

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

ST WENDREDA MARCH



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 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: View of the nave and the angel roof at St Wendreda March.

On page 24: St Wendreda's church in winter (Source: <https://mapio.net>).

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ST WENDREDA MARCH

Church Category: Market town

Deanery: March

Address: Church Street, March,
Cambridgeshire PE15 9PY

Website: www.stwendreda.co.uk

Changing Market Town project:
www.elydiocese.org/changing-market-towns



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Grade I listed building; Double-hammer beam angel roof; 12th century font; Elaborately carved Victorian pulpit and stained glass; 'Last Supper' window in the north aisle; Australian WWII pilot officer memorial; Case with the largest church Bible in England; Three large closed graveyards; No kitchen and WC facilities in the church; Church hall immediately adjacent to church with kitchen and WC facilities

Congregation to Population Ratio: 58 / 4,071

Fundraising: Friends of the church; Donations

Income Generation: Rental of church hall

Communications: Website; Facebook group; Information boards in the church; Postcards; Visitors' Book; Short guide; Bookstall; DVD library; Church noticeboard

Community Engagement: Community College partnership; Missions; Bell ringers; March Christian Bookshop; Bookshop; Open Tower Day; Coffee morning; Talks events; Concerts; Foodbank; Youth club; Pop-up church; House groups; Sunday school; Churches Together in March group.

ROOTS



Profile

March is a large fenland market town and civil parish in the Isle of Ely area of Cambridgeshire. It was formerly the county town of the Isle of Ely and is now the administrative centre of Fenland District Council. It has three wards – east, north and west. March had a population of 22,298 according to the 2011 census. The town is 14km (9 miles) south of Wisbech, 22km (14 miles) to the north-west of Ely, and 47km (29 miles) north of Cambridge.

March is situated on the banks of the River Nene, today mainly used by pleasure boats, but the town was once on an island surrounded by marshes. As the land was drained, the town grew and prospered as a trading and religious centre, with large numbers of pilgrims visiting the shrine of Saint Wendreda during the medieval period. Saint Wendreda is reputed to have founded a monastic community at March, possibly in the 7th century, dedicated to the healing arts, and many came in search of a healing miracle for their ills. It is thought that her relics remained at March until 1343. 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.

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) (See also REACH Ely case studies *Huntingdon, Littleport, and Wisbech*).



Top: South-eastern side of the church building (Photo by St Wendreda March). Bottom clockwise: East window and St Wendreda's church hall; Passage through the base of church tower; River Nene in the town of March.

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. Out-of-town development has also 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.

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. There are four major supermarkets and many food processing factories in the area. 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. Leisure facilities in the parish of St Wendreda include March Town Bowls Club, the Recreation Ground with play area for young children and Allotments.

In addition to four Church of England churches of St Wendreda, St John, St Peter

and St Mary, 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 that 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.

The parish church of St Wendreda is featured in Simon Jenkin's book *England's Thousand Best Churches* (2002).

Buildings

The parish church is the only one in England dedicated to Saint Wendreda, also known as Wendreth, reputedly a 7th century Anglo-Saxon princess, the daughter of King Anna and sister of Etheldreda and Sexburgha, both of whom became abbesses and, later, saints. Wendreda is said to have brought Christianity to March.

The church of St Wendreda is a Grade I listed building mainly of the 14th-century origin. The church was likely set on the site of an earlier 11th century Norman church. The present building – a mixture of rubble, flint, and brick, with Barnack limestone dressing – can accommodate 300 worshippers. The bright and airy building consists of an aisled nave, chancel, south porch, and west tower with a spire. The comparatively modern chancel was built in the second half of the 19th century, it replaces an older one which was in a very poor state of repair.



Top: Southern side of the church building. Bottom clockwise: Pulpit; Stained glass of Saint Wendreda; Wooden pews and the central aisle.

“St Wendreda’s building [has] a wonderful range of work, it is distinctive and different. The aspiration is for it to become an effective evangelical Anglican Church. Some people because of a conservative fundamentalistic background sometimes seem to continue March’s sectarian history.”

Revd Andrew Smith

Team Rector

Over the years, the town of March has migrated north, to cluster around first the marketplace next to the river Nene and then the railway. This has left St Wendreda rather isolated at the very southern end of the main street, almost in the countryside. Yet unlike its much younger cousin St Peter’s, hemmed in by buildings in the town centre, St Wendreda’s sits in a large graveyard, surrounded by mature trees and old cottages. An old settlement area around the church is known as Town End, which contains some of the oldest dwellings both in the town and parish. The parishioners of St Wendreda’s are the most spread out over the whole town. Three large churchyards are now closed to further burials, but open for internments of ashes.

Recent renovations include a restoration of the angel roof some 30 years ago and repairs to the tower. In 2009, work on the north parapet included some craftsmanship on

brand new stone to complete the task required. At present, there are no kitchen or WC facilities in the church building, and people use the facilities in the adjacent church hall which is located in the churchyard.

St Wendreda’s church was given permission to replace some of its pews with chairs, which are arranged by the north and south walls of the nave. The church is unlocked on request.

Church hall. The church hall has been completely rebuilt over the past 5 years and offers multiple rooms including a main hall, a small hall, a committee room, modern kitchen, and WC facilities. The hall is used for church events such as Sunday school, Pathfinders, Friday evening youth club, as well as various events by local community groups. The Hall is managed by a select group of church members who look after and maintain the hall in addition to handling hall bookings.





Artefacts

Angel roof. St Wendreda's church is famous for its beautiful double-hammer beam angel roof, thought by experts to be the finest example of its kind. The roof celebrates the saint with 118 angels, carved from oak, the largest of them half life-size, looking down into the church with wings outstretched. It is reputed that the donors of the angel roof were William and Alice Dredeman in about the year 1500. In addition, there are 19 canopied saints and martyrs in the angel roof. The complete assembly was made by the Rollesbury brothers at Bacton in Norfolk between 1523 and 1526.



The font, originally square though now octagonal, has a bowl dating from between 1100 and 1150. All of the stained glass is Victorian and the 'Last Supper' window in the north aisle is a good example of gothic style glass from that era. The Victorian pulpit which is comparatively recent is elaborately carved. At the west end of the nave is a memorial erected by the people of March in memory of the Australian World War II Pilot Officer Jim Hocking who ordered his crew to bail out, whilst he remained at the controls of his stricken plane, sacrificing his life on the 28 July 1944 aged 21 years, by steering the plane away from the town. In the south aisle is a case containing the largest church Bible in England.

RUNNING

Team

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

The ministry team of St Wendreda's was established in 2015. Originally each clergy post had responsibility for two churches, but this was reorganised in 2017 with the Team Rector taking three, and a new post of Team leader in Mission also have responsibility for St Wendreda's – this post is currently vacant.

St Wendreda's also has an Licensed Lay Minister, a Youth Worker (Authorised Lay Minister) and two churchwardens.

The Team Council includes representatives from all four churches and explores ways in which the churches can work more closely together. The church building is mainly cared for by the churchwardens with help from fellowship members.



Top: View from the nave towards the East window (Photo by Timur Alexandrov). Middle: Interiors of the church hall. Bottom: Community event in the church hall; Memorial erected by the people of March in memory of the Australian World War II Pilot Officer Jim Hocking (Photos by St Wendreda's church).



Religious Services

St Wendreda's is an evangelical church with an emphasis on Biblical teaching.

Morning Service (Service of the Word) is St Wendreda's primary pattern of service having communion only once a month. The service contains a mixture of modern and older songs and is led by a singing group, a small grand piano, keyboard, guitars and electric drums. The church also utilises video projection for the order of service. Robes, the pulpit and the altar are not used for these services.

Once a fortnight (alternating with St John's) the church holds a Holy Communion at 8 a.m. This service is small in number, average 4-6, generally local older age group.

A regular Sunday service takes place at 10.30 a.m. and is the most popular. The average number attending weekly 40-50 adults whose age ranges from young families to people in their 90s. Children and young people average 15. On the first Sunday of the month, the children stay in the church for the whole service; for the rest of the month they go over to the church hall for Sunday School. Members of the congregation are actively encouraged to participate in services, including reading the lessons and taking the prayers.

Covid-19 lockdown. During the pandemic crisis in 2020, the church building of St Wendreda's was locked and weddings and christenings postponed, in line with the Church of England's requirements for all church buildings. During this period, the church body was **keeping in touch** with people, particularly those who are having to self-isolate, via telephone calls and other means of communication. On its **website**, the church shared messages from churchwardens, 'word for today', invitations to share time together. House groups convenors (*see Engagement*) telephoned their group members weekly and kept in touch via **WhatsApp group** messaging. Virtual quiz nights were organised via **Facebook**. Churchwardens offered help in solving problems with shopping and telephoned with those members of congregation who felt lonely. On Sunday mornings at 11 a.m. the church transmitted the service via **Zoom**.

Parish Share

In 2019, parish share target was £33,512.

Fundraising

Friends of the Church is an established association. It had almost folded in 2019 but was persuaded to keep running. The funds raised by the Friends assist the PCC in their responsibility to maintain the fabric of the church. Given the architectural significance of the church building, St Wendreda's is able to draw on ample grants for any renovations required from English Heritage and other sources.

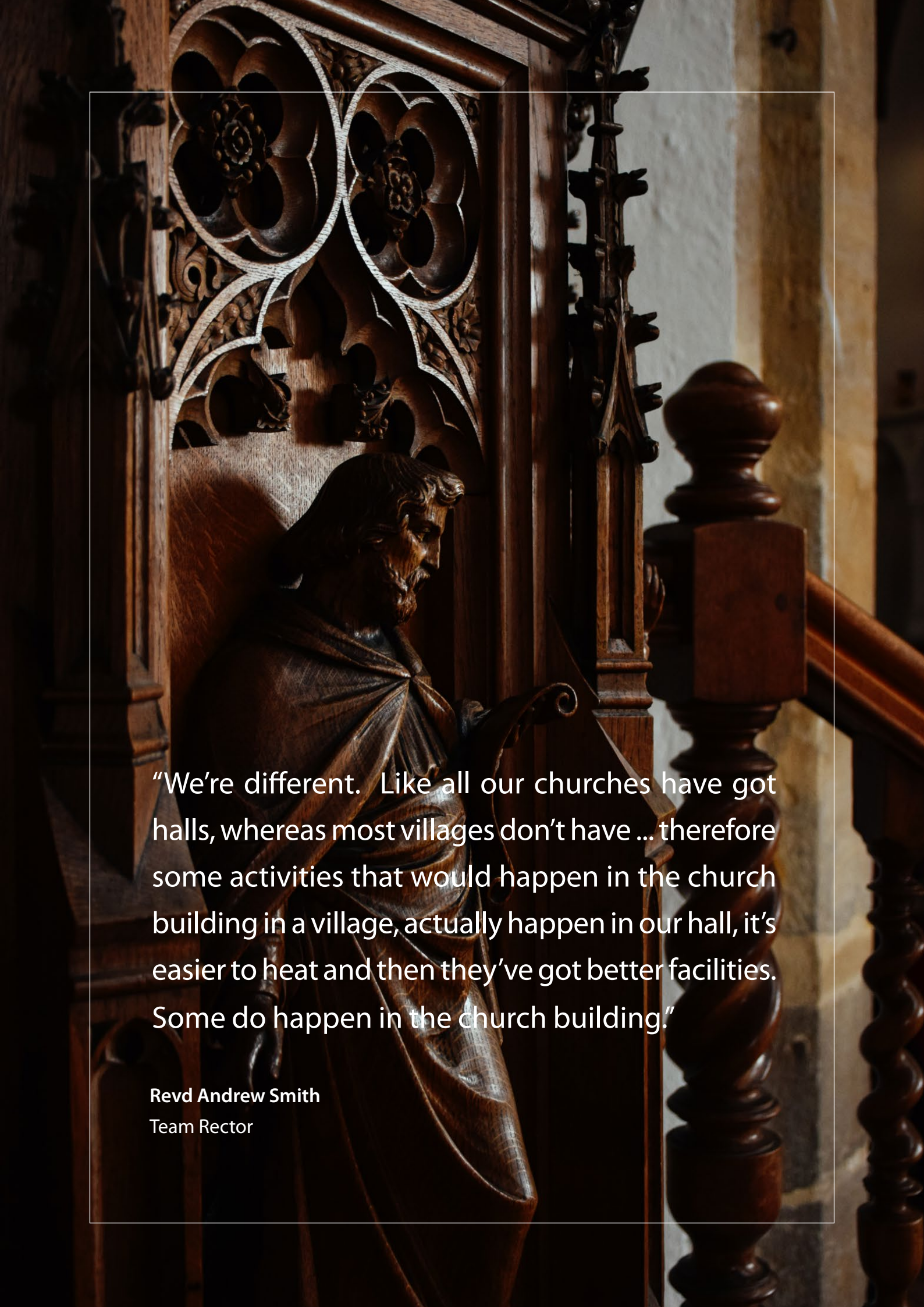
Donations. The building aside, there is a strong emphasis on raising funds through donations by church members and much of this is donated to certain Christian missions and charities. Historically the Church has been distanced from the Church of England which has an impact of financial priorities and the care of the building.

Income Generation

Rental of church hall. The church hall is hired out for children's parties and adult celebrations such as wedding anniversaries, funeral wakes and others.

Communications

St Wendreda March has a **website** and a closed **Facebook** group. A church **noticeboard** is by the main entrance to the churchyard. **Information stands** in the church illustrate stories and details about the angel roof, other church artefacts, March and the Fens. A **Visitors' Book** and a **short guide** *St Wendreda's Parish Profile* are available in the church. There is a **DVD library** and a **bookstall** located in the church offering cards, gifts and books for sale.



“We’re different. Like all our churches have got halls, whereas most villages don’t have ... therefore some activities that would happen in the church building in a village, actually happen in our hall, it’s easier to heat and then they’ve got better facilities. Some do happen in the church building.”

Revd Andrew Smith
Team Rector

REACH

Community

Community College Partnership. St Wendreda's church has a good working and reciprocal relationship with the nearby Neale Wade Community College which sits in a very pleasant setting, opposite St Wendreda's. The college has a long and distinguished history of education in March and specialises in Mathematics and Computing. Recently, the church was invited to be involved with the Neale-Wade Community College, as venue for Assemblies over three mornings, before the Christmas and Easter holidays. In addition, the College frequently uses the church building for concerts and carol services and in turn St Wendreda's uses the College for outreach events like a gospel concert.

Missions. The church supports a number of missions. These are: **Armenian Ministries**, a Christian charity which makes known the Word of God and provides physical help and assistance to the poor and needy in Armenia via the distribution of Bibles, Bible teaching, children's camps and humanitarian aid projects; the **Church Mission Society**, which is present in 40 countries across Africa, Asia, South America, the Middle East, Europe and the UK; **Crosslinks**, an Evangelical Missionary society which supports Bible teachers and pastors throughout the world; the **Mission Aviation Fellowship**, which sponsors pilots who fly small aircraft to remote and inaccessible communities with necessary supplies, taking sick people to hospital or safety; and **New Foundations**, a March-based Christian Medical Mission operating in the Niger Delta providing medical care to isolated communities. Used stamps and donations are collected for the **Leprosy Society**.

Bell ringers. The bell ringers at St Wendreda's church practise on a Monday evening between 7.30 and 9 p.m. When enough ringers are available, they ring before Sunday morning services. There are regularly between 10 and 15 people at each practice and ages range from school age upwards towards retirement. Abilities also vary from learning to handle a bell to competent method ringing.

March Christian Bookshop. St Wendreda's supports the March Christian Bookshop, which is open Tuesday to Saturday 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. The bookshop operates a small cafeteria. The bookshop is a major place of Christian work and witness for St Wendreda's.



1st row: Aerial view of St Wendreda's and church hall (Photo by ITV News Anglia www.itv.com); Church outdoor event (Photo by St Wendreda's).
 2nd row: Congregation members in the church (Photo by Richie Wisbey, www.flickr.com/photos/wisbey/); Bell ringers.
 3rd row: Members of congregation; A wedding day. 4th row: Sunday service; Churches Together in March event (Photos by St Wendreda's).

Events

Open Tower Day. Visits to the tower are arranged from time to time, raising funds for the church. The tower offers views of Ely Cathedral. The event also includes plant stalls, live music, refreshments, church tours, fresh produce, Teddy zip wire, face painting, and cakes.

Coffee mornings. Coffee mornings are held regularly in parishioners' homes.

Mother and toddler group is held at St Wendreda's church hall on a weekly basis.

Talks events. Recently the church was the venue for ex prisoner and author Gram Seed and his Sowing Seeds Ministry.

Concerts. From time to time the church holds musical concerts of varying styles – where the small 'stage area' up front is a great boon.

Engagement

March Foodbank. As part of its work in the wider community, St Wendreda's supports the work of March Foodbank. As well as practical support, prayers are given for the Foodbank. Donations are left in a basket at the rear of the church.

Youth Club holds regular meetings in the nearby church hall on Friday evenings. The club draws youth and young leaders from other churches as well.



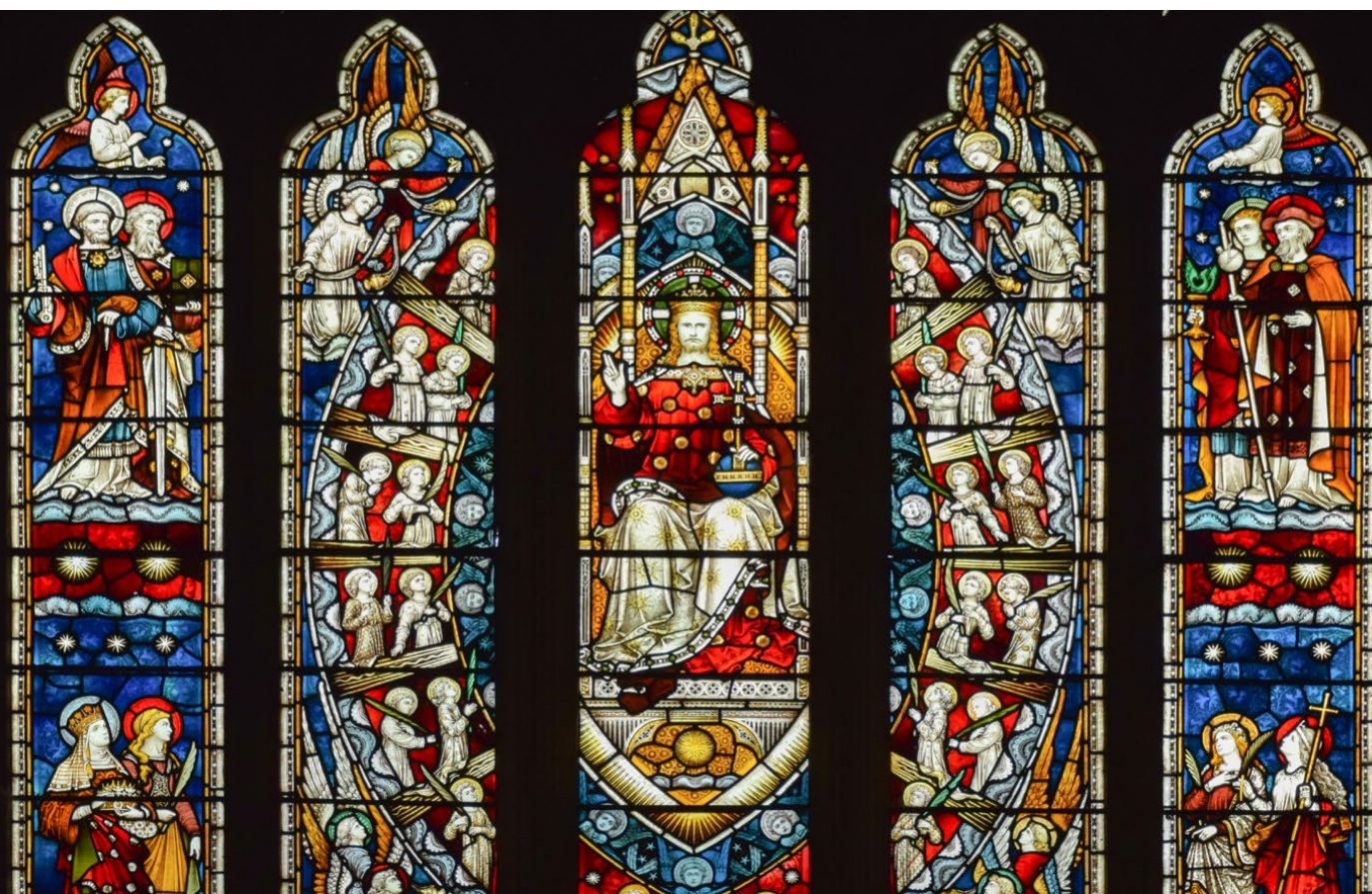
Pop-up church. A path for walks near the River Nene and a large open green space beside it have been used for open air church services.

House Groups. Within St Wendreda's there are five House groups that meet weekly. Each group has two leaders and they meet regularly to plan the future programme.

Sunday School. There is a thriving Sunday School which meets at the same time as the morning service. Sunday School starts in church and then released out to its groups part way through the service. Sunday School includes a creche, 'Climbers' group (3-7 years old), 'Explorers' group (7-11 years old), and 'Pathfinders' group (11-15 years old).

Churches Together in March. St Wendreda's is a member of Churches Together in March (CTIM) (www.churchestogether.org/march), a group representing a wide range of Christian backgrounds. They 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 and Christians Against Poverty and support for Christian Aid and Christmas shoeboxes. The St Wendreda's LLM is the driving force behind CTIM and the Foodbank.

Page 18: Communion Table and High Altar. Page 19: Stained glass in the East window.



REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Disaffection with the Church of England

Some of the leading members of the congregation at St Wendreda's have fundamental conservative tendencies and see themselves as a minority rather than a part of the traditions of the Church of England. An attempt to pair the Church with St John's church did not prove successful, it has to be persuaded to join the team ministry and for some the jury is still out. It has found some of the recent local issues and national changes (e.g. women in leadership, human sexuality debate) challenging, both because of circumstances beyond its control and also due to its strong sense of self-preservation. The church has dedicated people in leadership, and some of its tendencies are evolving.

Lack of attachment of congregation to church building

Fundraising by the congregation is aimed specifically at Christian missions and charitable causes. There had been some disillusionment amongst the Friends of St Wendreda's, who had felt their efforts to fundraise for the maintenance of the historic building were not appreciated, and this group had almost folded. There is a sense that some of the congregation would be more than happy to vacate the building and worship in the church hall since their outlook is similar to churches of an independent nature.

Church building condition

The church is mindful of those who feel passionate about the pews. An idea to replace the pews with chairs despite local support did not receive support from the diocese and heritage lobby in the past. At present, the mixture of pews with some chairs does not look appealing. In addition, a screen needs to be installed.

Church building location

Set on the edge of the town, its location makes the church building isolated from the rest of the town centre wider community.

Lack of volunteers

The Friends group had dwindled in recent years but is being supported by the ministry team and may relaunch.

Church congregation in decline

Previously a thriving church, numbers have fallen in recent years.

Youth engagement

The church finds it challenging to attract younger generation into the church.





Page 22: Church tower with the clock; North aisle with chairs.
Page 23: Children's corner; Information stands; Carved bench end in the chancel.

Lessons Learned

To encourage a diversity of expressions of faith

Although the church members had somewhat reluctantly been brought into the March ministry team, the vision is that each church should have some distinctive characteristics and style, so that the team might appeal to a wider variety of personalities and outlooks. In the past, St Wendreda's was united with the church of St John's for a time but that partnership was not successful, mainly due to differences in theological outlook. St Wendreda's has not had its own vicar for some years, firstly sharing with St John's, but now it is part of the Team Leader in mission's pastoral responsibility.

To work in partnership

There were considerable cultural differences to overcome when the ministry team was established but those are gradually being overcome. The team recognise that many aspects of church life work best at local level, but some have strengths when offered on a bigger, town-wide scale. St Wendreda's is also a member of Churches Together in March.

To increase opportunities for further church community integration

The church has tried to establish good reciprocal relationship with Neale-Wade Community College and welcomes them to hold events in the church. In return, the church holds outreach events in the College.

To increase opportunities for further church and community integration

Many people within the town have never been inside the church. A relaunch of the Friends group and their activities might open the church up to the community.



To adapt church buildings for more flexible and a wider use

The church aims to be inclusive and its church hall, with convenient kitchen and facilities, serves as a welcoming space. The hall is used quite frequently by local community groups to include Keep fit classes, Line dancing, Trefoil Guild and others. It is also hired out for children and family events.

To serve the community

The pandemic lockdown in 2020 made it impossible to host Chat-Tea in St John's church hall on the first Sunday of each month. The March Team Ministry decided that the pandemic disruption should not prevent this successful mission and organised hot meals making them available for collection or delivery three times a week – on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays. People could place an order by phone, and contact details were shared in newsletter, website, and St Wendreda's Facebook page.

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. 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.

To strengthen connections with the local and wider community

Members of St Wendreda's congregation are Trustees of a Christian Book Shop/Coffee Shop in March with members of staff from other churches. The church is very much involved in Churches Together in March and Support Deanery Events. Some of St Wendreda's church members volunteer and assist with a town wide men's monthly breakfast (women also invited) featuring guest speakers.



“I think a church is successful when it helps people to be more human. And you can't measure that... I'm not saying numbers are irrelevant, because they do say contact, but its depth is every bit as much important as spread.”

Revd Andrew Smith
Team Rector

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