

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets  
for the Common Good

# ST GEORGE LITTLEPORT



*Text, design, 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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**[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: Littleport church's stained glass depicting St George slaying the dragon.*

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# ST GEORGE LITTLEPORT

**Church Category:** Market town

**Deanery:** Ely

**Address:** 30 Church Lane, Littleport, Ely,  
Cambridgeshire CB6 1PS

**Website:** [www.littleportparishchurch.org.uk](http://www.littleportparishchurch.org.uk)

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



## Summary

**Buildings and Artefacts:** Grade II\* listed; Church open twice a week; Kitchen, facilities, and parish room; Stained glass by Geoffrey Webb; Medieval ironbound chest; Old furniture from other parishes

**Congregation to Population Ratio:** 72 / 8,477

**Fundraising:** Summer and Christmas fetes; Quiz nights; Coffee mornings

**Income Generation:** Arts and Crafts Fair; Concerts; Rental income opportunity

**Communications:** Website; Facebook page; Newsletter; *What's On* News sheet; Posters; Noticeboard

**Community Engagement:** Children and Family Missionary; Pop-Up Church; Youth Cafe; Church fetes; School collaboration; Youth work; Arts and Crafts Fair; Community Survey; Churchyard available for outdoor events.

# ROOTS

## Profile

The largest settlement by area in East Cambridgeshire, Littleport with a population of 8,477 people (2018) is five miles north of Ely. Although a market town, Littleport is referred as a village as it lacks a main street to qualify as a town. The large parish of Littleport comprises hamlets Little Ouse (previously St John's) to the east, now residential with a church and public house converted into private dwellings, and St Matthew's to the west. Littleport has convenient transport links – the A10 and train station connect Littleport with King's Lynn to the north and Ely, Cambridge, and London to the south.

Historically, Littleport gained fame as the site the 13th century rebellions against the drainage of the Fens and the Ely and Littleport Riots of 1816 caused by post-war high unemployment and rising grain costs.

At present, Littleport is served by primaries and a high school locally, village hall, café, post office, restaurants, four public houses, supermarkets, and nursing home. In front of the parish church of St George, in a nearby park, there is a Harley-Davidson monument (2003) to commemorate the centenary of the motorcycle company and William Harley, the father of the company's co-founder and a native of Littleport.

One of the newer local traditions is a 5 km parkrun at the Littleport Academy campus. The Littleport Society is open to all interested in developing the social, historical, and cultural potential of the community. Other churches in the village – St John Methodist and Vine Community Church – are a short walk from St George Littleport.



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



Top: View of the church from Church Lane. Middle: St George's entrance doors. Bottom: South windows facade and the Harley-Davidson monument near the church.

## Building

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St George Littleport is Grade II\* listed church building and while there is evidence of prior building from the 14th century, the 15th century edifice is a fine example of Perpendicular architecture. The church building is situated at the centre of Littleport on an elevated site.

The 15th century tower is oldest part of St George Littleport. In the past, a passageway was in the base of the church tower, probably because it was built to the edge of the churchyard. In the 1860s, the church was enlarged when the second nave, aisle on the north side and fixed pews were added. In 1920 a new clock, with Cambridge chimes, was installed in the tower in memory of men who fell in the WWI. The belfry in the tower houses a full peal of eight bells.

The building accommodates 220 people in the pews and on Remembrance Sunday receives about 350 people.

Renovations in the 1970s include installation of WC facilities, kitchen, choir vestry, and parish room behind a stud wall the length of the church. The church building is kept open only on Tuesdays and on Fridays from 10 a.m. to 12 p.m.

## Artefacts

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There is a 15th century stone font by the south door. The door features two carved heads: a prior from a monastery and St. Edmund, King of East Anglia from 855 to 870. A large ironbound chest dated 1672. An unusual 18th century headstone in the form of a weeping figure seated by a tree decorates the east window outside the chancel. There is stained glass in the east window by Geoffrey Webb with signature spiderweb mark, and the south aisle window depicts a life scene in the Fen country. A few pieces of furniture in the church came from the two other former parish churches, St John's and St Matthew's, which were closed and congregations welcomed into St George Littleport.



*High Altar and sitting arrangement in the nave.*

# RUNNING

## Team

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The ministry team of St George includes the vicar, two churchwardens, PCC secretary, treasurer, authorised lay minister, three licensed lay ministers, a children's and families missionary from the Diocese's Changing Market Towns project, retired prison chaplain, and ordained theological college tutor.

## Religious Services

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Services at St George Littleport include Holy Communion, organised on Wednesdays and the second Sunday each month. On the first, third, and fourth Sunday mornings of the month, jointly with Young People's Church, St George Littleport holds a Parish Communion Service. A Messy Church event, attended by 45-50 parents, carers and children, is held in the afternoon of the first Sunday and is suitable for children of all ages.

The joint evening service with St John's Methodist Church at High Street is organised on the second Sunday. On the fourth Sunday of the month the Methodist church and the Vine Community Church come to St George Littleport for a Churches Together evening service. Alive@Five, a worship and teaching service, is held on the fourth Sunday in the month. Thursday evenings are dedicated to Bible studies in the Parish Room.


At present, volunteers provide music and choir at services.

## Parish Share

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In 2018, the parish share expenditure was £41,768.



The image shows the interior of a church. In the foreground, there are rows of dark wooden pews. A red carpet runs down the center aisle. To the right, a large stained glass window with a colorful design is set within a pointed arch. Above the pews, several modern, white, teardrop-shaped pendant lights are suspended from the ceiling. The ceiling features dark wooden beams. In the background, an arched doorway leads outside, where a bright light is visible. A red curtain hangs to the left of the doorway. The walls are light-colored and show some signs of age.

“Being visible in the community and listening to what people ask for and going and seeing what else is around ... I don't think there's any substitute for just being available and listening and saying, well, could we do this? The answer's yes, let's find a way of doing it, let's put this on and see.”

**Revd Howard Robson**  
Vicar

### Fundraising

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**Church fetes.** St George Littleport holds annual Summer and Christmas Fetes. The fetes are organised by church members for the local community and have been the most important fundraiser events.

**Quiz nights, coffee mornings.** Initially organised as social gatherings, these events have become additional occasions to raise funds for St George Littleport.

### Income Generation

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**Arts and Crafts Fair.** The Arts and Crafts Fair was launched in 2016 and is timed to coincide the Harvest festival and celebrate crafting and creativity. Funds are generated from stall holder fees and sales. Three successful fairs to date have generated between £3,000-4,000 per year. St George Littleport has used the funds to purchase a marquee for future fairs and events.

**Concerts.** At Harvest festival and Christmas, St George Littleport hosts music events, e.g., the New Cambridge Singers and Littleport Brass Band. Funds are generated from a percentage of ticket sales.

**Rental income.** At present not an important source of funds, however, renovation plans to create a separate access to the parish room would increase opportunities to hire out the space.

### Communications

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In 2019, St George Littleport launched a new church **website** that provides general information about the church, its history, services and events, updates on the Tower Project, and a photo gallery. The church also posts updates on its **Facebook** page. The village free **newsletter** *Littleport Life* is distributed quarterly to all households in the parish and features news and events at St George Littleport ([www.littleportlife.co.uk](http://www.littleportlife.co.uk)). The church issues monthly **news sheet** *What's On*, displays **posters** on church and village noticeboards, and collects feedback in the Visitors' Book available in the church.

Littleport church has free wi-fi – the mast is installed on the church tower and transmits wireless broadband to the outlying parts of the parish.

“[We are] having a really good name in the community and there’s always more that we can do, but we have purpose for being. I suppose we inculcated an atmosphere of ‘let’s see if we’d like to do this’, ‘let’s see if it’ll work’ and ‘let’s see what relationships we can build out of that’. It’s more than a permission giving environment – it is consciously what can we think of to do. Someone asked, can we do Messy Church – yes, can we do Foodbank – yes, can we do Teatime Church – yes, and they’re all organised by lay people.”

**Revd Howard Robson**  
Vicar



*Kitchen and Parish Room in the church*



# REACH

## Community

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**Social prescribing and community involvement.** St George Littleport is included in the social prescriber's list of social community institutions. The list enables general practitioners and other frontline healthcare professionals to refer patients to local social and community institutions to provide them with a face-to-face conversation about the possibilities and personalised solutions. Littleport church has welcomed referrals to the Soup & Roll and food bank – an independent initiative organised by the village and arranged in the church vestry.

**The Tower Project.** The external stone walls and stone buttresses suffer from weather damage. To renovate the tower, St George Littleport received about £60,000 from private donations and grants, e.g., Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust, Cambridgeshire Community Foundation, English Heritage, Allchurches Trust, The Veneziana Fund, and the Littleport Society. The restoration works commenced in January 2013 and completed in November of the same year.

**Churchyard.** The grassed space in the churchyard is used for outdoor church and community events, e.g., fetes, Teddy Bear Day, and children's play area.

**Food Bank.** St George church hosts the weekly Littleport Independent Food Bank, open between Thursday's and Friday's 10 a.m. – 12 noon. Vouchers are distributed by the church and various organisations in the village.



## Events

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**Café Church.** A social event that offers all age worship with baptisms is held on the second Sunday in the month and occasional fifth Sundays.

**Teatime Church.** A monthly informal event with prayer a hymn and refreshments held on the fourth Sunday in the month.

**Tea & Tots.** Tailored for small children, parents and carers, Tea & Tots provides play, singing, prayer and refreshments on Friday mornings.

**Teddy Bear Day.** Organised in October, the Teddy Bear Day welcomed families to picnic and play, e.g., Teddy Catapult with Teddy First Aid.

**Play & Pray.** A short service with activities and refreshments for young families, hosted at 9.30 a.m. on Tuesdays during term time. Intended for pre-school children the activities blend education, play and prayer, e.g., Bible stories, singing and craft.

**Church fetes and Arts and Crafts Fair** (*See Income Generation*). The annual fetes and Arts and Crafts Fairs have attracted traders and visitors from outside Littleport and increased community interest and motivation.

**Shine!** A monthly crafting group, with Christian reflection and prayer, is held at the church and attended by families and members of other activity groups.

*Pages 10-11: 'Bishop George' inspects the scaffolding; Tower Project restoration works; Shine! crafting group activity; George the Dragon with Jedi Knights at Summer Fair 2017; Flypast over the church; Children at Teddy Bear Day (Photos by Littleport church).*





Top-left: St George's vicar the Revd Howard Robson at Pop Up Church event. Top and middle sections: Messy Church and Teddy Bear Day activities (Photos by Littleport church). Bottom: Space at the back of the nave with information boards.

## Engagement

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**Community survey.** In 2016, St George Littleport launched a survey to assess community attitudes to church building use. Responses highlighted the need to refresh the facilities and suggested communal uses of the building and the need for more opportunities to engage young people.

**Children and Family Missionary.** In 2019, a Children and Family Missionary was appointed to reimagine opportunities for the church ministry and develop new initiatives for families and children. This person has previously been a Pioneer Partner, a diocesan scheme.

**Youth Hub.** A group organised for young people in their 20s convenes at St George Littleport on Tuesday evenings, most of whom have no connection with the church. The churchwarden and children and family missionary currently organise and lead group activities, however, there are plans to recruit a male volunteer and an authorised youth minister for youth to lead the group.

**Pop Up Church and school collaboration.** In partnership with Littleport & East Cambs Academy, St George Littleport provides youth mentoring and a Pop Up Church in the Academy on Friday lunchtimes.

“The Church should be seen in exactly the same way, because the Church is a movement, not an exhibit. The church does need to do ‘churchy stuff’ like services and prayer groups and Bible study because that is where we are fed and replenished – just like all cars need to visit the filling station (or plug socket). But if the church is only ever conducted inside the building, it’s like we’re playing games in garages and that won’t do.”

**Revd Howard Robson**  
Vicar

# REFLECTIONS

## Challenges

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### Vandalism

St George Littleport has suffered from recurring bouts of anti-social behaviour and vandalism. Due to the lack of secure storage facilities, the church is locked when not in use.

### Church building condition

Although the exterior of the church building is in good condition, the interior structure needs repair and redecoration. In addition, the PCC is considering removal of the fixed pews to make the space versatile in the future.

## Lessons Learned

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

The creation of a separate entrance to the parish room will enable the church to be kept open when not in use. In addition, plans to install solar panels on a hidden part of the roof and improve the heating system will increase the attractiveness of the parish room for events.

### To increase opportunities for further church and community integration

Building on the success of the Pop Up Church at the Littleport & East Cambs Academy, the PCC aims to extend church work with 'Thrive!' – a school-based mentoring and training project and replicate StreetKlub (Canterbury, UK) – a street-based pop up Sunday school designed to promote community building and personal development for those struggling to access such opportunities.

### To appreciate and celebrate volunteers

While acknowledging the need for more volunteers, St George Littleport is indebted to all the work and time that current volunteers have given to the church and the community.



“We work with what we’ve got, and we hope that more people will come along because otherwise you spend all your time complaining about what you haven’t got and in reality you’re never going to have enough for everything that we could do. If all they ever hear is me complaining about all the people that we haven’t got, it’s like saying they don’t count.”

**Revd Howard Robson**

Vicar

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

The lay ministry and church members are committed to exploring how various church activities might mutually support each other. There is a group to explore opportunities, encourage information sharing to avoid falling into a ‘silo mentality’, and generate creative solutions. For example, Messy Church, toddler groups, Shine! and baptism opportunities are each promoted at the others, and organisers are attentive to opportunities to promote all events and community benefiting activities at St George Littleport. The Mothers’ Union is especially visible around young families.

#### **To serve the community**

To reach out to all members of the community, especially youth, St George Littleport collaborates with the East Cambridgeshire District Council to offer career advice, employment skills, housing and advice on dealing with addiction.



“The building has compromises; well, we’re going to do church despite the building.

So complaining about the building is not allowed, we’re just realistic about it and we get on despite the building.”

**Revd Howard Robson**  
Vicar

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