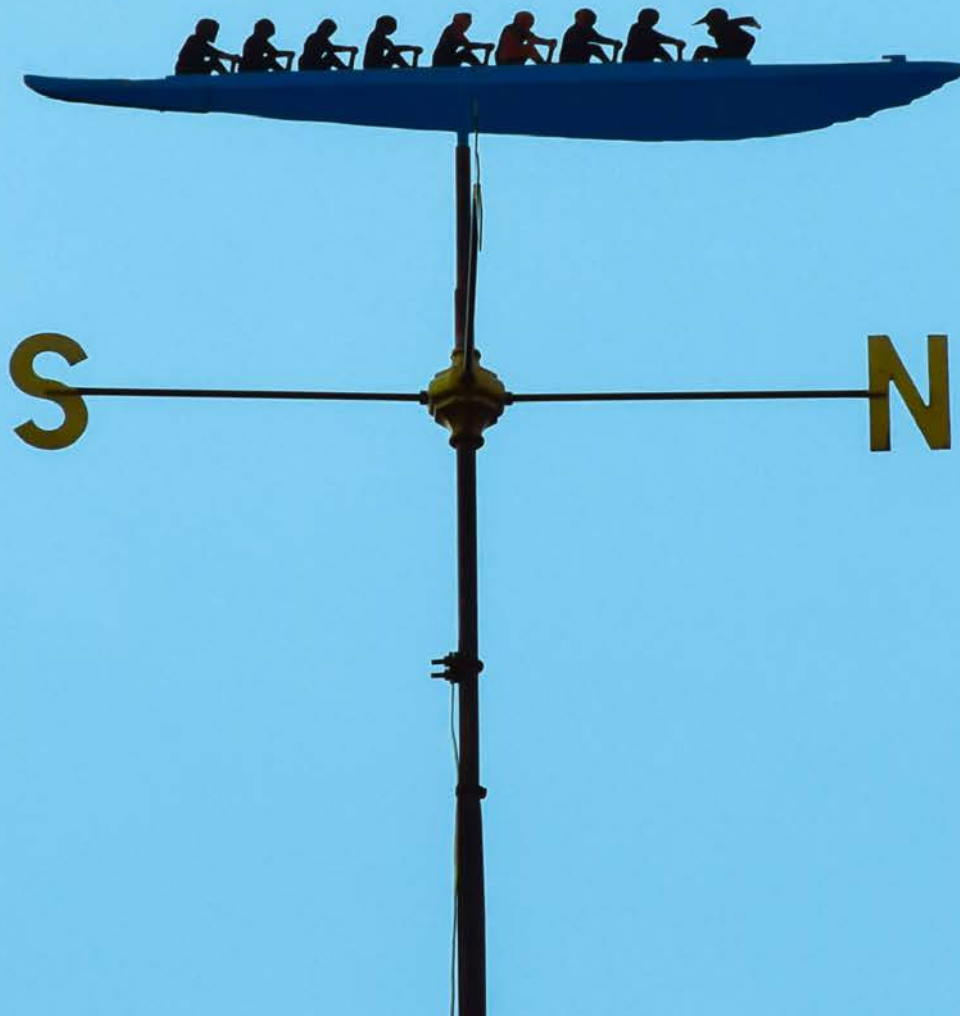


Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

ST MARY THE VIRGIN FEN DITTON



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**

*with the generous support of Allchurches Trust
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: Fen Ditton church's weatherwane in the form of the rowing eight.

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ST MARY THE VIRGIN FEN DITTON

Church Category: Rural

Deanery: Cambridge North

Address: Church Street, Fen Ditton,
Cambridge CB5 8ST

Civil Parish Council website:
www.fenditton-pc.org.uk

A Church Near You database:
www.achurchnearyou.com/church/13799



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Grade II* listed; Church Hall (sold October 2019); Hospitality area facilities; Limited church opening times; Historical connection with boat races; Rowing eight weathervane on church tower; 12th century masonry survivals

Congregation to Population Ratio: : 42 / 3,652

Fundraising: Asset sale; Microfundraising

Income Generation: Church fete; BBQ; quizzes; concerts

Communications: Noticeboard; Civil Parish Council website and newsletter; Webpage on *A Church Near You* database; Church magazine *New Life*; Information boards in the church

Community Engagement: Community survey.

ROOTS



Profile

Fen Ditton is a small village, population 760 (2011), to the north-east of Cambridge and immediately outside the city boundary. Despite proximity to Cambridge, Fen Ditton has an archetypal village appeal and atmosphere. The parish of St Mary the Virgin Fen Ditton, population 3,652 (2018), includes Fen Ditton village and a significant portion of the adjacent outskirts of the city of Cambridge. St Mary the Virgin church is located on a small hill adjacent to the River Cam and overlooking Ditton Meadows.

Fen Ditton village has good transportation access to a major road and has access to a new railway station, Cambridge North. A row of old Almshouses and a Georgian house, formerly the rectory, are located close to St Mary the Virgin church. Village amenities include three public houses, a primary school, and the Recreation Ground with a cricket pitch, several football pitches, basketball court, children's playground, and grassland for sporting and leisure uses. The village cricket team plays home games on the Recreation Ground.

Two main community gathering spaces in Fen Ditton are the Church Hall and the Pavilion. The Church Hall is owned by St Mary the Virgin, registered as a separate charity, and managed by a Board of Trustees that include the resident priest-in-charge (Chair) and PCC members. The Pavilion, owned by the Fen Ditton Recreation Ground Trust, is set in the Recreation Ground, with two pedestrian access points, and is a short walk from the church.

To fund a Church Reordering Project (*See Fundraising*), the Trustees have sold the Church Hall. As part of the condition of sale, the hall is still available for bona fide users until 2029, or until the Pavilion redevelopment project is completed—whichever is sooner.



*Top: South side of the church building. Middle: View of Fen Ditton church from the meadows.
Bottom: Old Church Hall and Village Pavilion (Photo by Fen Ditton church)*

Building

The church is of 12th century origin, with the tower dating from the 13th century, dedicated to St Mary the Virgin in 1515. The west end of the church building was rebuilt in the Victorian period. The Grade II* listed building is constructed from Barnack stone and rubble with clunch and limestone dressings. The belfry houses eight bells and a new set of bells were hung in the 1980s.

The church entrance is wheelchair accessible via a gate beyond the main stepped churchyard path on Church Street, and the PCC is currently looking at ways to improve access. Inside the church, the south aisle rear is arranged as a small hospitality area with kettles (no plumbed facilities), comfortable seating, books, toys and craft products, as well as a space for pushchairs and buggies. The north aisle rear is partitioned for the choir and clergy vestries and a WC. The building can accommodate 150 people. The churchyard, closed for burials since the 1890s, is open for the interment of ashes only.

St Mary the Virgin is normally open to visitors before and after services on Sundays, on Saturday mornings for church cleaning, and on the last Tuesday morning of each month for Community

Coffee Mornings. In addition, there are various 'open church' events during the year, especially in the summer. To access the church at other times, visitors can contact keyholders. The Church Hall, which belonged to the church until the sale in 2019, was originally part of the Rector's garden and was built in the 1910s.

Artefacts

As the church tower is visible from the River Cam, St Mary the Virgin has historical connections with the life of the River Cam. The Bumps, the University of Cambridge colleges' annual boat races, bring plenty of visitors to the adjacent riverbanks and grassland. During the academic year, the river is used by the rowing clubs. Architecturally, the association with the River Cam is expressed in the west tower weathervane designed in the form of a rowing eight. Inside the church, a riverside scene is depicted in the west window's stained glass.

Other artefacts include the 14th century octagonal font, the WWI memorial on the south wall, medieval moulded stonework in the churchyard walls, and some original 12th century masonry survives.



Top: View towards the east window from the nave. Middle: High Altar. Bottom: View of the church from the chancel.

RUNNING

Team

The part-time priest-in-charge is responsible for St Mary the Virgin Fen Ditton and the neighbouring village parishes of St Peter Horningsea and All Saints Teversham. Two volunteer churchwardens support the priest-in-charge and the community. In addition, the church has a reader who takes services and two associate self-supporting priests (one retired, one a busy academic) who support through taking services and pastoral work.

Religious Services

The regular Sunday service – a Parish Eucharist, sung Communion with Common Worship – is held in the morning. The Service of the Word is on the third Sunday in the month. Services on the last Sunday in the month rotate between the three parishes (*See Team*). Quiet Holy Communion is organised every Wednesday at noon. Further, there are two mid-week groups: a Bible Reading Group that meets on alternate Thursdays in the church; and a Prayer Group that convenes on alternate Wednesday mornings in the church. The group events are advertised on posters at the church. Since the 1930s until the 1990s, St Mary the Virgin church held a traditional annual service for rowers in July.

“There are other people who have been here for a very long time, who do live in the parish, who believe in supporting their parish church. I would like to know why they come. I think they come to see their friends, I think they come to pray. But there’s nothing distinctive in the worship that we offer, that would distinguish it from other churches around.”

Revd Dr Alun Ford
Priest-in-charge





Parish Share

In 2019, the annual parish share expenditure was £22,993.

Fundraising

Asset sale. The Church Hall and the Pavilion have until recently both been fundraising to improve their facilities. It was the PCC's view that two similar large-scale projects within a short walk of each other, each seeking approximately £250,000, were unlikely to attract the necessary funding. It was proposed therefore that the Church throw its weight behind the village's efforts by shelving the Church Hall project and bringing the hall to the market.

The Hall Trustees (who are all members of the PCC) would be able to fulfil the charitable objects of the church hall trust by using the funds generated from the sale to re-order the church to provide space for community use in addition to worship. The sale has now been completed. As a condition of sale, the old Church Hall remains available for community use for ten years or until the Pavilion project is completed, whichever is sooner.

Micro Fundraising. St Mary the Virgin Fen Ditton has signed up for EasyFundraising (www.easyfundraising.org.uk), the UK's charity shopping fundraising initiative, working in partnership with many retailers, that helps charities raise funds by shopping online. Every online purchase made by signed up customers brings 1-2% of the sale towards the church.



Panoramic view of Ditton Meadows on the banks of the River Cam with footpaths to Fen Ditton

Income Generation

Church fete generate funds towards the upkeep of the church. The fundraising activities across the year generated £4,023 in 2018.

Church charity BBQ and quiz evenings are organised in a local public house.

Concerts. Recent concerts have included a choral festival over a weekend with Trinity College choir singing at Fen Ditton church and the St John's Voices singing at Horningsea. Fen Ditton church has also hosted the St Philip's Singers for several concerts.

Communications

Local news and information, including on church events, are published on the Fen Ditton **civil parish council website**. The church does not have its own website but has a presence in the Church of England database 'A Church Near You'. There are plans to purchase church management software and develop a joint website of the three parishes.

Civil parish council **newsletter** is published twice a year and lists community announcements, events calendar, council plans, and contact information. The three parishes – Fen Ditton, Horningsea and Teversham – publish a **magazine** *New Life*, with church and other community news, available by subscription (£4 for 10 issues per year). Volunteers help to edit, collate materials for publication, and distribute the magazine to village residents. **Notice sheets** are published weekly. Public **information boards** in the church illustrate the history of the church and its artefacts. The church **noticeboards** are by the main entrance to the churchyard and in the porch by the south door entrance.

REACH

Community

Church Hall had a large indoor space to accommodate 70-100 people, small well-equipped kitchen, WC facilities, a smaller upstairs room for 12 people, car parking space on forecourt and cycle racks. For the strategic reasons outlined about, it has been deemed best to bring the Church Hall to market and to fulfil its charitable objects by re-ordering the church.

Church Reordering Project. The funds generated from the sale of the Church Hall and land will be used to renovate St Mary the Virgin church. The plan is to create a high quality and easily heated liturgical space for worship, hospitality, and community events. The aim is to make the church space more flexible, welcoming and convenient for community use, e.g., Mother and Toddler groups, elderly people get-togethers, and after-school clubs.

“For the church to be used two or three times a week, that’s all it needs, to have a little steady stream of stuff coming in. I think if people can see that the church is offering something, they will be more inclined to favour it. But here, it doesn’t really offer anything, which means that people think we’re always out there with our begging bowls.”

Revd Dr Alun Ford
Priest-in-charge

Church-Community Partnership. The Church Hall and the Recreation Ground Pavilion are located very close to each other and the Hall Trustees have sought to act strategically for the good of the parish.

“We need to be able to keep the church open, because we cannot keep it open at the moment, and it is a very popular destination for people coming along the river.”

Revd Dr Alun Ford
Priest-in-charge



Events

Activity groups. St Mary the Virgin accommodates several village activity groups, including the bell-ringers, choir and flower arrangers.

Activities for wider communities. St Mary the Virgin offers after-service **refreshments** at all services open to everyone. In addition, on the last Tuesday of each month, the church is open to everyone for **Community Coffee Mornings** with refreshments where people can socialise. In addition, every summer during The Bumps races on the river, the church is kept open and offers hospitality for walkers.

Medieval Fair. In 2017, Fen Ditton village organised the Medieval Fair on the Recreation ground to celebrate the rich history of the community and the arrival of a new priest to St Mary the Virgin church. Villagers of all ages were dressed in medieval costumes. The priest-in-charge opened the festivities, which featured medieval dancers, Viking reenactment, a falconry display, games, craftsmen demonstrations, history treasure train and other entertainment. The Fair concluded with the ceilidh and fireworks. The event was supported by generous donations from local businesses, residents, and advertisers.

Pet Blessing Service. Residents of all three parishes are invited to an annual 'pet blessing' service and dog walk. The pet blessing service is popular and well attended.

Engagement

Community survey. In 2018, St Mary the Virgin conducted a survey to canvass opinion from the local community with regard to the use of the church building and the churchyard. The community expressed strong interest in activities for parents and toddlers and elderly people to tackle isolation and loneliness. Community suggestions for church building use included lectures, educational sessions, art displays, concerts, and for the church yard included children-friendly activities, e.g., wildlife and conservation projects.

Focus on families and younger people. As the Family Holy Communion service for young families with children was not particularly successful, Fen Ditton church regularly involves young people in others services. The **Sunday Club** is designed to appeal to primary school aged children, and generally meets in the Church Hall on the first Sunday every month except August, joining the end of the morning service. The Sunday Club is run by volunteers from the church and aims to give children a broad experience of the Christian faith. Usually about 8-10 children and parents attend the Sunday Club.



Medieval Fair in Fen Ditton (Photos by Cambridgeshire Live, www.cambridge-news.co.uk)

REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Preserving village identity

According to Cambridge City Council, the population growth of Cambridge is likely to encroach on Fen Ditton village. The most likely impact is that Fen Ditton will lose its village identity and become one of the 'necklace' villages of Cambridge. The threat of village identity loss is a deep concern to village residents.

Reconnection with the parish

The extent of St Mary the Virgin church engagement with the broader parish community has fluctuated. For example, St Mary the Virgin and the Christ the Redeemer used to hold joint services when they were both part of Fen Ditton parish. The joint services helped to foster and maintain connections between congregations in the village and the city. In the 1990s, new parish boundaries were set and Christ the Redeemer church was established as part of the separate parish. The resulting St Mary the Virgin congregation decline has weakened cross-community links. In making Fen Ditton a 'village church' caused the loss of its way as a 'parish church' that can minister to village and city.

Church location

The growth of the parish population and further development of the Cambridge city has created new socially active locations in the parish away from St Mary the Virgin. The outcome is that the church is perceived to be peripheral to the congregation. *'The church is not in the centre, it's not where the people are,'* adds Revd Dr Ford.

Irregular income generation

At present, St Mary the Virgin church uses reserve funds to pay for ministry.

Small parish team

The shared priest-in-charge and parish volunteers are responsible for organising and delivering all parish obligations and commitments. As the priest-in-charge serves three churches, with a small self-supporting ministry team, and there is no paid administrative support, volunteers and lay leaders are essential in the delivery of some worship and other services.

Church building and churchyard condition

The layout of the church building needs updating to accommodate more flexible use, e.g., lack of secure storage facilities in the church means that the church building is closed outside service hours and events. The lack of a barrier between the bell-ringing area and the church sanctuary disturbs the gathering congregation and detracts from peaceful preparation for worship. The fabric of the building needs modernisation, e.g., the heating system is inefficient. Finally, having the churchyard not suitable for outdoor events such as the Church fete and children's activities, Fen Ditton church uses churchyard spaces of other churches in the group, at Horningsea and Teversham.

“We can make this radical intervention in terms of selling the [church] hall, and then we can try and reorder, and then we’ve got a space that we can begin to offer something in.”

Revd Dr Alun Ford
Priest-in-charge



Lessons Learned

To increase opportunities for further church and community integration

With the exception of the longstanding coffee mornings, midweek prayer group, and Bible Study group, the current condition of the church building limits the opportunities for church community engagement opportunities. The sale of the Church Hall and the Church Reordering Project have been designed to increase opportunities for the church building to be used for new activity groups and community engagement events.

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

While the Church Reordering Project aims to increase community use of the church building, it is currently at the early stage of planning grant application submissions.

To foster collaboration links with other churches and community groups

The collaboration between St Mary the Virgin church and the Recreation Ground Trust is designed to support the needs of the best of the village. The Pavilion redevelopment will ensure the provision of community meeting spaces in the village. Decisions have been made by the PCC and Hall Trustees that are mindful at a strategic level. At present, St Mary the Virgin collaborates closely with sister parishes of St Peter Horningsea and All Saints Teversham. Fen Ditton church is also reaching out to other churches in Cambridge to seek potential strategic partnership.



FEN DITTON



THE CHURCH. 1890. The church is a fine specimen of the Perpendicular style, and is one of the best in the county. It was built by the Fenmen, and is a fine example of their architecture. The tower is a fine specimen of the Perpendicular style, and is one of the best in the county. It was built by the Fenmen, and is a fine example of their architecture.



VIEW FROM ROAD. 1890. The view from the road is a fine specimen of the Perpendicular style, and is one of the best in the county. It was built by the Fenmen, and is a fine example of their architecture.



SPORTSMEN AT CHURCH L. 1890. The sportsmen are gathered at the church, and are a fine specimen of the Perpendicular style, and is one of the best in the county. It was built by the Fenmen, and is a fine example of their architecture.



THE RIVER. 1890. The river is a fine specimen of the Perpendicular style, and is one of the best in the county. It was built by the Fenmen, and is a fine example of their architecture.

“I’d want [the church] open all day, from morning prayer to evening prayer. I’d like there to be an office so that the three parishes can function like proper churches. I’d like there to be meeting rooms that are used, I’d like the main space to be used two or three times a week for big activities, for hospitality, for after school clubs, for whatever. Just so that people can come into the church and own it as their building, and then make the transition to worship.”

Revd Dr Alun Ford

Priest-in-charge

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