

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets  
for the Common Good

# ST JAMES LITTLE PAXTON



*Text, design and photography*

**Dr Timur Alexandrov**

Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation  
Cambridge Judge Business School

**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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Diocese of Ely

*The project is implemented by*

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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: St James church's mascot Little Jimmy.*

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# ST JAMES LITTLE PAXTON

**Church Category:** Rural

**Deanery:** St Neots

**Address:** High St, Little Paxton,  
St Neots PE19 6NF

**Website:** [www.thepaxtonsbenefice.org/  
churches/littlepaxton](http://www.thepaxtonsbenefice.org/churches/littlepaxton)



## Summary

**Buildings and Artefacts:** Grade II\* listed building; Major refurbishment project 2010-11; New south porch with servery, storage space and WC facilities; Refurbished peal of six bells; Underfloor heating; Modern lighting; Stackable chairs replaced pews; 13th-century font; South doorway tympanum; Wall painting; Monuments; Medieval graffiti; Queen's Diamond Jubilee time capsule

**Congregation to Population Ratio:** 50 / 3,427

**Fundraising:** Fundraising campaign 'Church for Tomorrow' (2008); Grants; Loans; Sale of Victorian pews; Individual sponsorship; Parish giving scheme; Contactless donations

**Income Generation:** Rental donations; Concerts; German Christmas Market; Cinema screening

**Communications:** Benefice website; Facebook page; Newsletters; Monthly benefice magazine; Church footfall book; Noticeboards

**Community Engagement:** Little Paxton Pictures; Bell-ringing team; Tots and Carers; Exercise classes; Simply Saturday monthly Lunch Club; Knit, Stitch & Natter group; German Christmas Market; Concerts; Special cinema screening with dementia group; Collaboration with school assemblies; Social media engagement with benefice Facebook page and website; Pastoral care as requested.

# ROOTS

## Profile

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Little Paxton is a village and civil parish that lies 8 km (5 miles) south of Huntingdon and 1.7 miles (2.7 km) north of St Neots in the district of Huntingdonshire at the western edge of Cambridgeshire.

In 1883, there were three paper mills on the River Ouse, one of which was at Little Paxton. Converted from a former medieval corn-grinding mill, the paper-making business employed hundreds of local people. In 1912, when 200 people were employed at the mill, many of the wooden buildings were destroyed in a fire, but rebuilding using brick and improving the equipment made the mill safer and more profitable. By 1913, the mill produced the finest grades of papers. However, its fortunes declined during the economic depression after the 1920s and it closed down in 1939. During the Second World War, Wigmore Teape evacuated their paper mill at Dover and moved to the safer inland site in Little Paxton. The mill was converted to manufacture nylon but had closed down by 1948.

Until the 1970s, Little Paxton was a minor village and the parish church was under threat of closure. The building of a housing estate and a junior school revived its fortunes and the establishment of the Paxton Pits Nature Reserve around part of the nearby gravel pits has brought visitors to the village. The population of Little Paxton was 3,244 in 1,360 households at the 2011 census (about 4,500 in 2020), which includes the nearby settlement of Southoe. The nearest villages are Diddington, Southoe and Hail Weston.

The A1 road lies just to the west of Little Paxton, running roughly from south-west to north through the parish, and the A14 runs to the north, allowing access to the Midlands and the eastern counties. The nearest railway station is at St Neots, which is on the East Coast Main Line. The River Great Ouse runs along the western boundary of the village.

Village amenities include a primary school, a number of shops and small businesses, a public house, a community hub, a village hall, playing field and a scout hut. Paxton Pits Nature Reserve extends to more than 280 hectares (700 acres) and provides not only a wildlife reserve but a variety of water sports, including sailing and waterskiing, and fishing. St James' church sits at the centre of the old village and Kingfisher Church, a church plant from St Neots Evangelical Church, holds services in Little Paxton Primary School on Sundays.







*Clockwise from top-left: St James' church west tower; South porch; Public footpath and church entrance.*



## Building

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The parish church at Little Paxton is dedicated to Saint James and is a Grade II\* listed building. It consists of a chancel, nave, south aisle, west tower and a north porch. The walls are constructed from pebble rubble, ironstone and limestone dressings, with slate and tile roofs. St James' church was not mentioned in the Domesday Book, but there is evidence of a stone church on the site by the end of the 12th century, forming what is now the chancel.

Originally, this church was a chapel of ease to the minster church of Great Paxton so that the priests would have had to travel between the two buildings. The west tower was built in around 1400 and the south aisle in around 1500. The north wall is said to have been knocked down during the civil wars of 1642-46 but was rebuilt and much modified in 1849 when the church was completely restored. During this restoration, an arcade of four bays with segmental-pointed arches on octagonal piers with moulded capitals was installed in the south aisle.

In 1998, work took place to build a south porch, providing much-needed storage space, a small servery with a basin and water heater and an accessible WC. A major refurbishment project in 2010–11, which had some National Lottery funding, saw the original bells restored, the acquisition of two-second hand bells, and a new bell cast. A new bell ringing chamber was constructed and a glass screen installed enclosing the vestry. The church now has a clock striking bell and a peal of six bells; the new bells were rung for the first time in November 2011. At the same time, damp issues were resolved. The carpeted floor now houses pipes as part of an underfloor heating system and modern electrical installations provide power points and effective lighting. Victorian pews have been replaced by solid oak stackable chairs in order to create a more useable space for services and community events. The pitch pine pews were sold and raised a considerable sum towards the restoration project.

The church is located centrally in the High Street in the oldest part of the village and normally the church with an adjoining churchyard is open most days for community events. The building can accommodate about 120 people.





Top: St James' church with Victorian pews before renovation in 2006; Looking down at nave from bell-ringing platform (Photos by [www.st-neots.ccan.co.uk](http://www.st-neots.ccan.co.uk)). Middle: View towards the chancel from the nave with rearranged chairs. Bottom: View from the nave towards West window.

“In 2008, we invited the Ely DAC to come out to the church to discuss how we might make more flexible space. To our surprise, our archdeacon suggested that we removed all pews, not just a few in one aisle. The idea was created of making the whole of the nave flexible space and a questionnaire to villagers provided us with many ideas for what might take place in that space. Although it wasn't until 2012 that the project saw completion, the venture generated a lot of interest in Little Paxton. It is being used far more widely than we could ever have imagined.”

Revd Canon Annette Reed  
Vicar

### Artefacts

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St James' church has a 13th-century font with plain octagonal bowl on central chamfered shaft with three small octagonal shafts. The font cover is of painted oak and dates to the 17th century. There is a monument to Robert Throckmorton, 1698-99. A medieval wall painting adjacent to the pulpit was found during the most recent renovations and is now preserved behind a wooden panel. In the nave, the tower buttresses are inside the church indicating that the tower was constructed before the nave. Above the chancel arch on a painted and gilded board is a royal coat of arms. It bears the date 1610 but seems to be more appropriate for a period later in the Hanoverian dynasty. It was a legal requirement for all churches to display the royal arms until Charles II and still very common after that until the Victorian period. Beside a window in the south wall of the chancel there is some medieval graffiti which looks remarkably like a fine example of the Suffolk Punch horse of today. The original Norman stonework doorway and a 12th-century fine-carved tympanum (a shaped stone between the lintel and the semi-circular arch above main entrance door), showing Christ the Good Shepherd with the lamb, a large cross enclosed in a circle, and a wolf pursuing a lamb, grace the main south entrance to the church through a modern porch (*see page 20*).

Before the new floor was fully laid in June 2012, a time capsule was buried. It contains pictures of the church community, the restoration work, the Queen's Diamond Jubilee celebrations in the village, a church magazine and some items prepared by the children of Little Paxton School.



# RUNNING

## Team

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St James Little Paxton is a member of the Paxtons Benefice, which also includes Great Paxton (Holy Trinity) with Diddington (St Laurence's) and Southoe (St Leonard's). The ministry team includes the vicar, who has responsibility for all four churches within the Benefice, a secretary, and a salaried benefice administrator. The Benefice has four lay ministers and there are two churchwardens who look after the church.

## Religious Services

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Sunday services include the sung Eucharist every first Sunday at noon and every second, third and fourth Sunday at 9.15 a.m. There is a family friendly Forty Minutes service on the first Sunday at 10.45 a.m. and short services are held every second, third, fourth and fifth Wednesdays at 10 a.m. The vicar holds assemblies in local schools and regularly visits the local retirement home. Attendance numbers at Sunday services range from between 30 and 50.

**Covid-19 impact.** In 2020, church services and other activities were temporarily suspended because of the coronavirus pandemic. During national lockdowns, Little Paxton church was keeping in touch with community members via **phone calls** and shared virtual all-age Worship service via **Paxton Benefice YouTube channel**. On the **Benefice Facebook page**, the vicar shared weekly prayer, encouraging stories and videos of learning new skills during the lockdown, and Thoughts for the Day. Licensed Lay Minister Mel Eyeons has also been posting mid-week **You Tube services** for the benefice. A **Facebook group** 'Little Paxton Community Group', formerly known as 'Little Paxton Self-Isolation Support group' (established in March 2020), has evolved into a useful facility for the residents of Little Paxton. Group members (956 people) share news, supporting messages, and community-related issues.

## Parish Share

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In 2019, parish share expenditure was £28,691.



St James' church mascot Little Jimmy in different outfits (Photos by Timur Alexandrov and Paxton Benefice).



### Fundraising

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**Fundraising campaign.** In 2008, St James' church launched a major fundraising campaign 'Church for Tomorrow' (CHUFT). The aim of the project was to carry out major restoration works, initially to the bells and the bell tower, as well as to install underfloor heating and remedy a damp problem. New flooring and lighting provide a welcoming, warm and comfortable centre for worship and community use.

**Grants, loans and sale of pews.** As part of the campaign, the PCC applied for National Lottery funding ('People's Millions') and, via a regional televised competitive process, was successful in obtaining funding of £40,000. Local school children were involved in the campaign, and the headteacher organised a sleepover in the church. The Amey Community Fund provided a grant of £45,000 which paid for the underfloor heating and new lighting system. Personal short-term loans from members of the congregation supplemented the cost, and the sale of pews raised a considerable sum. The PCC were also able to draw on reserves of several thousand pounds. A loan from Cambridge Historic Churches Trust has one more year to run. The whole project cost just over half a million pounds. In addition, the parish council has provided a grant for a more recent cinema project to the tune of £4,500.

**Individual sponsorship.** New chairs were needed following the renovations, and these were funded by individual sponsorship by

local people, with a plaque placed on each chair. The demand from potential sponsors was greater than the number of chairs that could be purchased. The total cost of stackable chairs was £23,000 (£250 per piece).

**Parish giving scheme.** The church has a parish giving scheme and a 100 Club with five monthly draws.

**Contactless donations.** The church uses contactless payments for small donations at christenings and other events.

### Income Generation

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**Rental donations.** Rather than charging rent, the church invites donations for the use of the building, with a suggested donation of £12 per hour. User groups that cannot afford the full amount pay less.

**Concerts** are also funded by donations of ticket prices, which vary according to the type of concert. Little Paxton church is well used by user groups and this raises a significant level of income.

**German Christmas market**, which takes place both in the church and the churchyard, is very well supported and raises over £1,000 each year.

**Regular cinema screenings** raise more than £100 per film. Some of this funding comes from the dementia group, who attend monthly screenings.



Preparations for the Little Paxton Parish Council anniversary exhibition in 2019; View of St James' churchyard with a footpath.



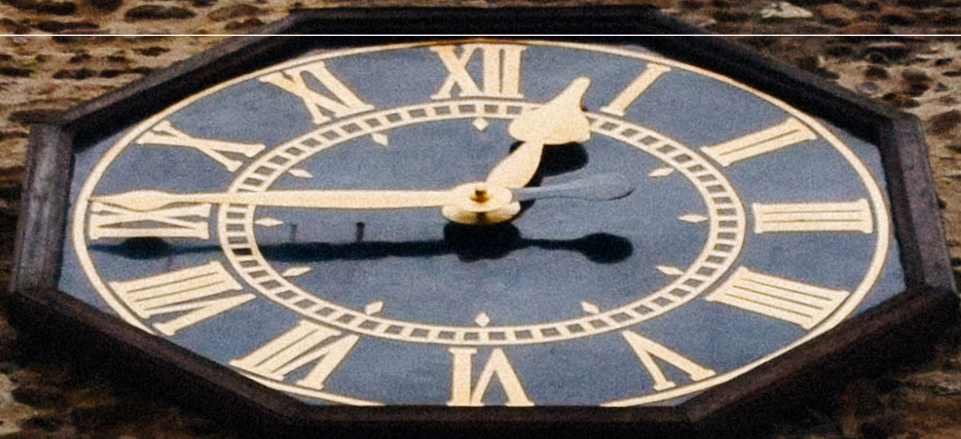
## Communications

Information about Little Paxton church can be found on a Benefice **website** and a Benefice **Facebook page**. A number of **newsletters** are published on the website: these are Quartet, Keeping in Touch and Thoughts on Faith. The PCC used a **questionnaire**, delivered in person to homes in the village, to gather villagers' ideas on how the church might be used by the wider community after the renovation project. Later on, the Facebook page was used to garner support for the bell project. The Bell Appeal had also resulted in considerable publicity in local **newspapers** as well as an appearance on the **televised lottery bid**. When the church is open, a **footfall book** is maintained, which has recorded up to 800 visitors in a month. Church's **noticeboards** are installed at the entrance to the churchyard.



Church noticeboards in the churchyard.





"If you look through the registers, the congregation sizes have remained the same. The good news is we've been able to bring new people in and stay stable. So many people come in here, for some reason, during the week, they get to know the place and they feel very at home."

Revd Canon Annette Reed  
Vicar



# REACH

## Community

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**Little Paxton Pictures.** The church offers regular film days including a monthly showing for a dementia group. Admission is free, but refreshments are sold, and donations are welcomed.

**Bell-ringing Team.** St James' church has a new bell-ringing team whose members meet for practice on a Thursday evening. The team has made a significant contribution to the life of the church.

**Tots and Carers** group meets every Wednesday morning from 10.45 a.m. to 12 p.m.

**Exercise classes.** The church is home to a number of weekly exercise classes, including Pilates, Line Dancing and Active Seniors.

**Simply Saturday.** This is a new venture for adults of all ages in Little Paxton church, with a bring-and-share lunch, companionship and various activities. It meets on the first Saturday of every month from 12.30 to 2.30 p.m. Activities include games, quizzes, music and talks. Donations towards the cost of tea, coffee and heating are invited.

**Knit, Stitch & Natter Group.** This group meets on the second and fourth Wednesdays of the month between 1.30 and 3 p.m.



*Pages 14-15: Handmade models of St James' church and Little Paxton village*

“It’s got to change, those [church attendance] figures that are asked for have got to change to give a true reflection of the life of a church community. I spend time going out to the two schools in the benefice and do a lot of assembly collective worship. I visit the local nursing home. None of that gets [logged]... none of the pastoral work, not just what I do, but that which others undertake, gets logged. I’m amazed how many do come for the festivals. I think these old churches are so valuable for the festivals and occasions.”

**Revd Canon Annette Reed**  
Vicar





## Events

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**German Christmas market.** This pop-up Christmas market has been a popular event. It includes stalls and refreshments, carol singing, a visit from Father Christmas and the switching on of the Christmas lights. It is the latest in a series of pop-up events held at the church.

**Concerts.** Fundraising concerts are held at both the church and the local primary school.

## Engagement

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**Community Survey.** As part of St James' fundraising campaign CHUFT (see *Fundraising*), the PCC had delivered a questionnaire to 300 households prior to the reordering of the church. A church member volunteered to help design and produce the survey with open questions to seek parishioners' views on potential community uses for the church. Prior to having a Facebook page, the church distributed a paper questionnaire to most homes in the village.

Village residents were invited to bring back filled papers to the church or provide feedback via email or post. Overall, the church received back about 50 responses.

**Vicar's parish visits.** In August 2011, during the CHUFT fundraising campaign, Little Paxton church vicar the Revd Canon Annette Reed spent the month knocking on the doors of many homes in the village to raise awareness of, and funds for CHUFT. This challenging initiative received media attention and was covered by the BBC and the local press.

**Collaboration with school assemblies.** The vicar maintains a good relationship with local schools, holding assemblies and welcoming visits to the church by the children. The village school was also involved in the fundraising effort for the new ringing floor, participating in the filming of a slot for a televised lottery bid.

**Church help group.** A large group of volunteers is required to prepare the church for all the events that are held, moving chairs around, and other work.





Clockwise from top-left: Harvest festival; Paxton Benefice vicar the Revd Canon Annette Reed with biodegradable rose confetti donated by community members for wedding ceremonies in the church; Community members Dick Saw and Mary Parnham visiting Little Paxton church on their Ride and Stride cycling challenge in aid of Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust and Southoe Church; Preparations for Christmas in the church (Photos by Paxton Benefice); Renovated area under the West tower (Photo by Timur Alexandrov); Volunteers looking after the churchyard (Photo by Paxton Benefice).



# REFLECTIONS

## Challenges

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### Church capacity

St James Little Paxton is a small church and the vicar's time is in demand given that she is involved with the four churches within the Benefice, meaning that it would not be possible to introduce any further weekly services. The church is at full capacity with 120 people at a service, which can happen in the case of larger funerals. People sometimes have to be turned away from special events, such as the Christingle service. In addition, the church building is now very well used by the community that there is little scope for the introduction of any additional clubs or groups.

### Lack of personnel

The vicar is responsible for the four churches within the Benefice. There are currently no curates who could assist her with church services and events. However, the ministry of the LLMs and ALM are invaluable.

### Restrictions on improvements to facilities

Kitchen facilities are quite restricted, and volunteers need to bring in microwaves and hot water urns to be able to prepare refreshments. The church had not been able to obtain permission to install anything more than a small servery when the porch was added in the 1990s.

### Community attachment to church fixtures

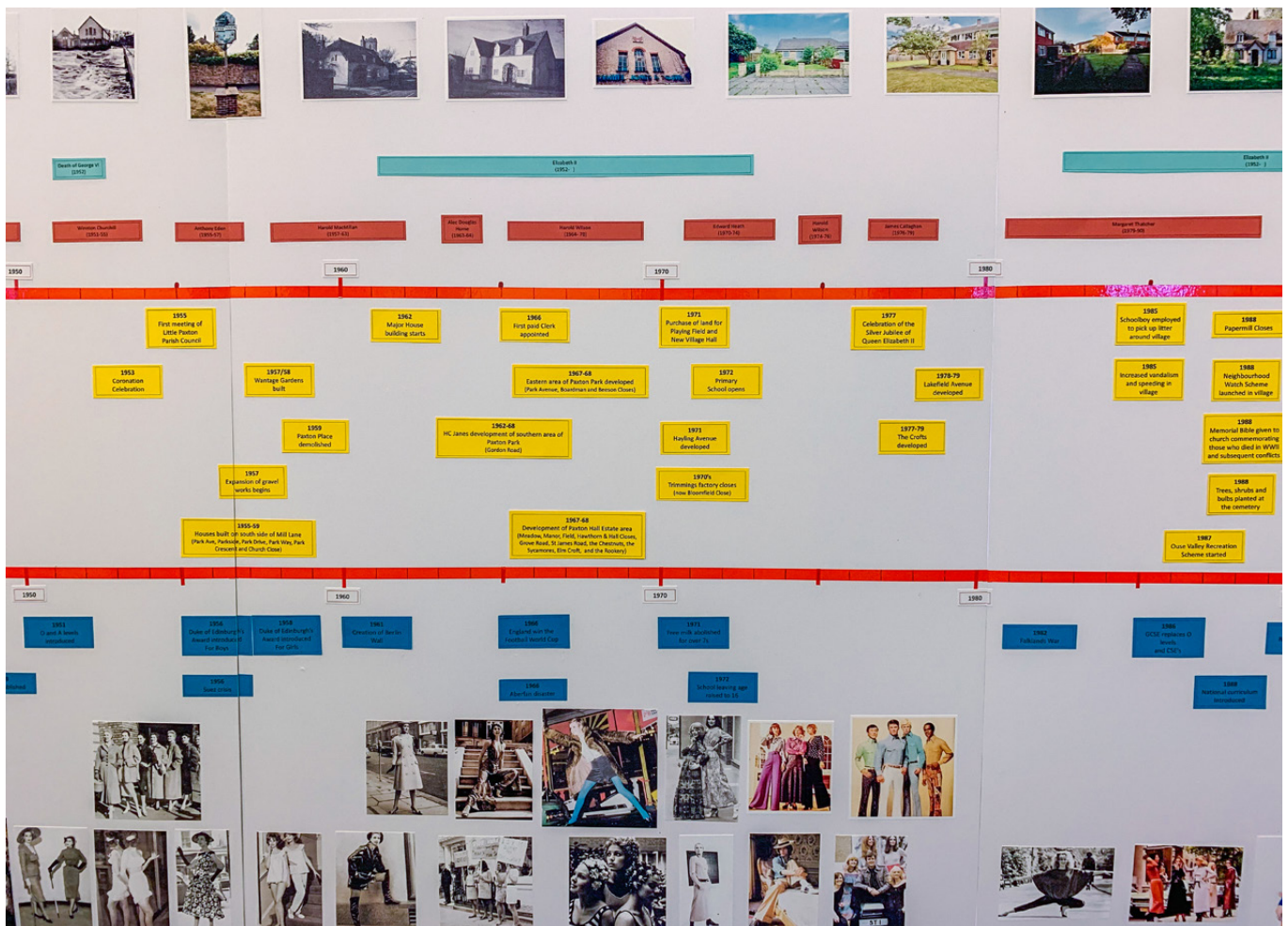
A small group of mainly elderly parishioners had initially been unhappy about the proposed removal of the pews and had raised a petition. Many of these parishioners have since passed away.

### Ensuring the community has a voice

The PCC has been keen to canvass opinions from all residents about changes to the church. This has been a challenging process and a paper survey was used to ensure that everyone was given an opportunity to comment.

### Work involved in running a community space

The PCC had underestimated the work involved in organising and running the community space. The Benefice now has a paid administrator to do this and she is supported by a group of volunteers. St James' church is about to advertise for a paid caretaker/occasional offices co-ordinator to help with the smooth running of the church post-Covid-19.



Timeline of Little Paxton milestones in the context of the UK and world historic events, exhibited in the church during the 2019 Little Paxton Parish Council anniversary events.



## Lessons Learned

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### **To work in partnership**

Engaging the community in the proposed changes to the church has led to people feeling that St James' is 'their' church and to supporting the events and clubs taking place there.

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

The church is well used during the week as well as on Sundays. Since renovation, it has become very busy with regular bookings from community groups, private bookings, for occasional concerts and it is still frequently used for life events such as christenings and funerals.

### **To apply transferable skills in church management**

The Revd Cannon Annette Reed came to the Paxtons Benefice with a history of reordering other parish churches in the Sheepy Benefice in Leicester diocese. For example, her experience in putting a Post Office into the north end of All Saints' church in Sheepy Magna helped her during major renovations at Little Paxton church. In addition, the major renovation projects had required strong leadership and the input of many volunteers from the congregation as well as non-worshippers. The running of the community space has required the employment of a benefice administrator and the support of volunteers.

### **To maintain a good relationship with local schools**

The vicar's long-standing relationship with local schools had been very beneficial when it came to making a bid for lottery funding as the children and teachers had supported the campaign to win a televised bid to restore the bell tower.

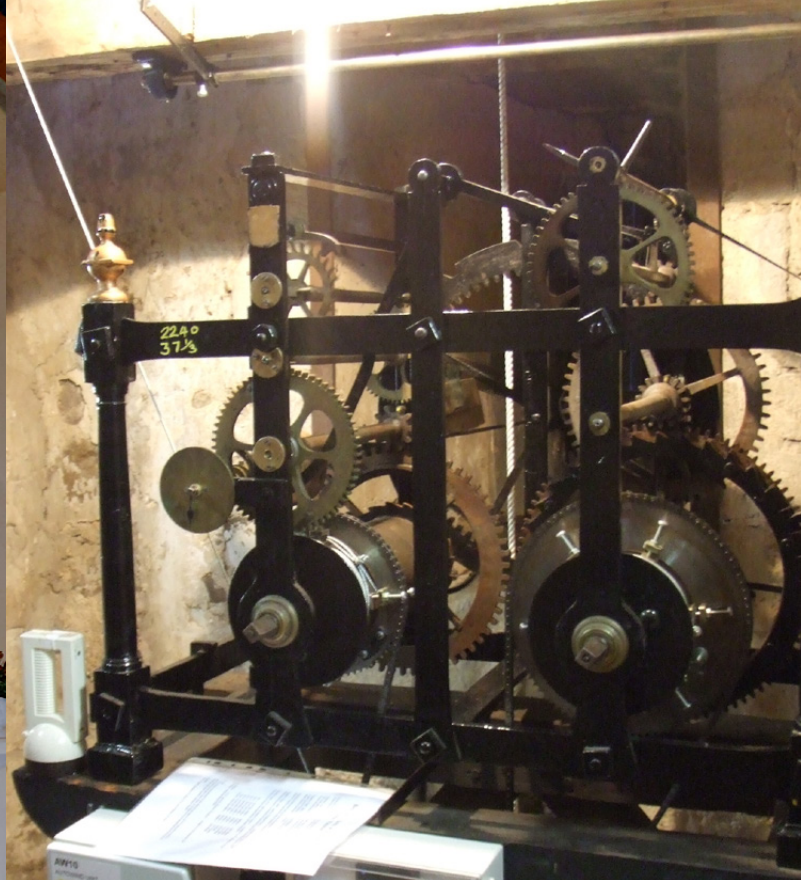
### **To adapt the church building for more flexible and a wider use**

The removal of the pews and the work to create a warm, comfortable space had turned the church into a valuable asset for the community and many events and groups now use the space. The church can now offer a greater level of hospitality to its worshippers and visitors.

### **To make good use of social and traditional media**

The PCC had been creative in their use of media. A campaign in the local press, and later on Facebook, to win a lottery bid had marshalled the support of the local community to vote for St James's bid. The rehangings of the bells had generated a lot of publicity as they hadn't been rung since the First World War. The PCC developed a brand for the project (CHUFT), which was also an important factor in winning support. Latterly, the church has made good use of social media to reach and offer support to residents during the 2020 national lockdowns.







“The concept of a project group that works together well, with different roles, which are clearly defined, is the best approach [in church renovation]. So, a group of people that have vision and really believe this thing can happen is vital. We had a vision and we shared that together, and we were all very passionate about it. You need that willingness, that excitement, that ‘we can do this’ attitude.”

**Revd Canon Annette Reed**  
Vicar



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**Cambridge Centre for Social Innovation**

Cambridge Judge Business School  
University of Cambridge  
Trumpington Street  
Cambridge CB2 1AG  
socialinnovation@jbs.cam.ac.uk  
www.jbs.cam.ac.uk

**Diocese of Ely**

Ely Diocesan Office  
Bishop Woodford House  
Barton Road  
Ely CB7 4DX  
T: +44 (0) 1353 652701  
www.elydiocese.org

[www.reachely.org](http://www.reachely.org)