

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets  
for the Common Good

# ST MARY THE VIRGIN FELTWELL



*Text, design, and photography*

**Dr Timur Alexandrov**

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation  
Cambridge Judge Business School

**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.

*Editorial board*

**Dr Helen Haugh**

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation  
Cambridge Judge Business School

**Geoffrey Hunter**

Diocese of Ely

*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: Stained glass in the East window of St Mary the Virgin Feltwell.*

Copyright © 2020 University of Cambridge. All rights reserved. The authors gratefully acknowledge financial support from The Ely Diocesan Board of Finance under research grant ref RG95970.

# ST MARY THE VIRGIN FELTWELL

**Church Category:** Rural

**Deanery:** Fincham and Feltwell

**Address:** St Mary's Church, Bell Street,  
Feltwell, IP26 4AL

**Website:** [www.grimshoebenefice.com](http://www.grimshoebenefice.com)



## Summary

**Buildings and Artefacts:** Grade I listed building; Chancel in Decorated style; Wheelchair accessible entrance; Recently improved sound system; Fine carved figures on Medieval bench ends; Stained glass designed to imitate the 13th century French cathedral style; Memorial brasses; Space for community events in the north aisle subsequent to removal of Victorian pews; No facilities and car park

**Congregation to Population Ratio:** 10 / 2,862

**Fundraising:** Quiz nights; Carnival teas; Concerts; Summer music festival; Village fete stalls; Lecture Series; Exhibitions; Festival of Light; Yard Sale

**Income Generation:** Grants; Small donations; Village magazine sales

**Communications:** Benefice website; A Church Near You; Facebook groups; Community group at [Nextdoor.co.uk](http://Nextdoor.co.uk); Village magazine; Visitors' Book; News sheet; Noticeboard

**Community Engagement:** Community information point; Support group; After-service coffee; Churchyard Wall Repair Project; Lecture series; Music festival; Village yard sale; Festival of Light; Harvest auction; Open tower day; Teddy bear service; Exhibitions; Community survey.

# ROOTS



## Profile

---

The large village of Feltwell, in the borough of King's Lynn and West Norfolk, lies some 16 km to the west of Thetford and 30 km north east of Ely. The village lies near the border of Cambridgeshire and Suffolk as well as being close to two American airbases, namely Lakenheath and Mildenhall. Feltwell is close to Thetford Forest, Norfolk Wildlife Trust Reserve at Weeting Heath and the RSPB reserve at Lakenheath. It has a population of 2,862 (2011) and covers 5,376 hectares, more than half of which is fen, now mostly used for arable farming. There are no major transport links nearby but the area has bus service.

Because of its size, Feltwell is well provided with amenities. In addition to a general practice surgery and pharmacy there is a veterinary practice, a garage/service station, two convenience stores, and a number of other small businesses. The British Legion hall is used for community events; and the school and the Women's Institute have halls that can be hired, but there is no dedicated community hall. There is one public house in the village.

Feltwell has two churches, St Mary the Virgin and St Nicholas. The latter is now redundant and in the care of the Churches Conservation Trust, but the churchyard and wall are the responsibility of St Mary's. There is also a Methodist chapel.

The village was the site of a busy Royal Air Force (RAF) bomber command aerodrome in WWII that now houses US schooling, furniture storage, and satellite tracking from three large aerals housed in distinctive radomes. A large number of flint tools and bone artefacts have been found in and around the village, indicating the Neolithic origins of settlements in this area, as evidenced in the flint mines of Grimes Graves, some 11 km away. Until the Fens were drained, it was possible boats to tie up at Feltwell which was formerly an anchorage.





*Top: View of the church and the churchyard from the East. Middle: North wall of the church.  
Bottom: Church tower visible from the road; St Nicholas church building.*





## Building

---

The large Grade I listed building of St Mary the Virgin church stands in the centre of Feltwell village. The exact date of the origin of the church is not known, but the oldest part of the building, the chancel, is in the Decorated style of architecture, which prevailed from about 1275 to 1375.

The church building, approximate capacity 680 people, consists of a chancel, nave with clerestory, aisles, south porch, and a massive square embattled clock tower with four bells. Each of these three tenor bells has a diameter of over three feet and the oldest one bears the inscription 'John Draper made me in 1621'. In 1966, the belfry was considered to be in need of attention and the three bells were taken down so that the structure could be repaired. As the tower is not strong enough for the bells to be swung, the bells are struck. The church is roofed in slate and lead and there are floriated gable crosses at the east end of the chancel and the south aisle. Some twenty shields are carved under the battlements bearing the arms of Moundeford, Barry and Fincham.

Substantial changes to the layout of the church building were carried out in the 1830s. Recent

repairs have been carried out to the roof, using an English Heritage grant, and to the tower. A sound system was from a bequest. The entrance was made accessible to wheelchair users following a donation from a Feltwell resident. The Victorian pews in the north aisle, mounted on a platform, were removed in 2010 as the platform was suffering from dry rot and woodworm damage.

The church of St Nicholas on the western edge of the village is under the care of the Churches' Conservation Trust, but the 40 metre boundary walls and the churchyard are the responsibility of Feltwell PCC and are in need of repair. The PCC have been fortunate enough to engage with the Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) and have started a joint project with volunteers both from the SPAB and the local community to carry out part of the repairs. The church has also received a grant of £9,000 from the Heritage Lottery Fund and appointed a Heritage Contractor to make repairs to the structurally unsafe section of the wall.

St Mary Feltwell has been subject to several petty thefts. The church lacks basic facilities in terms of an efficient heating system, WC or a kitchen. The church building is open daily from about 9 a.m. to 6 p.m. There is no car park.





Pages 4-5: Panoramic view from the church tower



Space for community events in the north aisle.





## Artefacts

---

The church interior has a timber roof of great beauty, with finely carved angels and pierced tracery. The nave of St Mary Felwell is seated throughout with late 15th century pews with poppyhead bench ends, finely carved. Six of the carved figures on the bench ends depict six of the seven Corporal Acts of Mercy and are considered rare. Others have been mutilated, probably around 1643.

The stained glass windows, said to be East Anglia's largest expanse of 19th century French cathedral glass, depict scriptural scenes, mainly from the New Testament (*see the image above and on the opposite page*).

There are several brasses and memorial plaques, the most interesting of which is in the memory of Margaret Mundford who died in 1520. She is wearing the headdress of that period known as the Kennel Headdress from its resemblance to the gable end of a dog kennel, while from her girdle hang her beads, her purse, and pomander, i.e. a box containing an aromatic ball carried as a preservative against infection.







# RUNNING

## Team

---

St Mary Feltwell is part of the Grimshoe Benefice, which comprises the churches of Hockwold, Northwold, Southery, and Weeting. The ministry team includes the vicar, two churchwardens, and a benefice administrator as well as the PCC.

## Religious Services

---

A Eucharist service is held on the first and third Sunday of each month. There are on offer two other Eucharist Services at churches in the Benefice when there is no Sunday worship at St Mary's. The fifth Sunday is a shared Benefice service. There is a regular Morning Prayer and Eucharist held every Wednesday. The school's annual carol service is organised in the church.

Regular congregations in the Benefice are small and that of St Mary's Feltwell has declined significantly in recent years, and is now down to around 8-10 regular worshippers.

**Covid-19 lockdown.** Like all churches, St Mary Feltwell was closed during the coronavirus pandemic and national lockdown in 2020. To support community, a **village support group** was formed at the start of the lockdown and the church rector is on the organising committee. Members of Feltwell church community volunteered to be contacts for those in need and were in **regular telephone contact** with each other. Regular Eucharist **services via Zoom** were offered by the Rector on Sundays and Wednesdays. St Mary's church was updating its **Facebook page** and posted daily thoughts, prayers, and meditations.

## Ministry Share

---

In 2019, ministry share expenditure was £ 5,041.04





*Top: Space for community events in the north aisle subsequent to removal of Victorian pews.  
Bottom: Social area with tables, chairs and sofa under the West window.*





*Top: View from the nave towards the chancel and rood screen.*

*Bottom: Seating arrangement in the nave and fine carved figures on Medieval bench ends.*



## Fundraising

---

**Quiz nights** are held once a month, generally during the summer, generating around £400.

**Carnival teas.** The church provides teas for the village carnival, which raised another £400, as well as refreshments for the village yard sale.

**Concerts.** Concerts are held at intervals and include Ely Boys' Choir, local choirs and musicians.

**Church fete.** A church fete had been held for several years, although these have not been well attended and the event has been combined with the Norfolk Day fete in an attempt to attract more visitors.

**Music festival.** In summer 2019, the church hosted the first major music festival. The two-day event featured more than 20 folk, pop, rock and blues acts, new and major local talents, live original music, food and drink. About 100 people attended the event on each day. Due to the overheads of running the event for the first time, income generation was low. Kindly, some of the musicians waived their fees as a donation or gave a small donation to church funds.

**Yard Sale.** The church provides refreshments for the annual Village Yard sale and keeps the proceeds of around £400.

**Festival of Light.** This annual event raised £900 in 2019.

**Exhibitions.** St Mary Feltwell is often asked to be the venue, provide refreshments for exhibitions and keep any proceeds from refreshments. Sometimes the church is given a

donation from the exhibitors.

**Classic Car Show and Tower Tours.** These are occasional events raising funds.

## Income Generation

---

**Village magazine.** At least half of the proceeds of sales of the village magazine are remitted to the church to fund running costs. This amounts to around £3,000 per annum.

**Donations.** Donations are made by people borrowing tables and cutlery. There is very little demand for rentals given the current lack of facilities and the availability of other rooms for hire in the village.

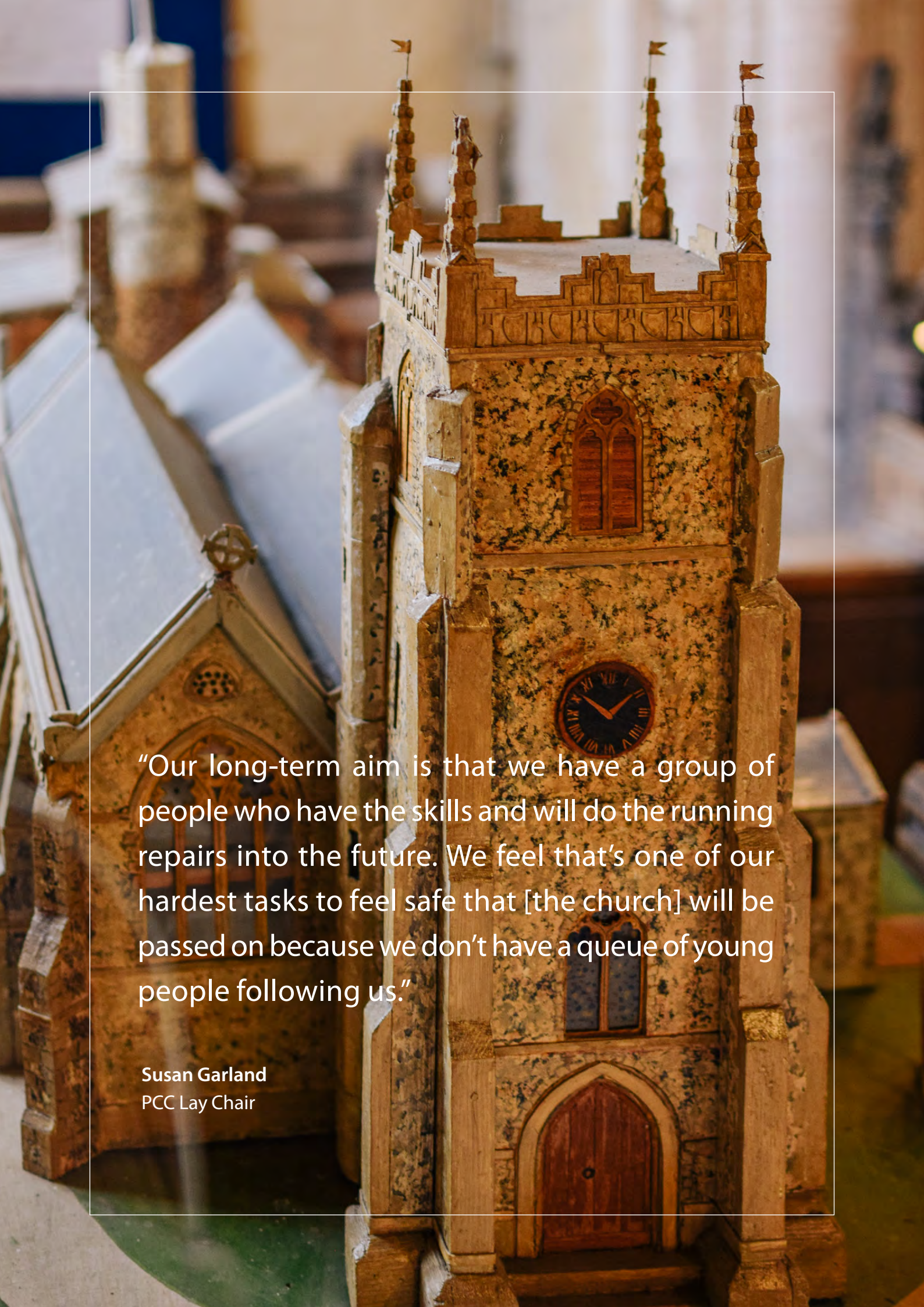
## Communication

---

Information about services and events at Feltwell and other Grimshoe benefice churches is posted on the **benefice website** and **A Church Near You**. St Mary Feltwell has two **Facebook** community groups and makes use of the community's **social media group** (Nextdoor Feltwell) at Nextdoor.co.uk to advertise events. The group is administered by local volunteers and is by invitation only. The **village magazine** is published monthly and is edited by two members of the local community. Church events are advertised in a section in the magazine. A **Visitors' Book** is available in the church and comments show that relatives of former serving members of the Air Force, including from Australia and New Zealand, often return to visit the area. The benefice publishes a regular **news sheet**.

**Community information point** (See *Community*).



A close-up photograph of a highly detailed wooden model of a Gothic church tower. The model is made of light-colored wood with intricate carvings and painted details. It features a clock face with Roman numerals, a wooden door at the base, and several windows with Gothic tracery. The tower is topped with a crenellated roof and several spires with small flags. The background is blurred, showing other parts of the model and a green surface.

“Our long-term aim is that we have a group of people who have the skills and will do the running repairs into the future. We feel that’s one of our hardest tasks to feel safe that [the church] will be passed on because we don’t have a queue of young people following us.”

**Susan Garland**  
PCC Lay Chair



# REACH

## Community

---

**Support group.** This informal group not only members of the congregation. The church can call on it for help with events and maintenance, for example, of the churchyard.

The former Feltwell church **Friends group** had raised a considerable amount of money for renovations, but they have now turned their attention to other charities.

**Community information point.** The borough council funded a laptop and the installation of Wi-Fi for a community information point, with a telephone line funded by the parish council. This is manned on a Wednesday morning when the church is open for tea, coffee and support.

**After-service coffee** provides a social element to church services.

**Feltwell's Faith in Flint project** attracted volunteers interested in learning the skills required to repair the boundary wall of the churchyard at St Nicholas. 68 volunteers in total took part in this project. The Covid-19 lockdown prevented the Spring project and this will be extended to Spring 2021. The Society for the Protection of Ancient Buildings (SPAB) ran a flint skills residency alongside this work.

“SPAB has given us our enthusiasm back. Never have we had a group of people stand so positively with us. SPAB just stood there and went yes, we can do this. Nobody says yes to us, they all say, oh, I don't know about that, but they said, you and we can and this is how.”

**Susan Garland**  
PCC Lay Chair



## Events

---

**Lecture series.** The church community has organized several lectures on topics as diverse as the weather, astrophysics, glaciology and charity work. Attendance to date has been small.

**Music festival** (*See Fundraising*).

**Village yard sale.** This large annual event involves numerous stalls set up in the front gardens of local residents and visitors come to the church to collect a map of the trail and to enjoy refreshments.

**Festival of Light.** At Christmas, St Mary Feltwell church invites organisations, businesses, and local families to decorate a Christmas tree in the church. The event proved to be popular and children can visit Father Christmas in his grotto.

**Harvest auction.** The auction follows the annual Harvest Festival service and the money raised and some of the food is distributed to the homeless via Jimmy's Shelter, Cambridge, or the Salvation Army.

**Open tower day.** Visitors are able to climb the tower and enjoy the views of Ely Cathedral and the surrounding area.

**Teddy bear service.** Children christened in the church are given small teddy bears and are invited back to the church for this special service.

**Exhibitions.** St Mary Feltwell has held exhibitions related to the Royal Flying Corps and Royal Air Force located nearby

in the First and Second World Wars, respectively. Quilting and art exhibitions and classic car shows are also held.

## Engagement

---

**Community Survey.** The PCC carried out research in the village some seven years ago prior to applying for a Heritage Lottery grant and received a dozen letters of support and suggestions for community uses for the church. The alterations suggested would have provided an income stream for repairs and ongoing maintenance. However, having prepared a very detailed report, the application was turned down and the PCC had to think of new ways to repurpose the north aisle in a less ambitious project. An architect has been appointed and funding bids are underway.

**Community volunteers.** The church is operated by a small group of volunteers, including the tidying of the churchyard, although the Parish Council have, following an appeal from the PCC, agreed to fund the cutting of the grass at nearby St Nicholas' churchyard. The PCC aims to build a group of volunteers with the necessary skills to repair the flint walls.

**Military families.** The church has historic links with the local airbase and its more recent occupants, the United States Airforce, would traditionally lay on a large firework display for the 4th of July. These types of events have declined since security was increased following an upsurge in terrorist threats. However, Feltwell church still receives visitors researching their families' war service.





Top and middle: Music festival at St Mary's Feltwell in July 2019.  
Bottom: A wedding at the church; Christmas Tree and Festival of Lights event in December 2019 (Photos by Feltwell church).



# REFLECTIONS

## Challenges

---

### Facilities

The church building has no heating system. The lighting is also poor, and the PCC would like to limewash the walls and install modern lighting to counteract this. Although the PCC would like to improve the facilities for the community, the structural issues with the building take priority.

### Church building condition

The building lacks plumbing to install a WC or kitchen area. Although the removal of some of the Victorian pews provided a space for community events, the funding for redevelopment is lacking. The church building is labelled 'poor' on the at-risk register maintained by Historical England.

The most recent quinquennial survey highlighted bowing problems with the south aisle wall, which is bowing outwards, as well as some other defects such as beetle infestation. This, together with repairs to the Lady Chapel roof, repair of South Choir stalls and stained glass windows, are currently the most pressing issues.

### Income generation

The congregation is in single numbers and their contributions are insufficient to pay for items such as the insurance of the building, amounting to £4,230.74 per annum and the Ministry Share of £5,041.04 per annum. The poor condition of the church means that

rental income is difficult to generate, therefore the church has to rely heavily on fundraising. Less frequent services and the small congregation impact on the amount of money donated and the congregation are being encouraged to make direct donations to the church.

### Asset management

The PCC's vision for a community space, including a village museum, did not come to fruition when their application for a grant was turned down.

### Small and senior congregation

The team has struggled to attract new worshippers to the church, a common challenge for several other churches within the benefice. The choir had folded due to lack of attendance as its members had reached retirement age and found they had other commitments.

### Lack of personnel/volunteers

The small PCC has worked hard to lay on events and apply for grants for repairs and feel that there is not always support in the village for their attempts. There is concern about what will happen in the future as there are no younger church members to take on this responsibility.

### Need to appeal to younger members of the community

There is little interaction between Feltwell church and the village school, apart from the annual carol concert. St Mary's would like to provide facilities to attract pupils to use the building for both school projects and socialisation.





“Most important lesson was we listened to people who encouraged us to go for too big a project in here. We listened to one or two village people who said you should go for this, you will get the money for this and they actually didn’t know that and I think we were a little naïve, a little too enthusiastic. And because we believed that and I think that’s what knocked us back. So we’ve become much more measured in our expectations.”

**Susan Garland**  
PCC Lay Chair





Top: Village Yard Sale; Quilt exhibition. Middle: Faith in Flint project with 68 volunteers helping to repair the boundary wall of the churchyard at St Nicholas. Bottom: Car show; Remembrance Day in the church (Photos by Feltwell church).



## Lessons Learned

---

### **To have realistic expectations about what can be achieved**

The PCC had responded enthusiastically to ideas suggested by the community for the use of the church and spent a significant amount of time planning a major upgrade to the facilities. This vision turned out to be unrealistic and the grant application was declined. The project was seen as poor value for money given the size of the community and the fact that Feltwell is not on a popular tourist trail. The team were also unable to provide reliable data on footfall. At the time, the PCC found it hard to obtain good advice on planning such a major project. There is much more advisory support available from the Diocese now.

### **To create a living church**

The addition of an information point has drawn some additional visitors into the church, for help with IT matters or simply to share a coffee and conversation.

### **To integrate the church and the community**

The PCC has shown flexibility and imagination when it comes to arranging successful community events. For example, when a fete proved unsuccessful, they transferred their efforts to providing teas at the local carnival. The summer music festival was a new and original venture. The central location of the church in the village provides an opportunity to bring the community together, for example, by providing a central meeting point for the village yard sale event. The historical links with the local airbase have attracted visitors to exhibitions on wartime operations and casual searching for information. Also people visit to trace family history.

### **To adapt the church building for more flexible and a wider use**

As part of their ambition to meet the needs of the community, an information point has been installed, funded by the borough and parish councils.

### **To support the church by creating volunteering opportunities**

The flint project had been successful and had attracted volunteers interested in learning more about flint walling. By encouraging this activity, the church hopes to build a future task force, having benefited from the skills and labour of the volunteers.







“I’m growing more doubtful about [the growth of a worshipping community] as time goes on because there just aren’t people coming up. But with the wider use of [the church] as a community building then that may just spark an interest in people.”

**Christine Parker**

Churchwarden and Benefice administrator



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

**Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation**

Cambridge Judge Business School  
University of Cambridge  
Trumpington Street  
Cambridge CB2 1AG  
socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk  
www.jbs.cam.ac.uk

**Diocese of Ely**

Ely Diocesan Office  
Bishop Woodford House  
Barton Road  
Ely CB7 4DX  
T: +44 (0) 1353 652701  
www.elydiocese.org

[www.reachely.org](http://www.reachely.org)