

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets  
for the Common Good

# ST MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS & HOLY CROSS WORMEGAY



*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  
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*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: Nave of St Michael's church, Wormegay.*

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# ST MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS & HOLY CROSS WORMEGAY

**Church Category:** Rural

**Deanery:** Fincham and Feltwell

**Address:** Saxon Way, Wormegay,  
King's Lynn PE33 0SH

**Benefice website:**

[www.watlingtonbenefice.org.uk](http://www.watlingtonbenefice.org.uk)



## Summary

**Buildings and Artefacts:** Grade II\* listed building; Remote location; No running water; No kitchen and WC facilities; Monthly service; Freestanding pews; Remains of medieval paintings; Jacobean High Altar; Victorian frosted glass windows; Carved stone; Church building open upon request; Mission Room

**Congregation to Population Ratio:** 25 / 353

**Fundraising:** Benefice group fundraising; Donations; Joint summer fete; Plate envelope scheme Strawberry and Wine Evening; Coffee mornings; Jumble sales

**Income Generation:** Investment funds; Rentals of the Mission Room

**Communications:** Joint Benefice website; News sheet; Noticeboards; Coverage in local newspaper *Lynn News* and radio station; Word of mouth; Phone calls

**Community Engagement:** Mission Room; Coffee mornings; Volunteer support; Joint event with West Norfolk Priory Group churches.

# ROOTS

## Profile

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Wormegay is a small village and civil parish in the county of Norfolk with a population of 359 in 141 households (2011 census). The place-name 'Wormegay' is first attested in the Domesday Book of 1086, meaning 'the island of Wyrms' people'. The village, which falls within the district of King's Lynn and West Norfolk, is situated some 6 miles (9 km) south of King's Lynn and west of Norwich. The A10 to King's Lynn runs to the west of the village. Passing Tottenhill village to the west of Wormegay, there is a railway station at Watlington. Other railway stations in the area King's Lynn to the north and Downham Market to the south. The River Nar passes through the parish and the landscape is largely agricultural, cut frequently by drains.

The nearest villages are Tottenhill, Watlington, and Runcton Holme to the west. Royal Air Force (RAF) Marham station, the home of the F-35 Lightning, a multi-role stealth fighter, is situated to the south-east of the village. The station is also home to a range of engineering support functions from maintenance to frontline support. Over 3,600 service personnel, civil servants and contractors work at RAF Marham.

Nearby churches are located in Tottenhill, Watlington, and Runcton Holme and belong to the same Watlington Benefice together with the church of St Michael in Wormegay (*see Team*). There is a Church of England primary school which runs in partnership with Runcton Holme school. A Methodist church in the village had been demolished within the last ten years. To the west of the village centre is Wormegay Castle – all that remains of a motte and bailey earthwork. To the south of Wormegay church and across the fields, there is a historical landmark WWII Rifle Range, a large wooded area with pine trees and footpaths and a popular place for a variety of walks.

Wormegay has been part of the Fenland Archaeological Survey, which has used extensive fieldwalking and surface collection from the late 1980s through to the present day to note and analyse the presence of archaeological objects. As a result of this, there have been a large number of worked flints recovered, with prehistoric sites representing almost half of those recorded in this parish.





*Top: View of the church building from south-west. Bottom: Exterior of the north wall; Church entrance and west tower.*

## Building

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Wormegay parish church, dedicated to St Michael, All Angels & Holy Cross, is in a remote location, down a rutted farmtrack, and half a mile from the village centre. It is thought that the village once surrounded the church but that it moved further west following the Black Death (1348) or as a result of the farmland surrounding the church becoming diseased through overfarming. The closeness of the church to Park Farm makes it possible that the owners of this medieval property had the church built in this particular location.

St Michael, All Angels & Holy Cross is a Grade II\* listed building and is constructed from carrstone and ashlar dressings. The original church building dated to the 13th century, but little remains of this structure; the earlier building having been almost entirely rebuilt in 1893. At this time, the church would have had a thatched roof. The extensive renovations were the result of a bequest from the colourful essayist and writer W.H. Henslowe who was the curate in charge of the parish from 1842-1890. The only remaining parts of the original building in the Early English and Perpendicular style are the tower and the east wall of the chancel. The tower contains a single bell, inscribed with the words 'John Draper made me 1635'. The bell, which was repaired, is tolled to announce services and for weddings and funerals.

The isolated location of the church has meant that it has suffered episodes of vandalism over the years, particularly to the windows. The church's copper lightning conductor was also stolen within 24 hours of being installed. For this reason, St Michael's church is locked but a key can be obtained from the churchwarden or a local resident. Church building can accommodate approximately 100 people, and there are extra chairs at the back of the church should they be required. The wooden pews in the nave are freestanding and can be moved to the side if necessary.

The building has electricity but no running water, kitchen or WC facilities. It is unlikely that the PCC will be able to afford to upgrade the facilities. The most significant recent renovations were made in 1989, which included repointing and re-leading the tower, repainting the church, placing guards on windows. Local schoolchildren placed a time capsule in a stone in the tower. A small organ was installed in the 1990s and hand pumped until electricity was installed in 2001. Thanks to secured electricity supply, heaters were also installed, yet the church lighting remains quite dim. Two floodlights are used outside the building. The churchyard is still open for burials and there is an adjacent parish cemetery.

**Mission Room.** Wormegay church acquired a small tin hut on the village green in around 1911 from Park Farm. The hut may be a former chapel used on the railways. Known as the Mission Room, this small building is licensed for services, which are held here during the winter months when the farm track is impassable to vehicles. Mission Room can accommodate around 50 people.

## Artefacts

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The church contains two medieval paintings in wall niches on either side of the altar. One depicts Saint Michael, but it is believed to have been scratched out by puritans in the 16th century. The High Altar is Jacobean and is made from oak, carved with five consecration crosses.

The octagonal stone font has eight blank shields on the basin and possibly dates to the 14th or 15th century. The pulpit is made from oak and dates from 1900. There is also a carved stone bearing Christ on the cross which originally came from Wormegay Priory founded in 1234. A bishop's chair incorporates a pulpit back board dating from the 17th century. The windows are thought to be Victorian and are in plain frosted glass.



*Top: View towards the chancel from the nave. Middle: Church nave with the font and the organ near west window.*

# RUNNING

## Team

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The church of St Michael, All Angels and Holy Cross belongs to the Watlington Benefice of four churches which is now part of a larger cluster of twelve churches known as the West Norfolk Priory Group. The other three churches in the benefice are St Botolph in Tottenhill, St Peter and St Paul in Watlington, and St James in Runcton Holme. A priest-in-charge leads services at the four churches on a four-week rotation, and the congregation usually travels to whichever church is holding a service on any particular Sunday. Wormegay church has two churchwardens, a trainee curate, and there are a number of lay readers in the benefice. The West Norfolk Priory Group has a mission administrator based in Downham Market.

## Religious Services

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Services are held at the church from late spring through till Christmas, moving to the Mission Room in the winter months. The service takes the form of traditional Holy Communion. The mid-week service at 10 a.m. on the first Thursday of the month and the first Sunday service at 9.30 a.m. are held at St James' church (Runcton Holme). The second Sunday service at 11 a.m. is offered at St Peter and St Paul's (Watlington) and St Botolph's (Tottenhill) holds the third Sunday service at 9.30 a.m. Wormegay church holds the fourth Sunday service at 11 a.m. and the congregation are reminded on church noticeboards about the various service times across all four churches of the benefice. Occasionally, the church runs a lay service led by lay readers in the Watlington Benefice. Because of the rotating service schedule, on average, Wormegay church receives about 25 worshippers from the parish for its Sunday service once a month. The demographic tends towards the more elderly.

**Covid-19 impact.** During the period of national lockdown due to the coronavirus pandemic in 2020, the church was closed and services and other activities were temporarily suspended. To keep in touch, church members relied on **phone calls** and **email updates**. Once the lockdown was eased, a Sunday morning service was re-introduced at 11 a.m. at Watlington, with a maximum of 30 attendees from the whole group. Slowly other churches are reopening, and Wormegay hopes to hold a 9.30 a.m. service once a month in the Mission Room from October 2020.



“The fact that on a winter morning we’ve got the lights on, you can hear the organ, perhaps hear us singing in there, brings [the church] into the village... Whereas if you are in the centre, you are on [the community’s] doorstep.”

Elaine Squires  
Churchwarden



*Unpaved Church Lane near the church and the fields.*

### Parish Share

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In 2019, parish share expenditure was about £4,000. In 2018, the church had only been able to raise £660. The parish share was paid in full for 2019, but this is unlikely in 2020.

### Fundraising

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There had previously been a Friends group although this has now folded. The church had a **scheme** where parishioners could show their support for the church even if they were not regular churchgoers. They were informed of special services being planned, invited to the Patronal Service for St Michael's, and encouraged to attend any fundraising events. With an aging population, the number of people in the scheme had naturally declined, and the scheme has not been continued.

**Benefice group fundraising.** Most of fundraising events are organised at Watlington church and village hall. In the Watlington Benefice there is a group fund to provide funds for day today running costs, such as candles, communion wafers, paper and ink for newsheets, etc. This is a fund which can also help a parish in the group, if they have an unexpected expense they cannot pay. This fund is suffering with the current situation (*see Covid-19 impact*), as no fundraising is taking place.

**Donations.** Parishioners fund the ministry through plate collections and parish giving although the majority of fundraising efforts are channelled to group funds. The church is currently using the **plate envelope scheme** for weekly offerings and plans to use the direct debit scheme in the future.

St Michael's church receives approximately £1,000 in donations each year from two

villagers which is used for the upkeep of the churchyard. There is often some uncertainty as to whether the parish share will be paid in full.

**Church fete.** A group church fete of the Watlington Benefice is organised in July at Watlington church.

**Fundraising events.** Wormegay holds occasional fundraisers in other locations, such as a **Strawberry and Wine Evening** held at one of the churchwardens' homes, which raised £300. There are also **coffee mornings** and **jumble sales** at the Mission Room, and supports group fundraising at Watlington.

### Income Generation

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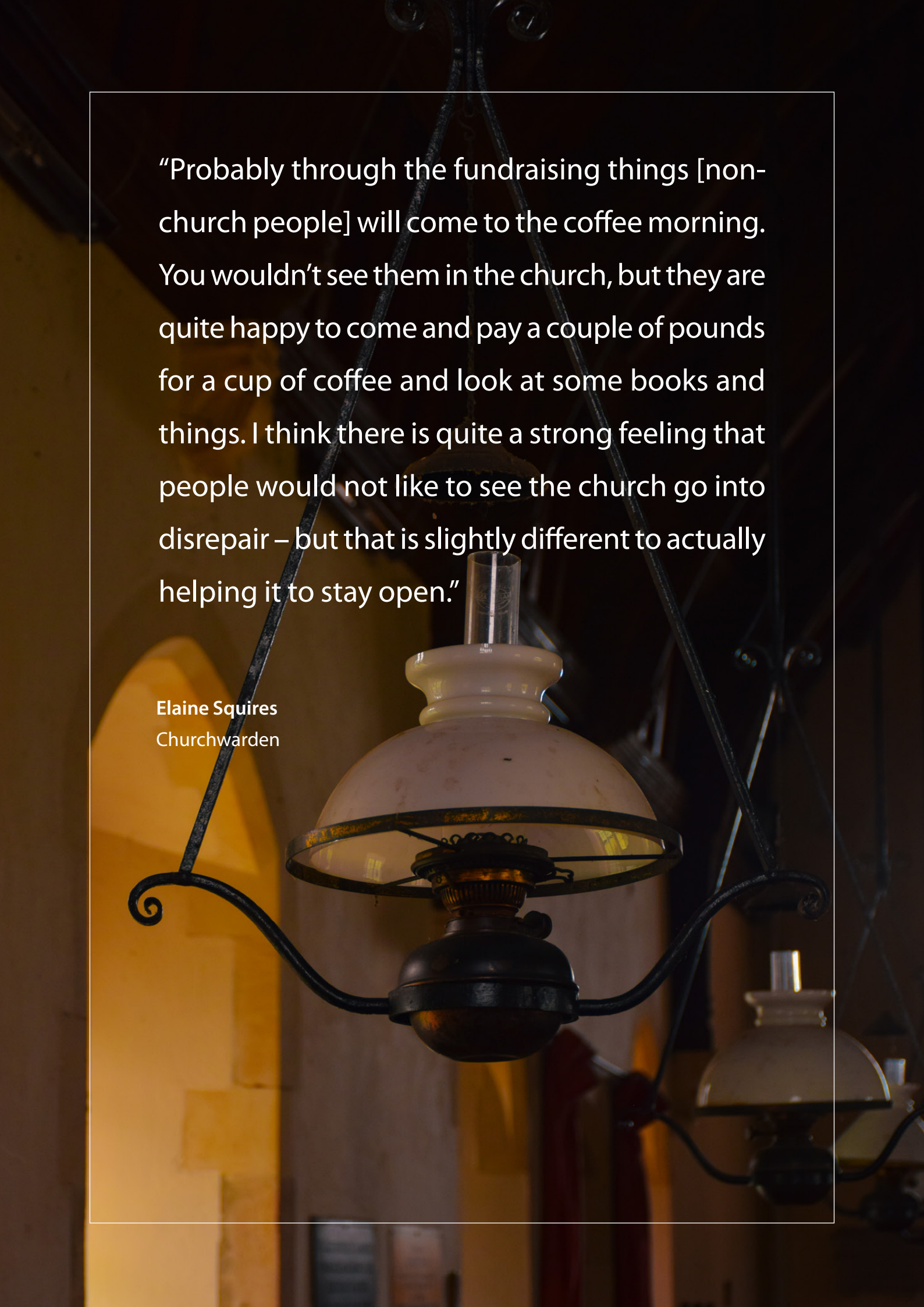
**Investment funds.** The church has investments of approximately £19,000 that can be called on to pay for renovations, including a chancel fund (£4,774) and income shares (£3,600). The remote location of the church, difficulties with access in wet weather, and the lack of facilities mean that events are usually held in other locations and the church is unsuitable for rentals.

**Rentals.** The Mission Room is occasionally rented out to groups and to the parish council.

### Communications

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The Watlington Benefice has a **website** and a weekly **news sheet** giving details of services. **Noticeboards**, a local **newspaper** *Lynn News* and **radio station** are used to advertise events. **Word of mouth** is effective for spreading the word in this small community, and **phone calls** are made if the location of the service is changed, for example.



“Probably through the fundraising things [non-church people] will come to the coffee morning. You wouldn’t see them in the church, but they are quite happy to come and pay a couple of pounds for a cup of coffee and look at some books and things. I think there is quite a strong feeling that people would not like to see the church go into disrepair – but that is slightly different to actually helping it to stay open.”

Elaine Squires  
Churchwarden

# REACH

## Community

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**Mission Room.** This small tin building with six windows is located in the centre of the village (*see photos on page 12*). It is mostly used by the community for coffee mornings, events such as Remembrance Sunday commemorative service led by a local volunteer, as well as a lunch stop on Maundy Thursday for the Easter pilgrimage from Ely to Walsingham. The building is licensed for services, but it has neither kitchen nor a WC facility. The room was acquired from Park Farm in around 1911 for a notional rent.

## Events

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**Joint events.** With the launch of the Priory Group, more joint events are being organised, such as the annual open-air service held in the gardens at Stow Bardolph. Worshippers from many different churches attend this event, including Methodists and the Salvation Army. There is also a group church fete in July that is usually held in Watlington (*see Lessons Learned*).

The church was being used by the local primary school for services to commemorate harvest and the end of the school year, however, this has not been able to be continued in the current Covid crisis.

## Engagement

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**Coffee mornings** are held in the Mission Room and are usually well supported.

**Volunteers.** The church is entirely reliant on voluntary help. The churchwardens clean the church on a monthly basis, a member of the congregation mows the grass and maintains the churchyard, and families still return to tend the graves. Members of the congregation bring coffee in flasks to the monthly service to allow for social engagement following the service. The owner of Park Farm has replaced the church gate.



Top row: Members of St Michael's congregation at church service (Photo by Wormegay church); Spring plant sale and coffee morning in aid of Neighbourhood Watch, Wormegay village hall, 2018 (Photo source: [www.lynnnews.co.uk](http://www.lynnnews.co.uk)). Middle and bottom: Benefice summer fete at the Old Rectory, June 2017 (Photos by Watlington Benefice).



*Top: Exterior of the Mission Room; Stone font at St Michael's church. Middle and bottom: Interior of the Mission Room.*

# REFLECTIONS

## Challenges

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### Church location

Wormegay church is located half a mile from the centre of the village and is accessed by a farm road which is muddy and rutted in winter months. There is no car park and vehicles find it difficult to turn around in the unlit lane. For events such as weddings, the adjacent farm allows access so that cars can turn. Being in the middle of an agricultural area also creates a problem of having insects in the church, particularly ladybirds that cluster around the door to hibernate.

### Church building condition

St Michael's has mains electricity but no running water. Hence there is no WC facility or kitchen, and the church is unlikely to have the funds to install these in the near future. The closest to the church water main is at Park Farm, a quarter of a mile away. Despite the installation of heaters, there is some damp and the church is aired at least once a month. The internal lighting is quite dim. Fortunately, the repairs raised in the recent quinquennial inspection were not considered to require any major expense.

### Small and senior congregation

The demographic is quite elderly. The monthly service is attended by worshippers from the other churches in the Watlington Benefice who supplement the local church

members, of whom there are around half a dozen including the churchwardens. There is less of a community feel than in the past, perhaps due to the village's popularity as a commuter area.

### Vandalism

There have been a number of instances of windows being broken and theft of the copper lightning conductor. As church is in a remote location, it is now locked during the daytime. Guards have been installed to protect the windows.

### Income generation

The church is not always able to meet its annual parish share. There are no opportunities to raise income by hiring out the church, given the lack of facilities and the fact that there are no groups within the village that might use it.

### Community perceptions of the church

St Michael's church is subject to the same perception as many other churches in that people believe the Church of England is a wealthy institution and should be able to support the maintenance of its churches.

### Lack of personnel and volunteers

Although there are a number of volunteers who currently look after the church and the churchyard, it is not certain that this will continue in the future.



Top: Medieval paintings in wall niches on either side of the altar. Bottom: Carved stone memorials.



## Lessons Learned

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

St Michael's church encourages the local community to make use of the church buildings particularly the Mission Room, which the church sees as a village asset. A local neighbourhood watch group regularly meets in the Mission Room for coffee mornings and the parish council organised their meetings there. The room also hosted the Easter pilgrimage group from Ely to Walsingham. In addition, a local volunteer who has been researching local soldiers from the benefice area organised a commemoration service at the war memorial on the village green on Remembrance Day.

### **To work in partnership**

The church continues to function as a place of worship largely as a result of the efforts of volunteers and its membership of a larger group of churches. Besides fundraising benefits, joint summer fete for the four churches in the Benefice group helps promote churches' activities by spreading the word among residents of the four villages, as well as maintain the community spirit.

### **To involve lay people in running church services**

St Michael's church welcomes initiatives from the congregation to get involved into church activities. For example, the church appreciates a local resident, who has been keen on researching Remembrance Sunday and biographies of the soldiers from Wormegay and Tottenhill, to run a little commemorative service on Remembrance Day.

### **To be close to and listen to the local community**

The church finds it useful and more efficient to spread news about the Benefice group events by meeting people. A church volunteer meets people on her walks and reminds about upcoming events and coffee mornings.



“When we think of success, we think of our group success rather than an individual church. I suppose in a way the success is the fact that we are still here, that we haven’t had to close, and that people are willing to come this distance to worship in this church.”

**Elaine Squires**  
Churchwarden

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