

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

ST MARY THE VIRGIN GREAT ABINGTON



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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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: Detail of the stained glass in the south aisle window.

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ST MARY THE VIRGIN GREAT ABINGTON

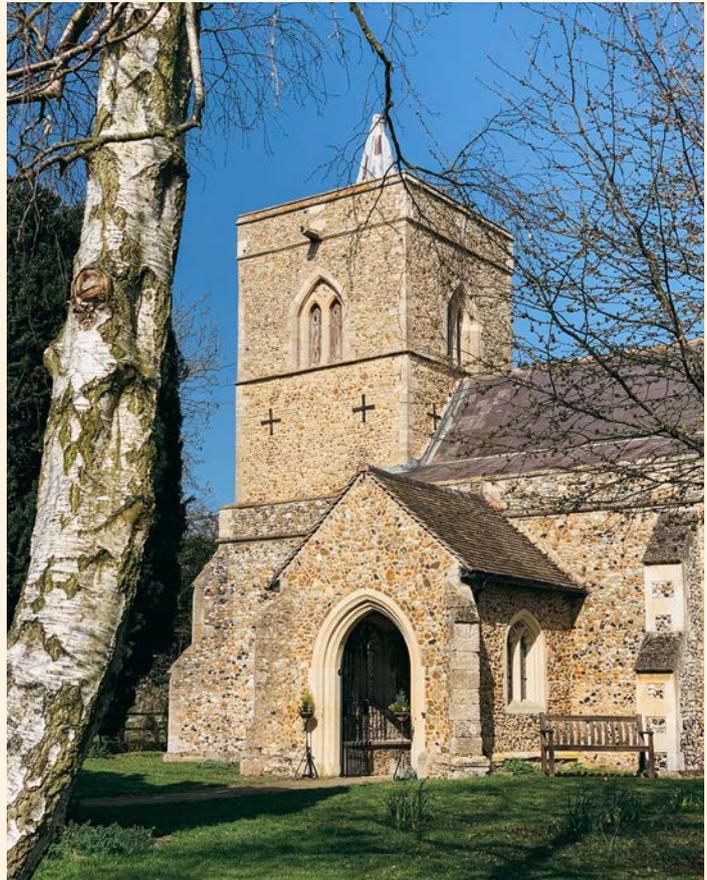
Church Category: Rural

Deanery: Granta

Address: Great Abington, Cambridge,
CB21 6AA

Parish website: [www.theabingtons.org.uk/
churches/great-abington-church](http://www.theabingtons.org.uk/churches/great-abington-church)

Granta Vale Seven Churches webpage:
[www.hildersham.com/the-granta-vale-
group.html](http://www.hildersham.com/the-granta-vale-group.html)



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Grade II* listed; Modern open-back wooden pews; Bell tower; Kitchen set under the tower; Facilities in a new build extension; Lectern with carved ornaments; Marble monument to Sir William Halton; Stone wall carvings and inscriptions

Congregation to Population Ratio: 15 / 816

Fundraising: Church-run 4-year fundraising campaign

Income Generation: Annual garden party; Concerts; Open day events

Communications: Parish website; Webpage of the Granta Vale Seven Churches group; *News from the Pews* page in the village magazine; Church flyers

Community Engagement: Collaboration with St Mary's church in Little Abington; Spacious churchyard available for outdoors events.

ROOTS

Profile

The Abington villages of Great Abington with the church of St Mary the Virgin and Little Abington with St Mary's church are part of the same parish. The churches are located on either side of the River Granta, about 7 miles south-east of Cambridge. The 2016 Sunday Times rated the Abingtons as 'best villages' to live in in the East of England. St Mary the Virgin and St Mary's are part of the Granta Vale group, seven independent churches in South Cambridgeshire in the parishes of Balsham, Hildersham, Weston Colville, West Wrating, and West Wickham.

The Abingtons lie on the historic route from Cambridge to Colchester and bounded on the western side by the Icknield Way that also passes through the nearby village of Linton (See REACH Ely case study: *St Mary The Virgin, Linton*). The Abingtons are conveniently located near three science parks: Granta Park, Babraham Park and the Wellcome Genome Campus and served by good transport infrastructure.

The population of Great Abington is 816 and Little Abington 538 people (2011 census). A development of twenty new homes of mixed tenure on the edge of Great Abington was opened in 2018 with another forty-five in 2019. Amenities in the Abingtons include a village hall, officially named the Abington Institute, a 17th-century public house, recreation ground, football and cricket playing fields, an open-air bowling club, and four schools – a pre-school, a primary school, a school for pupils with special educational needs, and a sixth form college of Cambridge International School.





*Top: St Mary the Virgin, Great Abington. Middle: Noticeboard in High Street; Public footpath to the church.
Bottom: St Mary's, Little Abington.*

Building

The Grade II* listed building of Great Abington's church dates from the 13th century with subsequent architectural additions. Since the 16th century the church has been dedicated to St Mary the Virgin. Because of the flooding in Victorian times, the churchyard is closed to burials. The present capacity of St Mary the Virgin is 175 people. Natural wildlife fencing surrounds the perimeter of the church.

St Mary the Virgin Great Abington is in a secluded position and was lacking in modern facilities. The building comprised one south door entrance, a blocked-up window (former Victorian door), and the area underneath the bell tower used as a cupboard and a storeroom. Investments have however, been made to make the church more welcoming for a wider community. Between April and December 2016 alterations were made to the building: a kitchen underneath the tower, the blocked window re-opened, and a new porch extension built with two WCs and an additional wheelchair-friendly entrance door. During the period of renovation, the church services were held at St Mary's church, Little Abington. Since 2013, volunteers have been responsible for keeping the church open during the day.

Artefacts

Light-weight wooden pews with open back can be used, and removed, for concerts and community events. The pews and the lectern have elaborate carved wooden ornamentation. There are the Norman font and the tomb monument of the knight Sir William Halton lying on his elbow facing the organ. Stone walls have carvings and inscriptions.



Top (Great Abington): Carved wooden ornamentation in the sanctuary; The view of the nave and the organ with a kitchen in the back. Middle (Great Abington): The south wall with boxed pews and the nave with open-back pews. Bottom (Little Abington): Meeting room under the tower; The nave with old pews.

RUNNING

Team

The Granta Vale church group is managed by a Rector. Fifty parishioners are registered on the Electoral Roll and twelve PCC members, including a secretary, an authorised lay minister resident in the parish, as well as a churchwarden and two assistants for each church.

Religious Services

Across the Granta Vale church group, there is a range of worship styles and traditions appealing to a broad variety of tastes and age groups. The Abington churches are used on alternate Sundays to host religious services. The Evensong is provided monthly at Little Abington. The St Mary the Virgin Great Abington congregation is 8-12 people (8 a.m. service) and 15-26 people (10 a.m. service). The congregation is made up of predominantly retired people and a few families.

Both Abington churches sustain good relationships with the United Reform Church in Little Abington occasionally sharing ecumenical services, and with Great Abington primary school where members of the PCC regularly contribute to school assemblies. Special schools' services, such as Harvest, Christmas and Easter, take place in St Mary the Virgin church.

Parish Share

The annual expenditure of St Mary the Virgin and St Mary's church into the benefice is £22,000.



*Religious services and indoor and outdoor concert and community events at St Mary the Virgin, Great Abington.
Photo by St Mary the Virgin, Great Abington.*



Porch extension with WC facilities; Full kitchen set under the bell tower. Opposite page: Inscriptions on church walls; The marble monument to Sir William Halton.

Fundraising

In 2013, the churches of St Mary the Virgin and St Mary's collaborated to raise £90,000 for the church building renovations. After briefings with an architect, it was decided that the blocked window should be re-opened and a facilities extension constructed of matching field stone. The more elaborate designs increased projected expenses to £190,000.

“We said, well, that’s not the problem, let’s do what’s right for the community and for the church. Let’s tackle the finance problem as a separate issue. So it was through our determination and planning that we achieved our goal.”

Tony Collett
Churchwarden

The churchwarden developed a four-strand strategy to explore various fundraising avenues. By 2015, the Abingtons had raised sufficient finance, for example, from grant funding bodies (£100,000), individual donations (£40,000), community events and concerts (£12,000), and the corporate sector (£10,000). The new extension was blessed by the Bishop of the Diocese in early 2017.



The annual expenditure on the upkeep of the church building is £8,000. The generated funds are not usually put aside for restoration or refurbishment. In case of an urgent repair to the chancel, the church can apply to the diocese to draw on a ring-fenced Fabric Fund.

Income Generation

Annually, community events hosted by St Mary the Virgin and St Mary's church jointly generate approximately £6,000. The churches host 3-4 **annual events / concerts** (generating circa £1,000 per concert); An annual **Vicarage Garden Party** (in the style of a church fete) generating £1,800; and **Summer Open Garden** events with plant and refreshment sales generating £1,000.

Communications

Parish website; The Abington churches contribute a page **News from the Pews** in the monthly village magazine *The Abingtons & Hildersham News*; **Flyers** delivered to households; The Abingtons have developed a **subscription database** of concerts attendees for future communications.

REACH

Community

Churchyard. Although the church building is not a primary venue for family events due to the availability of the village hall, St Mary the Virgin Great Abington benefits from having an enclosed churchyard that is suitable for community and family events. While Little Abington has an open churchyard and a Garden of Remembrance for interment of ashes, the de-registered churchyard means that St Mary the Virgin churchyard is closed to new burials but remains consecrated. Since the burials are quite old, there is less risk of relatives of graves being upset by the recreational use of the churchyard. During outdoor events, the church can erect marquees and host barbeques, pre-reception wedding and christening events. In addition, the recreation ground, a green open field adjacent to the church building, provides more space for outdoor events.

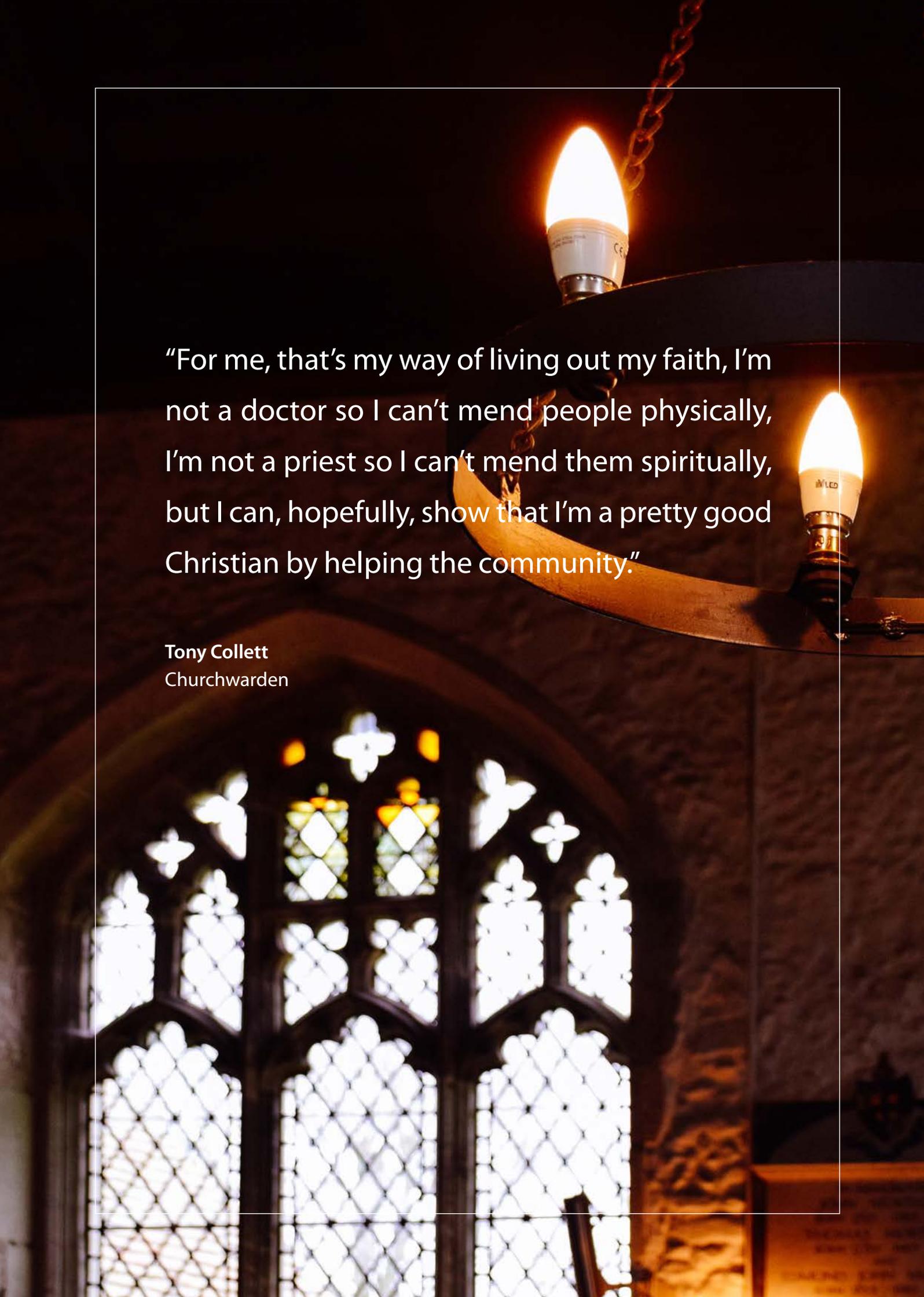
Events

Great Abington is known as an active church that organises a few community-oriented events. **Mothers and Tots Lunch** is organised bi-monthly in the church and is tailored for new parents and their children, where mothers can share their experiences and obtain help and prayer. There is **Space To Be**, a group for contemplation and quiet time. The church, its grounds, and the village hall are both used for **Messy Church**. The outdoor variation – **Mossy Church** – is organised in the Abington Woods, a shared open space for the local community and an outdoor learning centre. Storytelling afternoons, Summer Play Scheme, picnics, Lantern Walk, tea, carols, camping with the yurts are some of the year-round activities in the Woods. Local volunteers have plans to make over the **Garden of Peace** in the Woods to create a peaceful place for quiet contemplation or prayer.

Engagement

Focus on families and younger people. In March 2019, Great Abington welcomed a new licensed pioneer lay minister to develop more church activities tailored for young families and children. A 'Breakfast Café Church' and a music centred activity are amongst those being considered.

Integration into village activities. Key personnel of the two churches are supporters and/or organisers of 37 village clubs and activities such as the Forget-Me-Not Club for elderly people, Art Group, Glams Choir that uses the church space for their practice, Scouts, Rivercare, Social Club, Walking Institute, Helping Hands, quiz nights, and running the café in the village hall, to name a few. *'There is always an intermeshing between the people who do that and church members,'* adds Mr Collett.



“For me, that’s my way of living out my faith, I’m not a doctor so I can’t mend people physically, I’m not a priest so I can’t mend them spiritually, but I can, hopefully, show that I’m a pretty good Christian by helping the community.”

Tony Collett
Churchwarden

REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Church location

The secluded location of St Mary the Virgin means that the church building and churchyard are quiet and peaceful and whilst it does not have a kerbside visibility it is recognised as a church with several special features. So visitors tend to be those with knowledge or interest in historical buildings and churches and those that use the public footpath between the two villages.

Youth engagement

With the exceptions of Easter and Christmas services, the church in Great Abington has struggled to attract younger

people to religious services, community concerts and events.

Income generation

Great Abington is open to income generation and will consider rental income from any group except those whose ethos is not in keeping with the church.

Lack of volunteers

There are insufficient volunteer staff to develop and manage fundraising and community events. To encourage people to join the church and volunteer, St Mary the Virgin advertised, with limited success, for volunteers in the village magazine.

“We’ve asked for volunteers and no one’s really come forward. There needs to be a specific project where someone is charged to go out and do it... Because vaguely asking just doesn’t work.”

Tony Collett and Graham Ross
Churchwardens

Lessons Learned

To respond to community demand for keeping the churches open.

When the Granta Vale group benefice introduced a single benefice-wide service on the first Sunday of each month, this eliminated the services on that day in both of the Abingtons. In response to the community's request an Evensong is held on alternate months and a mid-week communion service is held monthly.

To proactively encourage more volunteering and community engagement.

To increase church building use and attract and sustain volunteering, the creation of a Friends of the Church group is under consideration.

To apply transferable skills in church management.

The marketing experience of the churchwarden at St Mary the Virgin was beneficial to the fundraising programme, especially the preparation and submission of applications to funders and encouraging individuals to donate.

To adapt the church building for more flexible use.

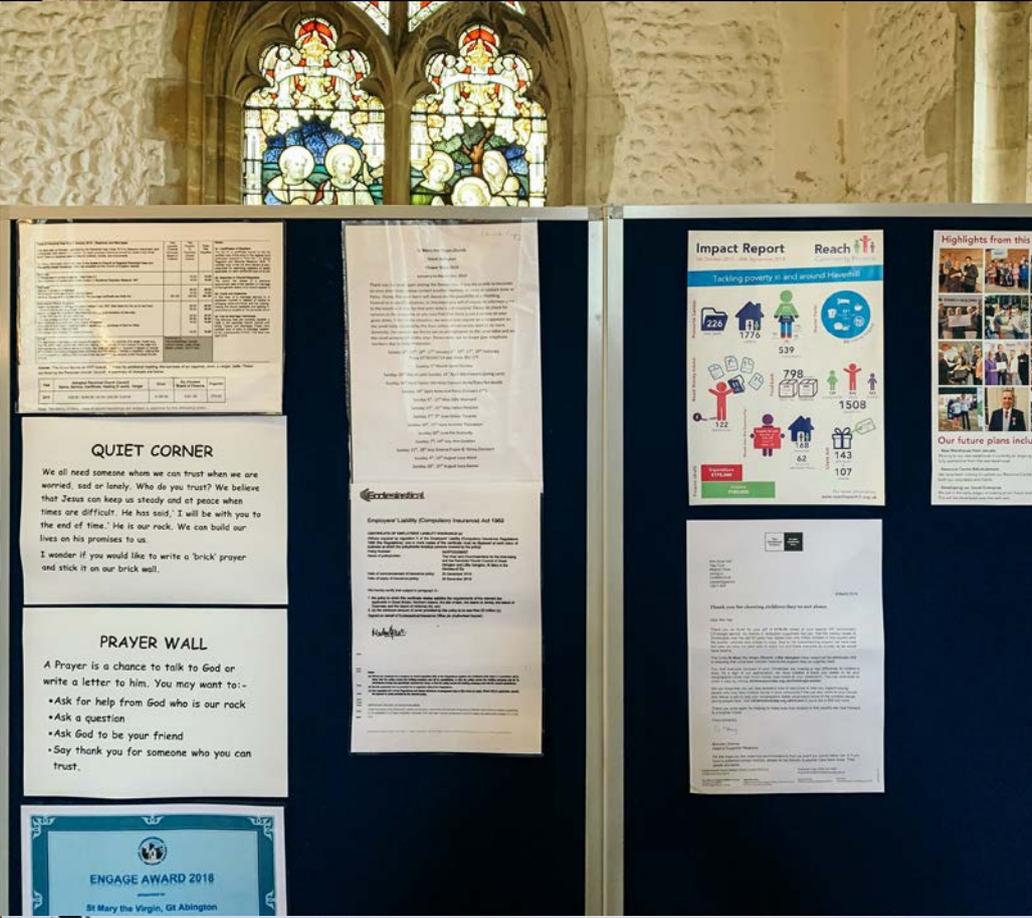
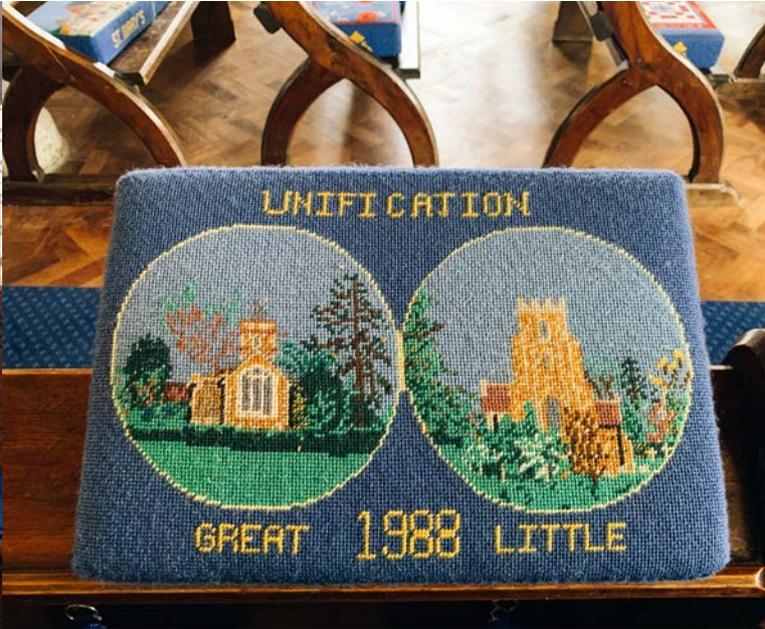
The new church facilities have significantly expanded opportunities for increased community engagement and church building use, for example, hosting family events. At present, the PCC is considering replacing the portable wooden pews with chairs to bring even more flexibility to the building. However, the potential negative impact on church ambience needs to be managed.

To find cost-effective solutions in innovation.

The installation of facilities in old church building requires water supply and sewerage removal. In collaboration with a local farmer, St Mary the Virgin was able to manage costs by connecting to existing waste removal infrastructure.

To be open to people who might feel overwhelmed or intimidated by the church.

The Abington churches encountered an issue of setting up a prayer corner in memory of a previous church member. In Little Abington church, it was decided to arrange it under the bell tower near the church entrance as setting it by the altar might be intimidating for general visitors.



Top: The wooden ornamentation on the lectern; The kneeler commemorating the unification of parishes. Middle: Great Abington's church decorated for a family event; Information boards in Great Abington. Bottom: The organ; The view of Great Abington from the tower of St Mary's, Little Abington.

“I think part of non-church going people are slightly in awe of the church, or they feel they shouldn't go in there, they don't know what it's like, and they don't feel entirely relaxed in it... People were nervous about going up towards the altar because [they] wanted to just go, sit down and think, and they might be a bit put off if they weren't regularly used to being in a church and if they were confident.”

Graham Ross
Churchwarden

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