

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

ST PETER & ST PAUL LITTLE GRANSDEN



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**

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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 a 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: One of the angels with outstretched wings on top of the pedestals of the rood screen in the chancel.

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ST PETER & ST PAUL LITTLE GRANSDEN

Church Category: Rural

Deanery: St Neots

Address: Church Street, Little Gransden,
SG19 3DU

Benefice website: www.bluebellbenefice.org.uk



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Grade II* listed building in the Perpendicular style; Victorian restorations; Recent renovations with roof and walls; Stone ramp in the north porch; Stained glass; Double piscina; Brasses; Ornate painted rood screen; Wall paintings; Anglo-Saxon carved stone; Graffito; No kitchen and WC facilities; No off-road parking

Congregation to Population Ratio: 40 / 298

Fundraising: Grants from various bodies; Legacy from a parishioner; Church fete and Autumn bazaar

Income Generation: Concerts, quiz nights, raffles and other social events contributing to church funds

Communications: Benefice website and magazine Roundabout; Facebook page; Posters; Villages' email group

Community Engagement: School collaboration; Pilgrimage Project; Bell ringing society; Church fete; Community Café in Great Gransden; Good Friday Treasure Trail; The Gransden Show; A Very Victorian Christmas; Community coffee morning and music festival at village hall; Benefice vicarage as a parish hub; Involvement with local events; Bluebell-19 community support group.

ROOTS



Profile

The small village of Little Gransden lies on the south western edge of Cambridgeshire. The village stands on the B1046 road and is 18 km (11 miles) from Cambridge and 16 km (10 miles) to the south east of Huntingdon. The nearest railway station is St Neots, some 7 miles away. According to the 2011 census, Little Gransden had a population of 296 people, and the parish covers an area of 777 hectares (1,920 acres). Little Gransden evolved as an offshoot of Great Gransden, which is ten minutes' walk away across the field called the Dole.

Village amenities include a village hall, recently extended, which hosts clubs such as indoor bowls and badminton, and a public house. The nearest shop and post office are in Great Gransden. There are over 30 different clubs and societies in the Gransdens. For everyone interested in the history of both villages, there is the Gransden Society (www.gransdensociety.org) that organises an annual programme of monthly meetings and social events. The former Baptist Church is used for a weekly community café. There are almshouses in the village, built by a vicar in the 17th century, and there are connections between the church and the charity that was established to run them. A further village fund exists to

help those in need. A restored windmill sits halfway between Great Gransden and Little Gransden and has been the focus of recent fundraising. Outdoor amateur dramatic performances have been held at the windmill. There is an active gardening society and village allotments. The church of St Peter and St Paul is the only parish church in the village. The Benefice vicarage, located in Great Gransden, is used for hosting Benefice meetings, groups, events and quiet/retreat days for visiting church groups.

Despite the heaviness of the soil, most of the parish land has been used mainly for arable farming. It was cultivated in three open fields until parliamentary enclosure in 1814. High, flat land in the east of the parish was hard to drain before mechanisation and was usually used for pasture and as the village common. In 1940, after the outbreak of World War II, the area was made into an airfield, called Gransden Lodge Airfield. It was in operational use from 1941 to 1946 but was unoccupied after 1948 and then sold off. Since October 1991, it has been the home of the Cambridge Gliding Centre. The Little Gransden Airfield on Fuller's Hill is the site of the annual Little Gransden Car and Air Show, which attracts large numbers of visitors.



Top: View of St Peter and St Paul's church from churchyard. Bottom: Exteriors of the south wall and the East window.

Building

The church of St Peter and St Paul is a Grade II* listed building situated in the centre of the village. The building in the Perpendicular style was built from the local carstone, supplemented with a harder stone in places. It dates back to the latter part of the 13th century and consists of chancel, nave of four bays, aisles and a lofty embattled western tower containing three bells. The present appearance of the church owes most to Victorian restorations. The chancel was restored in 1858 and its east end was rebuilt and a stained window inserted by the Revd Alfred Newby, a former rector, in 1875. The church was heavily restored in 1885–88. The church clock was recently restored and is now automated.

Recent renovations include a phased refurbishment of the church, thanks to grants from the Listed Places of Worship scheme and Amey Cespa and a major bequest from a parishioner. This included the re-roofing of the building in 2017, repairs to the East Chancel gable, all masonry, particularly the nave columns, replastering of walls, lath and plastering of the internal ceiling of the nave, removal of a redundant flue in the tower, restoration of all wood, re-hanging and repair to the west door. Alterations to the north porch with the entrance door included the replacement of steps with a stone ramp to make the entrance more accessible for those with disabilities. Medieval wall paintings exposed during the renovations were carefully preserved and then limewashed. A new sound system with a hearing loop has recently been installed. Future projects are planned to install a WC facility and a kitchen, and improvements that will make the church more accessible for the disabled.

The church building can accommodate 150 people. The building is open during the day, from around 9 a.m. to 5.30 p.m. The surrounding churchyard has many trees and shrubs.



Top: View towards the chancel from the nave. Middle: Open-back pews in the nave.
Bottom: Stone ramp in the north porch and Little Gransden Village Hall.



Benefice vicarage interiors.

Artefacts

The 19th- and 20th-century stained glass east window includes two panels connected with the dedication of the church to St Peter and St Paul. On the north side of the chancel is the organ, installed by a North London organ builder, probably in about 1902. It has been described as 'a concoction of second-hand materials not very skilfully contrived'. In 1976, the organ was completely dismantled and repaired. In the sanctuary is a partly medieval double piscina on the south side. The chancel floor has the brass in memory of William Knight, Rector 1599–1623. The most ancient furnishing is the 13th-century font. Its octagonal limestone bowl is set on a clunch stem. The oak cover is modern.

An ornate oak rood screen dating to the 15th century was painted and gilded in 1908. It has ornate but worn carvings, one perhaps depicting the green man, a sheaf of wheat and a bunch of grapes, symbolising bread and wine. Some wall paintings survive over the chancel arch. Beside the West door a graffito shows a man with a sword depicted upside down – presumably a deliberate mistake when reusing stone or a medieval workman's rush work result.

RUNNING

Team

St Peter and St Paul's church is part of the Bluebell Benefice comprising four parishes and is the smallest parish of the four, the others being Great Gransden, Abbotsley, and Waresley. The ministry team of Little Gransden church includes the Rector (0.5 post), a Licensed Lay Minister and two churchwardens. The Benefice has an Authorised Lay Minister responsible for music and there is a choir that sings at services across the Benefice. There is a large and active bell ringing society. The Rector is actively involved in the local primary school, as a Governor, leading assemblies and providing chaplaincy. In 2020, there were 33 names on the church electoral roll, of whom 18 were resident in the parish.

Religious Services

A traditional Communion service is held in Little Gransden on the second Sunday of the month at 8.30 a.m. A Benefice Holy Communion service including the choir takes place at 10 a.m. on the first Sunday. There is a mid-week Communion service on Wednesdays at 10.30 a.m. A well-attended service of thanksgiving was held after the recent renovations, during which time the church had been closed. All services are shared across the Benefice. Lego Church is run at the vicarage in Great Gransden. Sunday services at Little Gransden typically attract about 40 worshippers and midweek services around 8–10.

Covid-19 impact. During the coronavirus pandemic and the national lockdowns in 2020–21, church services and other activities were temporarily suspended. The Benefice hosted and facilitated a community mutual support group called **Bluebell-19** (see *Community*). To keep in touch with the congregation and community, the Benefice has **livestreamed** its Sunday 10 a.m. services. It also ran **virtual coffee** after the morning service on alternate Sundays at 11 a.m. via **Zoom**, before beginning an informal '**Coffee, Chat and Compline**' discussion and **prayer group** over Zoom every Sunday at 5 p.m. These virtual coffee events welcome everyone including those who do not live in the Benefice. The Gransdens' Choir conducted '**Choir Practice**' every Wednesday evenings on Zoom. On its **Facebook page**, the Benefice shares virtual service announcements, Bluebell Benefice Quiz Nights, Big Music Sunday Service, and other informative and supporting videos and posts. In June 2020, the church reopened for **private prayer** in accordance with social distancing guidelines, for Midweek worship through the summer, and then for Sunday worship from September.

Parish Share

In 2019, parish share expenditure was £10,107.

Fundraising

Recent restoration work, such as the replacement of the nave roof, has been possible due to successful acquisition of substantial external grant income from the Listed Places of Worship roof repair scheme. Events held at the church often involve the wider community, for example, **concerts**, and serve a dual purpose of being both social events and fund raisers. The annual **church fete** and **autumn bazaar** raise considerable sums. In 2019, for example, these two events raised almost £3,000, representing a sizeable proportion of the annual income of the parish. There is no formal Friends group in Little Gransden, although neighbouring villages such as Waresley do have such a group. Other events held in the past include a flower festival, performances such as A Very Victorian Christmas (*see Events*), quiz nights, coffee mornings and jumble sales – which have contributed to church funds.

Income Generation


Bequest. The church had received a substantial bequest that has been invested and has been used, in combination with external grant income to, undertake substantive remedial work (*see Building*). The use of the church building for public events is limited by the lack of a kitchen and WC facilities. In addition, there are alternative premises for hire in the villages: the village hall in Little Gransden has recently been extended and is well used by the community and there is also a hall known as the Reading Room in Great Gransden. At present, there is currently no parish giving scheme.

Communications

The Bluebell Benefice has a new **website** and a Facebook page which streams services and communicates information across all four parishes. This website currently links to the original website for Great and Little Gransden churches which features detailed information and photographs about church artefacts, and publishes annual reports and church updates. There is a **Facebook page** for Great Gransden and Little Gransden churches. The Gransdens-specific website and Facebook page are kindly run by the Authorised Lay Minister for music. *'Individuals wear lots of different hats and do all sorts of things. It is extraordinarily humbling how generous people are with their time and what they'll do for the church,'* says the Revd Rachel Blanchflower, the Rector of the Benefice. A **Benefice magazine Roundabout**, which includes a pastoral letter from the Rector, is delivered to every household once a month. **Posters** are placed around the village. There is a community **email group** called 'Touch Base' which is well-used and church information can be circulated to that group. Information is also put up on church and village **noticeboards**. Little Gransden's church noticeboards are in the church porch.



Clockwise from top-left: Mini-pilgrimage between the two churches of Great and Little Gransden; Church congregation at the formal dinner at Clare College, Cambridge; Inaugural performance of the music group at all-age service; Church fete event; Old vicarage garden event in Great Gransden; Summer Supper; A Very Victorian Christmas at Little Gransden church (Photos by Great and Little Gransden churches).



“We need to keep asking, ‘are people caring for the church building because first and foremost we are caring well for its people?’ I keep returning to the word ‘bless’: are we blessing our community with all we have? Do people feel blessed by the church? Not just, ‘do they like the church?’ but is there something more meaningful for them in why it is there and what it still stands for? And are we helping to articulate what that might be through the living stories we tell of and through it?”

Revd Rachel Blanchflower
Rector of the Benefice

REACH

Community

Many of the community events organised within the Benefice involve both Little and Great Gransden churches and there is crossover between the two churches and the village communities. St Peter and St Paul's church is supported by volunteers, drawn from both within and beyond its regular congregation.

Bell ringing society. There is a very active bell ringing society based in Great Gransden, whose members are drawn from both church and community. It is a big social group that encompasses all age ranges and it supports people to learn and train together.

Bluebell-19 is a community mutual support group that the Benefice hosted and facilitated during Covid-19. Bluebell-19 organised local community volunteers to help those isolating with shopping, prescription collection, dog-walking and conversation on the phone. They also provided the villages with updated information of sources of support for health and well-being during this time. Going forwards, this group will continue to help support the process of recovery from Covid in these parishes, overseeing the joining up of various support needs and help offered by volunteers.

"[Children] have produced all this extraordinary artwork reflecting on pilgrimage and what it means to them, which is now on display in Great Gransden. I am very interested in the potential of having two churches so close within these small communities and how we use the geography of our landscape and the connecting spaces between them as part of our worship space, not just the buildings themselves. So, we are beginning to do that in various different ways across the whole Benefice as well."

Revd Rachel Blanchflower
Rector of the Benefice

Community *(continued)*

Community Café. The former Baptist Church in Great Gransden hosts a community café every Tuesday between 10 a.m. and 3 p.m. It attracts people from all the surrounding villages. Up to 70 people attend the café and will often bring knitting etc. and sit together to catch up with friends and neighbours.

Church-school links and Pilgrimage Project. The Church of England primary school in Great Gransden, Barnabas Oley, works closely with the churches on inspiration around their 'Spirited Arts' projects. In 2019, the children undertook a Pilgrimage Project and as part of that, the Rector led a walk from Great Gransden to Little Gransden using the ancient way that connects both churches. The walk finished with the exploration of

Events

Church Fete is the church's largest fundraiser of the year. It involves all the traditional stalls, such as a book and plant stalls, and is well supported by the community (see *Fundraising*).

Community Coffee Morning is held once a fortnight in Little Gransden Village Hall.

Rededication of the Church. A service of thanksgiving and rededication took place on Mothering Sunday in 2019 following the closure of the church for extensive repairs. This was well attended by the community, many of whom were friends of the parishioner who had left the generous legacy that enabled this work.

Good Friday Treasure Trail. Some of the younger children were led by the vicar on a trail from Little Gransden to Great Gransden church on Easter in 2019, with the children collecting items along the way that reminded them of the Easter story and discussing the story of Good Friday. The walk finished with a short service at Great Gransden with coffee and refreshments. The event was a success and drew a lot of people in.

The Gransden Show. A large agricultural show established in 1891 is held every September that attracts visitors from a wide area. The event involves traditional countryside and farming activities, craft marquees, and pony trials.

A Very Victorian Christmas. The local amateur dramatic group, The Revellers, have staged an informal evening of Victorian readings and music in the church with lanterns and candles. The atmospheric evening was organised in partnership with The Gransden Lady Singers. Seasonal refreshments were available in exchange for a donation to church funds. The successful event attracted 80 people.

Music Festival. This is a large social event held in Little Gransden Village Hall every other year.

Engagement

Benefice vicarage as a parish hub. The Rector uses the office at the vicarage in Great Gransden as a base. The vicarage is used as a parish hub for offering hospitality, pastoral care and hosting services and learning groups and events. Visiting church groups have used the main room for quiet study days and several plans are in place for post-Covid times around a preschool/parent group, prayer days and space for retreats. 'It is the Benefice Vicarage, so it is everybody's space equally,' says the Rector of the Benefice. Meetings of church groups, the PCC, Lent groups and activities with children such as Lego Church, also take place at the vicarage.

Focus on families and younger people. An all-age planning group has been established with a particular focus on children and young people. Outdoor events have been targeted at the younger members of the congregation. Lego Church has continued throughout the pandemic and there is now a regular and stable core of families who attend. By building a partnership with Barnabas Oley school, and in conjunction with some of their SIAMs aims, children are being encouraged to become part of the planning and leading of worship. This has been further explored in online services throughout lockdown.

Collaboration with school assemblies. The Rector is a regular visitor to the local primary school, leading assemblies and greeting families at the school gate, and the children have been invited to visit the Gransden churches within the Benefice as part of their learning. Local children also took part in a mini-pilgrimage between the two churches. The school uses the church for special services every term and there are discussions underway about weekly class assemblies being held in the church post-Covid, which the children would lead.

Involvement with local events. The new incumbent has been warmly welcomed by the many groups that run in the villages. She believes it is important to become involved and interested in the activities taking place in the community, such as the annual agricultural show, school plays, the Evergreens' retirement club and the Little Gransden air show.



Details of the church's stained glass and the ornate painted rood screen.

REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Physical access to the church

Although a ramp was recently installed, further work is needed to make the church fully accessible to the community, including improvements to the gravel path. The PCC has installed a sound system that will assist those who are hard of hearing and allow children to play a bigger part in services.

Lack of facilities within the church

There is no running water at the church and no kitchen and WC facility, which is restrictive in terms of events, children's activities and all-age services. Volunteers running events such as afternoon teas need to bring everything onto site. It also limits the use of the church for other events.

Lack of a church hall

The absence of a church hall is not an issue as groups tend to meet at the Benefice vicarage in Great Gransden and the Little Gransden village hall is hired for some events.

Tackling rural isolation

Although there are many groups and activities within the villages, the church has an important role to play in welcoming newcomers to the village. A new welcome pack, including information on the Benefice churches, is being developed.



It is lifted up from the earth will draw all men unto it



Lessons Learned

To work in partnership

Although the Benefice has a small clergy team, volunteers from within the community are vital to keeping the church running. The congregations from Little and Great Gransden are particularly closely linked. The churches in the two villages are extremely close to each other, particularly by foot and this provides opportunities for joint activities on the theme of pilgrimage, for example, a prayer walk between Little and Great Gransden or a walk around the whole Benefice in bluebell woods.

To create a living church

The mid-week morning service is gradually attracting worshippers. The new incumbent has brought with her a wealth of ideas for new ways to encourage greater use of the church by the community, such as a pre-school music outreach group. By introducing children to the church at an early age, their confidence grows and they feel a closer affinity with the church. The Good Friday activities with the younger children offered another opportunity to bring the Christian story to life. However, it is important that any new activities fit in with what is already on offer in the village.

To integrate the church and the community

The minister is actively exploring new ways to integrate the church and the community, from the school to the farming community. The use of the vicarage as a parish hub provides hospitality to both visitors and parishioners.

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

The planned improvements to access and facilities will make the church more useable by both worshippers and the wider community.

To allow sufficient time for new initiatives to be introduced

The PCC has undertaken a phased process of improvements, beginning with those that are most urgent and have successfully leveraged parish resources with external grant income. Feasibility studies have been undertaken to have development plans available for when external funding opportunities arise and are considered in the light of how improvements might best benefit the community.

To maintain and strengthen the connection with the worshipping community

There are many families with links to the church going back for many generations which creates a deep connection between the church and the community. The church is very central to the communal identity of the village. Maintaining Little Gransden church so that it is clean and tidy with fresh flowers demonstrates to all those who visit that the church is loved and cared for.



“When you go into our church buildings, I hope that you will notice how well – looked-after and clean and tidy – they are, that the flowers are fresh. These buildings are loved and cared for. I think that this sort of attentiveness matters, because it reflects our worship of a God who is lovingly, generously attentive to all the details of our lives.”

Revd Rachel Blanchflower
Rector of the Benefice

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