new balcony, meeting room, and storage facilities. It was rebuilt to a high standard, with additional facilities such as a WC, cupboard-style kitchenette in the back of the nave that can be hidden, and a sophisticated sound and heating system, and modern organ in the balcony. Much of the additional work was done because the church was envisaged as having a future as a potential conference centre. The congregation chose to have open-back wooden pews reinstalled at this time. Chairs, identical to pews in design, are attached to bench ends and can be removed. The rebuilding was funded by an insurance claim of £2.2m with a contribution of £40,000 from the town. The Bishop of Ely, the Rt Revd Stephen Conway, rededicated and re-consecrated the church at a service on 1st April 2014. Security measures were put in, but as they were too expensive to maintain, they have largely been taken out of use. The building has seating for 100 people and is not normally left open. The church is surrounded by a large graveyard – the only one to be open out of the four churches in March.

**Church hall.** St Mary's has a small church hall on the same site as the church that is available for hire. The hall consists of a function room with seating for 60 people and a fully fitted kitchen and WCs with disabled access. It has a sound system with induction loop, wi-fi and ample parking.

### **Artefacts**

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One of the stained glass windows in the church was a memorial to the Revd T.T. Peyton. The font was made from stone and is in 13th century style with a square bowl on four grouped columns. This font was badly damaged as the source of the fire and is now buried in the churchyard. A small brass plaque commemorates a World War I soldier and in the churchyard are two war graves from the World War II.





*Top clockwise: Exterior of the west wall and church tower; View from the nave towards the chancel; Modern organ.  
Bottom: New sound system; Facilities and interiors of the church hall.*

# RUNNING

## Team

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St Mary's is a member of the **March Team Ministry** that also comprises St Wendreda's, St John's, and St Peter's (see *REACH Ely case studies in March*). Two paid staff are the Team Rector with pastoral responsibility for the ministry at St Mary's, St John's, and St Peter's; and Team Vicar who has responsibility for developing and leading Mission initiatives within the whole of March, and pastoral responsibility for St Wendreda's.

The March Team Ministry share:

- Team operations manager whose office base is at St John's. This post is funded by the Market Towns initiative;
- Children and families worker who is training to become a Licensed Lay Minister (LLM) – most of whose time is spent at St John's;
- Another vacant CMT post which the Team hope to be to reach out to adults in the town who currently have little contact with the church.


St Mary's has two churchwardens, but it has been a challenge to retain them.

## Religious Services

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One Sunday service a week at St Mary's is held at 9.15 a.m. Church congregation comprises about 35 people, overwhelmingly elderly people – there are no children and no children's work takes place there. The form of worship is the Book of Common Prayer and there has been little change to the traditional pattern of worship over the years. St Mary March retains the feeling of a village church.

**Covid-19 lockdown.** Church services and other activities were suspended during the coronavirus pandemic and the national lockdown in 2020. The church was keeping in touch with people, particularly those who had to self-isolate, via **telephone calls** and **weekly mailing** to those with email and had delivered to those without (across the town 220 email and 100 by hand). The March Team **livestreamed** some services via **Zoom** and encouraged people to access professional services online and those broadcast on TV and radio, and shared regular updates via its **newsletter**. St Mary's church website also shared **useful links** to a number of resources and virtual church services. Most St Mary's people do not have internet access.



“It is a very close caring community with longstanding connections, who really care for each other and are strongly committed. However, as aging occurs, fewer people end up taking on more roles. There’s one extended family of four generations, one member of that family looked after the church hall bookings, another member is both the treasurer and the secretary, and without these and a few other highly committed people it would collapse. Which is both a strength and the potential weakness... St Mary’s is a bit like a village church, in that they don’t have many activities other than Sunday services.”

**Revd Andrew Smith**

Team Rector

### Parish Share

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In 2019, parish share expenditure was £17,235.

### Fundraising

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At present, St Mary March does not hold big fundraising events. The most recent fundraising campaign was initiated by the community and residents of the town in 2010 when the church was devastated after the fire. Within eight months donations totalling £40,000 had been received, which were used to meet costs of furnishing the interior of the church not covered by insurance.

### Income Generation

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**Rental income** from the hire of the church hall is the main source of income, generating approximately £500 per annum.

### Communications

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St Mary March runs its own **website** and publishes a **weekly news sheet** *Spotlight* with details of services at St Mary's and St Peter's. A **magazine** is published jointly with the other two March churches of St Peter and St John. Its subscribers are mainly church members, although some people who are not church members receive it too. At the back of the church, visitors can explore a **collection** of media clips, news stories and photographs about the fire and the followed restoration process. A **Visitors' Book** is available. Well-designed church **noticeboard** is set by the main road.



# REACH

## Community

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The fire in 2010 had united the small congregation. However, the size of the congregation limits what can be achieved and volunteers who run the church hall bookings and who also operate as treasurer and secretary are drawn from one family.

## Events

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**Regular events** and activities organised by the March Team Ministry are advertised on March churches' websites. St Mary's has long shared ministry with St Peter's so there is some overlap with events and organisations meeting there (*see REACH Ely case study St Peter March*). St Mary's regularly hosts concerts.

**Coffee mornings** are held in members' homes.

**Flower Festival.** This annual event (admission £1, children free) alternates between St Mary's and St Peter's churches. The festival takes three days and features themed flower arrangements, paintings and crafts. Various stalls, raffle and refreshments are provided. The festival concludes with Songs of Praise.

## Engagement

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**Churches Together in March.** St John's is a member of Churches Together in March (CTIM) ([www.churchestogether.org/march](http://www.churchestogether.org/march)), a group representing a wide range of Christian backgrounds. The group carries out a range of activities together, as well as the individual activities of each church. Leaders and clergy from the various churches meet together most months for a short time of prayer and simply getting together. CTIM also supports other local Christian activities most importantly the Foodbank, Christians Against Poverty, Christian Aid, and Christmas shoeboxes.

**Pause for Reflection** is a series of quiet times offered throughout the year by the March Team Ministry across all four churches in March. There are bi-monthly morning sessions and other evening and Saturday sessions during the year. They are open to anyone who would value a time of reflection. There is no charge for any of the sessions held at St Mary's church. Those attending are invited to make a donation in the region of £3 to £5 to help cover costs of heating, printing and other materials.

**Mothers' Union.** St Mary's had an active Mothers' Union group which has just decided to cease, but very few other activities aside from the Sunday service. The Mothers' Union also organised a Lady Day Service in March.



*Clockwise from top-left: Visit to St Mary's church by Rotary Club members (Photos by [www.rotari-ribi.org](http://www.rotari-ribi.org)); Members of St Mary's congregation (Photo by St Mary March); Meeting room with a glass wall in the church; The nave and the balcony.*

“Geography might be factor [for] people who only walk to church. You probably need to be a car owner to go to St Mary’s.”

Revd Andrew Smith  
Team Rector





# REFLECTIONS

## Challenges

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### Church location

Although previously serving a rural farming community, St Mary March now finds itself isolated from the local community, sitting on a busy road close to an out-of-town shopping complex. The location is quite remote, which has implications for crime prevention, and most people need to drive there.

### Small and senior congregation

There are 35 people in the congregation and they are of an advanced age. This limits the activities that can be organised as there are so few volunteers to run them. The future of worship at the church is at risk as this generation passes away or leaves the area for sheltered accommodation.

### Lack of personnel and volunteers

There are now fewer people able or willing to volunteer their time or to donate to the church, and there is heavy dependence on the few. Clearly, if people should have to give up it would not be possible to continue to operate the lettings etc. It was also a difficult task to persuade a parishioner to volunteer as a second churchwarden.

### Overspecification following refurbishment

Following the 2010 arson attack, various ideas about the future use of the church were put forward, including as a conference centre. As a result, the sound and heating systems were built to a high specification.

These are expensive to run as the heating system was designed to be left on all the time, but the church is only used for one service a week. Since the refurbishment, the church space has not ever been used for a conference as planned. The sophisticated heating and sound systems have now started to deteriorate and have required extensive and very expensive repair.

### Crime and vandalism

The church has been subject to an arson attack, causing severe damage to the building, as was the former Rectory 50 years ago after it had been sold by the church.

### Resistance to change

The congregation is attached to a more traditional type of worship. Given the very different styles of worship in the other three churches, it would be difficult to transfer the congregation to another church within the ecclesiastical group should this church be closed.

### Lack of alternative uses for the building

It would be difficult to envisage an alternative use for the church, even for concerts, as it has only one WC facility. In addition, the churchyard is still open for burials and is being extended and benches and chairs were installed into the building after the fire, they are meant to be 'stackable' but in reality are too heavy to do so, reducing the flexibility of the church and grounds for community or private use.



1970, Wednesday, April 14, 2003

## Singing for St Mary's Church

By SARAH CLISS  
sarah.cliss@press.co.uk

SINGER, song writer Adrian Bond is hoping to give fire-ravaged St Mary's Church a musical boost after writing a song about the church.

It is 17 years on since the fire at St Mary's Church, a mission house after writing a song about the church.

Adrian Bond, a singer and songwriter, was very close to his family's heart especially the mother's who lived at Wexley and considered it her church.

As a result he felt moved to do something to help the project of the church. I was saddened and very upset when I saw it in flames. It had been part of my family's life for a good half century and I felt I should do something to help.

He has written the song 'We should rise again' and will be performing it for the first time at the St George's Day Fair in March town centre.

Adrian will also be performing the song during the church's 100th anniversary celebrations at St Mary's Church on April 19th.

He is hoping to get the song put into a CD and it can be sold in aid of St Mary's and further information about when and where this will be available will be published as soon as possible.

Local business-based heritage firm Herts, Transport staff organised an Easter raffle with a chocolate egg as a prize and raised the for the appeal with their efforts.

In the meantime today is the closing date for sealed bids on a special original oil painting of St Mary's Church painted by local artist John Abbott and put up for auction by an anonymous couple in aid of the rebuilding fund.

The painting was created by Mr Abbott in 1982 and was given to the couple in 2002 to celebrate their 50th wedding anniversary. The couple were married at St Mary's Church and intend to support the church's efforts to support the rebuilding fund.

The picture can be viewed at the church's office on Market Place, March, and sealed bids made. The husband bidder will win the painting. The closing date is today, April 14 at 5pm.

Bidders need to tickle their name and contact details.

Mr Abbott himself is being organising an art exhibition in aid of the church for sometime before the end of the school summer term.

It will be held at St Mary's School, which has close links with the church. The opening will be expected to donate 50 per cent of any sales to the rebuilding fund.

Anyone interested in getting involved should contact Mr Abbott on 01455 511111.

An open garden event is being organised by Margaret Payne, market chairwoman. The event will be held on June 19 and 20. Further details of this should be available next month.

It is estimated it will cost about £1.5 million to rebuild St Mary's and the hope is that the church will become a place of worship fit for the 21st century.

The vast majority of the cost will be covered by donations but anything extra will have to be funded at an additional cost, which is why public support is so important and why fundraising is essential. Work is still going on at the church showing it up and preparing ready for when rebuilding can start.

Don Cliss is backing the appeal by offering free publicity to all fundraising events.

If you are organising something then contact the newswriter on 01455-206132 or e-mail: sarah.cliss@hertsandchambers.co.uk. Events will also be featured on our website: www.hertsandchambers.co.uk.

Photo number: MFCF10PT04517

## More cash plea for restoration

By SARAH CLISS  
sarah.cliss@press.co.uk

March fire-ravaged St Mary's church is at least 18 months away from re-opening and another £20,000 is needed to complete the necessary rebuilding and refurbishment work.

That was the news given to members of the town's museum when they were given an exclusive look inside the church by the Rev Anthony Chandler (pictured right) recently.

A video of the group's visit was posted on line on the MarchShapeYourPlace website by Joan Munnis with Mr Chandler recounting the horror of the fire in March 2000 and the damage wrought by the intensity of the blaze.

During his commentary Mr Chandler explained how the arsonists responsible had made a determined effort to burn the church down. They set light to the organ, as well as piles of books including some in the font after gaining access to the church via a window in the porch.

He described how the fire initially smouldered for around 90 to 120 hours with a build up of toxic black smoke which finally burst into a fireball when the church door was opened.

It took only minutes for the blaze to take hold ripping through the roof which collapsed within 12 minutes of the fire taking hold.

Mr Chandler also described the painstaking work behind the scenes to ensure the project was restored to exactly how it was before the fire.

He explained how precise measurements were taken from the charred remains of the needed original plans had been tracked down to London museum where examples of work by the architect who designed St Mary's were kept.

The roof is now complete, and the windows are in behind the boards, but there is still much work to be done including the installation of underfloor heating and a stone floor, plastering, a new organ and furnishings as well as a disabled toilet.

The church's insurance covered the cost of restoring the church to as it was but additional improvements have to be paid for separately. So far donations and fundraising have raised £20,000 but a further £20,000 is still needed and Mr Chandler, who has been overwhelmed by the public's generosity so far, explained he was hoping to up lift some grant funding, but also hoping that local benefactors might also come forward.

**GETTING THERE:** A first glimpse inside St Mary's Church as restoration work continues.

# BACK TO THE FUTURE

**CHURCH IS RESTORED READY FOR THE 21ST CENTURY**

Craftsmen have worked The oak pews made out of



Some of the images of the fire and restoration works; Newspaper clips exhibited in the church.  
Bottom: A table with information materials and newspaper clips at the back of the church.

## Lessons Learned

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### **To work in partnership**

With two ministers overseeing the four churches in the group in March, there is less competition between the churches than had previously been the case. Each church has been able to develop its own type of ministry, according to local demographics, although the options for this are clearly very limited at St Mary's. Ways of working together are explored through the Team Council. The church is also a member of Churches Together in March.

### **To review spending and refurbishment priorities as a group in the future**

Now that the four churches operate as one group, taking an overall view of the churches' portfolio, reviewing the priorities for spending on individual buildings according to local need, has become more achievable. When St Mary's was refurbished following the fire, emotions ran high and there were strong views in the town that the church should be rebuilt. That decision might be different today, given the ageing congregation numbers and the challenges of running the church with ageing volunteers.

### **To serve the community**

The March Team Ministry has been running Chat-Tea meals – a not-for-profit non-faith-based community project that provides free hot meals for anyone who is in genuine need. Usually on the first Sunday of the month, young people from the Youth Group provide an afternoon tea in St John's church hall for the older members of the community. As the pandemic lockdown in 2020 made it impossible to host Chat-Tea in St John's church hall, the March Team Ministry decided that the pandemic disruption should not prevent this successful initiative and organised hot meals collection and delivery three times a week – on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. People could place an order by phone and contact details were shared in newsletters, church websites, and on Facebook page of St Wendreda's.

### **To use the church buildings for activities that benefit the local community and the church**

The March Team Ministry orients the four churches in March towards community needs. There are regular mother and toddler, women's and men's groups at all four churches, and a youth club at St Wendreda's and St John's. Until recently St Mary's ran a youth club on behalf of Churches Together in March, located at the Methodist church, but the youth have now grown up. All the church halls host a very large number of community organisations such as Women's Institutes, museum societies, Alzheimer's Society, and Breathe Easies. In addition, recreational initiatives like boxing clubs, dance clubs, jazz and brass bands vary across the four churches. The major user of St Mary's hall is a dance group.



It's a challenge [to manage four churches in one market town], but it is also an advantage, because we can do different things at the same time, in different places and the different flavours enable us to reach more people.

**Revd Andrew Smith**  
Team Rector

**REACH Ely: Reimagining Churches as  
Community Assets for the Common Good**

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