

Cambridge Judge Business School

REACH Ely Case Study Series

Reimagining Churches as Community Assets
for the Common Good

ST JOHN THE BAPTIST SOMERSHAM



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: An altar crucifix at St John the Baptist church, Somersham.

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ST JOHN THE BAPTIST SOMERSHAM

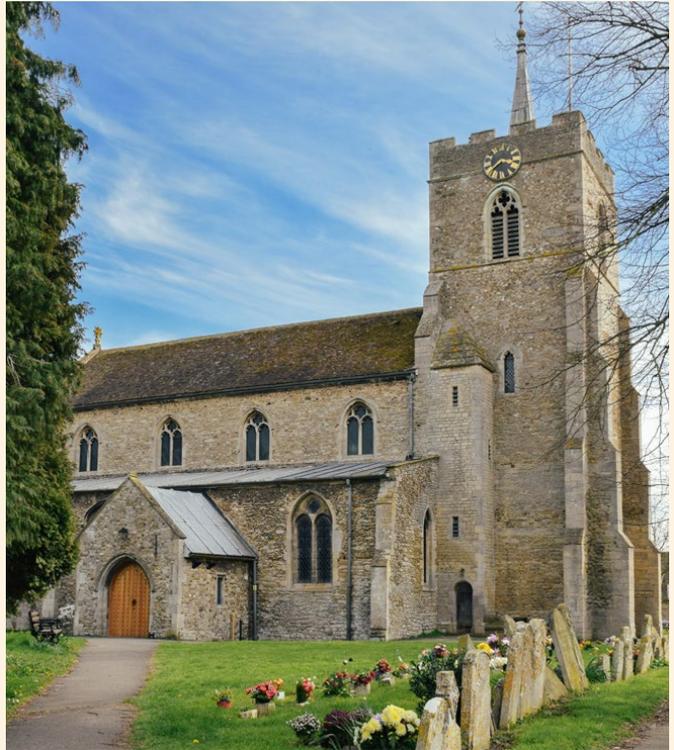
Church Category: Rural

Deanery: St Ives

Address: Church Street, Somersham,
Cambridgeshire PE28 3EG

Website: [www.somershamparishes.org/
churches/somersham](http://www.somershamparishes.org/churches/somersham)

Four churches benefice website:
www.somershamparishes.org



Summary

Buildings and Artefacts: Grade I listed; Carved wooden roof bosses; Five lock medieval chest; WWI memorial in the East window; Stone plaques and memorials; Carved stone corbels; Brass candelabrum

Congregation to Population Ratio: 41 / 3,844

Fundraising: Friends of the church group; Individual bequests; Standing orders; Envelope scheme; Parish giving scheme; Sponsored Ride and Stride; Microfundraising

Income Generation: Rental income; Market produce stall run by the Friends group; Flower festival; Christmas Tree festival; Concerts

Communications: Joint benefice website; Books; Welcome to Newcomers guidebook and event; Noticeboards; Posters; Facebook page; Benefice leaflet; Village magazine; Local and national radio; Visitors book and leaflet

Community Engagement: Outreach Group; Over Sixties Club; Festivals and concerts; Stall at the annual Somersham Carnival; Served area in the church; Children's playground; Coffee mornings; Collaborations with nursery, schools and local charities.

ROOTS



Profile

The parish of Somersham is situated on the east of Huntingdon and four miles north of the market town St Ives. The village stands on the ground rising from the surrounding fenland. In 2018, the parish population was 3,844 people.

Somersham is known for its rich heritage, namely the former Somersham Bishop's Summer Palace with hunting grounds, built in the 14th century as a residence for the Bishops of Ely, and a former spa outside the village. From 1848 the village was served by the now closed Somersham railway station, on the line from Cambridge to March. The area was converted into the Somersham Local Nature Reserve, a popular open site with walking paths, wildlife, a lake and wet woodland. Regular bus services link the village to St Ives, with onward links to Peterborough and Cambridge.

There is a former Methodist Chapel (now a private residence), Somersham Baptist Church, and a former Manor Hall built in the early part of the 18th century and gravel pits to the north of the village. Current amenities include a village hall (Victory Hall), Royal British Legion hall with a club, public house, restaurant, tearoom, two schools, bowls club, library, and village shops.

In 2016, 2017, and 2018, St John the Baptist Somersham received the **Engage Awards** from the Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust for bringing alive the architecture of the church building and making it more practical for the wide range of activities attracted to the church as well as for the efficient heating system. The award certificates are exhibited in the church.





Top: Church noticeboards in Church Street. Middle: Public footpaths in the churchyard. Bottom: West tower view from the churchyard.

Building

The parish church, dedicated to St John the Baptist, is a Grade I listed building, the oldest in the village, situated off the High Street and close to the village centre. It is generally presumed that the current site has been consecrated for Christian worship since the seventh century. The present church building dates from the period between 1250-1300 and is likely to have been built by one of the Bishops when resident in the former Summer Palace. The legacy of the Bishops of Ely residing next to the church contributed to the larger size of the Somersham church building when compared with others in surrounding villages. At present, the church building can accommodate 150-200 people.

The St John Somersham church building is in a good state of repair. Recent renovations (2008) include the removal of pews from the back of the nave to provide a communal space for a servery. In 2013, more works were implemented: the installation of an oak/glazed screen at the east side of the tower to make a enclosed vestry with a mezzanine room under the tower; WC facilities in the vestry under the mezzanine room; a servery area in the back of the nave and a kitchenette, concealed sink, café tables and chairs in the south aisle; new lighting; and efficient heating with eight fan convectors and white radiators in the sanctuary and the nave. In 2017, St John Somersham was awarded £5,000 partnership grant from the National Churches Trust and Cambridgeshire Historic Churches Trust to co-fund re-slating the chancel roof.

In 2019, St John Somersham improved facilities in the church tower, namely, by making safe access to the church tower roof by installing a proper ladder with a platform, and had the church tower clock completely overhauled.

The WC facility is accessible only during services or public events in the church. The church has limited on-street parking and an access to a small free car park on the opposite side of the road to the church. The belfry in the church tower houses six large bells. The church is kept open daily from 9 a.m. to 5 p.m. Most of the building is accessible to visitors except for the vestry and the bell tower which are locked.

Artefacts

The oldest part of the building is the chancel in the Early English Gothic style of architecture. The nave roof features carved roof bosses, two of which are, in the shape of the heads of Richard II and his wife Ann of Bohemia, in whose reign the Somersham church was built. Other medieval artefacts include carved corbels, a surviving Memorial Brass in the Sanctuary, a Five Lock Chest made of a single piece of timber, and the remains of the doorway and stairway to the former Rood Loft. The East Window features a memorial to Somersham soldiers who died in the WWI. The Sanctuary has a brass candelabrum and various stone plaques and memorials. The pipe organ was made in the early 20th century (1908).



Clockwise from top: Altar view with the font; View from upstairs Mezzanine Room; Choir pews with the nave; Fixed sitting arrangement and the Served area in the back of the nave.

RUNNING

Team

St John Somersham is a member of the benefice comprising the churches of St Peter in Old Hurst, All Saints in Pidley-cum-Fenton, and St John the Baptist in Woodhurst. The parish church in Somersham is the largest in the benefice. The benefice is served by the Rector, the first female rector in the history of Somersham, a curate, PCC secretary, two associate priests, two licenced lay ministers, a benefice administrator, and two churchwardens per church.

Religious Services

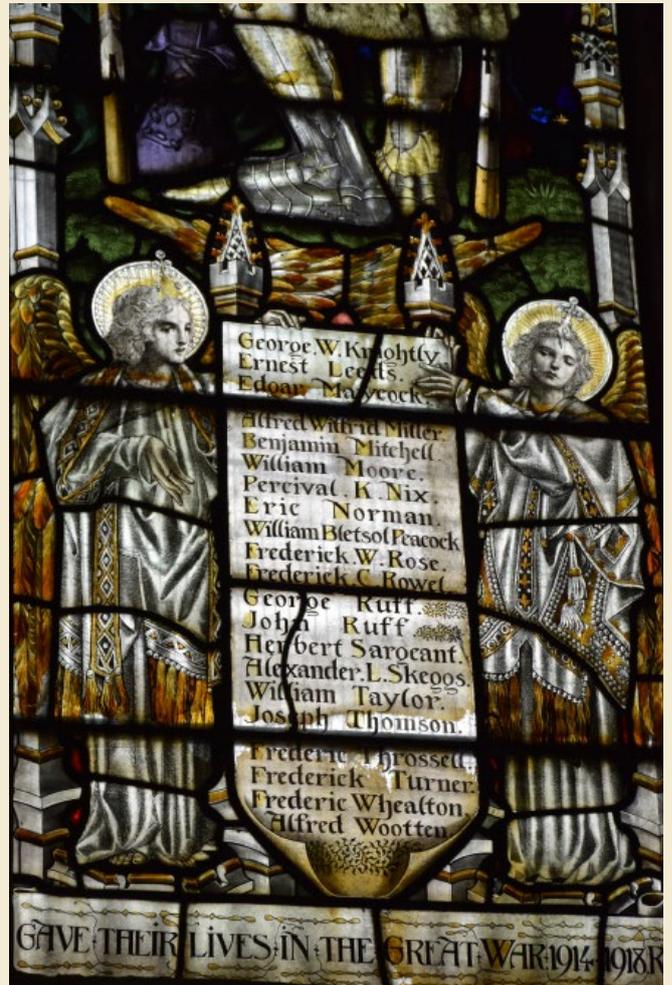
Church services at St John Somersham are held every Sunday at 10.30 a.m. Specifically, Holy Communion with a musical setting Sung Eucharist is on the first and third Sundays in the month. The Evening prayer is on the first Sunday at 6.30 p.m. Holy Communion with children's activities is organised on the second Sunday of the month, and on the fourth Sunday the church welcomes congregation for All Age Communion. The occasional fifth Sunday in the month is designated as Benefice Sunday with the service being hosted by each member church in turn. Midweek services are held on Wednesdays at 9.30 a.m. Twice a month, a Sunday School is held during the service. On the second Sunday children's crafts are available during the service. The church also runs regular Alpha Courses, a faith discussion group.

Parish Share

In 2018, the expenditures for the parish share paid was £38,270, this represents 70% of the total parish share for the benefice.

In 2019, the expenditures for the parish share is £39,416, this represents 70% of the total parish share for the benefice.

These figures include a 2.5% rebate for paying the previous year in full by direct debit.



East window stained glass and the High Altar.

Fundraising

St John Somersham church was struggling financially in the past two years however, by actively engaging in a variety of fundraising events, the church generated a surplus by about £3,402 in 2018. Annually, various fundraising initiatives help generate about £8,000 (*See Income Generation*).

Friends of Somersham Parish Church.

The group was established in 2010 to assist in the preservation and improvement of the church building. The rector and one of churchwardens of St John Somersham are the trustees of the group. The Friends group includes about 100 members who have an interest in the historic church building and the churchyard, but who may not necessarily wish to be part of the congregation or worship in the church. Many members do not reside in Somersham but have personal connections to the village and wish to be associated with the church. Some of the funds raised include: the vestry project (£5,000), new lighting system (£10,000), re-slating the chancel roof (£5,000), new heating (£9,000), path to the south porch (£1,385). The cost of the individual annual membership is £5. The Friends of the Somersham church work closely with the PCC to complement various church projects. The Friends organise concerts and

exhibitions and work to get the building used for community events (*See Events*).

Parish Giving Scheme and Donations.

Initial funding for various renovation projects was received in the form of a bequest of £50,000 to the church from a parish member. St John Somersham also applies for gift aid as well as donations from those signed up for the Parish Giving Scheme (13 people), bank standing order (30 people), and regular weekly offerings in envelopes (16 people).

Microfundraising.

St John Somersham has signed up for EasyFundraising (www.easyfundraising.org.uk), a charity shopping fundraising initiative that works in partnership with many retailers, and helps charities raise funds from people shopping online. Every online purchase made by signed up customers brings 1-2% of the sale towards the church. Monthly receipts are published in the Benefice Notices leaflet. On average, St John Somersham generates about £250 per annum. The church also accepts unwanted small items to sell on eBay and generate small profit. In addition, St John Somersham encourages people to sponsor a church member who participates in the national Ride+Stride (www.rideandstrideuk.org). Half of all sponsorship money collected are returned to the church (*See also REACH Ely case study All Saints Elton*).

“It’s the fundraising activities where you do attract more people, but despite the fact that you attract them, people come because they love the church as a building. It’s hard to get them in for services. It’s not the type of services, we try different forms of worship, they’re not all just traditional. It’s something that we probably need to work on more.”

Alan Draper
Churchwarden

Income Generation

Rental Income. Periodically, St John Somersham rents out the church space for choir concerts and Friends of the church events accepting a flat fee of £50 or less to fund heating, lighting, and incidental costs.

Flower Festival. Annually in June, St John Somersham organises a themed flower festival. Flower arrangements of various designs, sponsored by local community, decorate the church during a three-day weekend. The sponsorship has been popular in previous years with all the displays being sponsored. The event helps to generate about £2,000 annually towards the church running costs.

Christmas Tree Festival. A major fundraising event organised over a two-day weekend. St John Somersham invites different organisations in the village, from the Boy Scouts and Girl Guides through to the Over Sixties Club and others, to bring Christmas

trees into the church. Mostly artificial, the Christmas trees are decorated in accordance with the themes of participating organisations. Various Christmas trees are installed on boards on the side pews round the church and attract many people who visit St John Somersham to enjoy the decorated church and a festive atmosphere. In 2018, the event raised £2,000.

Candlelight Concert. The Somersham Town Band gives a Candlelight Concert before Christmas that generates about £500 per annum to the church.

Market Produce Stall. On the first Saturday of each month from March to October, the Friends of Somersham Parish Church run a market stall with a variety of produce and items for sale. The church encourages the local community to support the Friends of the church group by donating plants, garden produce, or attending the stall and purchasing goods.

“People want to see what they read about the church improvements in the parish council magazine, so they come from an inquisitive point of view. But also, as far as in the wintertime, when the church used to be very cold, they might have dropped off because it’s too cold in the church. In that respect it’s keeping those people involved. And I think also other groups are asking to use the church because it is a more comfortable space than it used to be.”

Alan Draper
Churchwarden



Communications

The **joint website** of the four parishes in the benefice provides information on the history, events, activity groups in the four parishes, as well as lists regular services, upcoming events in the benefice, and updates on church activities. A special section Visitors on the website lists top ten attractions for church visitors. The Outreach Group (See *Community*) organises a **welcome to newcomers** of Somersham. Published by the parish council, a **Guide for Newcomers** provides information about the church and the village.

The Family and Children Worker runs a **Facebook page** which attracts people of parental age of young children. *Benefice Notices leaflet* with the diary of upcoming events and financial updates is published monthly by the benefice. A bi-monthly **magazine** *Somersham4U* with information on church events is published by the parish council. There is a monthly trade directory booklet produced by a village printing firm that includes church and community events pages. For their festivals, the church attempts to get **local press and radio** for coverage. St John Somersham is a registered member on www.ExploreChurches.org, an online resource for visitors and churches, promoting a collection of historical churches to visit. Visitors to the church can sign the **Visitors' Book** placed on the desk near the entrance and take a **leaflet** *Ten Important Features to Look for in the Church* that explains design details of church artefacts. **Noticeboards** are set outside the church and in a bus shelter in the village centre.

Books. The churchwarden Alan Draper, resident of Somersham since 2006 and a former science teacher, has written and published three books on the history of the church and the village – *Somersham Heritage* (2014), *Somersham Then and Now* (2015), *Somersham Pageant* (2018). The books are based on a thorough research of archival publications and photographs and have sold well. A former church rector has written a small guide book to the church, which is available for visitors to purchase in the church for £1.

REACH

Community

The Servery and Mezzanine Room. The servery in the back of the nave was created as a flexible space with moveable cupboards, concealed wash basin and water heater. After its installation, church members agreed that it significantly transformed the church and the life of the community by attracting more people to the church. The comfortable and flexible space in the church made it possible to provide catering at events and after services. The mezzanine room is used for meetings and occasional Sunday School events. The PCC is open to the idea to use the room for more community events in the future.

“We’ve got sufficient formal space for the traditional type of service and the flexibility to run all sorts of other community activities when that’s appropriate.”

Eddie Howlett
Churchwarden

Outreach Group. The team at St John Somersham seeks to move away from the traditional way of ‘doing church’ to a more ‘missionary’ approach in order to improve links between church and community. To meet this goal, the PCC has formed an Outreach Group to engage with and provide help to local people, especially the elderly. Activities include providing help in the running of the village Over Sixties Club, providing communion, prayer and readings to residents of Brookfield Care Home, and assisting patients at Hinchingsbrooke Hospital to attend Sunday services in the chapel.



Top and middle: Servery area in the back of the nave with concealed wash basin, cafe tables and chairs, and wall heating radiators.
Bottom: Mezzanine room and facilities under the tower; Children playground event in the church.



Events

Activity groups for children. In 2016, with support from a local charity (the Brocklesby's Trust), St John Somersham started **Little Acorns**, a baby and toddler group, on Thursday mornings to encourage more families with children to be more actively involved with the church. Little Acorns has proved popular with pre-school children in the village. Children are engaged in singing, playing games, listening to stories, and making crafts together with learning Bible stories.

Once a week a small team of church members go to an assembly at Somersham Primary school to perform **Open the Book**, a project that offers primary school children an opportunity to hear key Bible stories. Church members also run **Loaves and Fishes**, a lunchtime club in the school that enables children to explore Bible stories in more detail. In addition, there is monthly **Messy Church** activities for children of all ages.

Market stall, concerts and festivals (*See Income Generation*).

Activities for wider communities. St John Somersham is open for various village groups to use the church space and the churchyard for a variety of activities. For example, local **children's playgroups**, organised by local young families, use the space in the nave and the Servedy for educational, entertainment, and social activities for children and their parents, and **Village Beavers Scouts** set a treasure hunt and outdoor games in the churchyard. Twice a week, on Wednesdays and Sundays, the church runs **Coffee Mornings** after services open to everyone.

Creative Minds. To promote well-being, St John Somersham launched the Creative Minds group in 2014. This drop-in activity group, introduced by the benefice rector and run by an art therapist trainee, welcomes people into the church to explore their creative sides using different media and art materials, have coffee and friendly conversations. This therapeutic group has proved to be popular among participants for an opportunity to meet and socialise in a comfortable environment.



*St John Somersham is hosting a children playground event.
On opposite page: Children's corner in the back of north aisle; Volunteer with children.*

Engagement

Focus on families and children. Somersham church plans to extend the pastoral care provided by the Outreach Group to the wider community, especially young families. This has been achieved by, for example, encouraging families to attend church services and organising themed family services. Accessible spirituality, gospel teaching and engagement for all ages are offered on these church occasions. The Outreach Group helps to raise awareness about events for families and young people through posters and circulars.

Family and children worker position was established in 2016 to reach out to young families, lead Parent and Toddler group and Messy Church activities, and coordinate and facilitate special events. The post is financed by the Brocklesby Charity, a Christian local outreach and financial support organisation.

Church clock and tower roof projects. With the conservation of the church clock and a new ladder to the church tower roof, Somersham church would be able to organise bell ringing practice lessons for beginners in order to increase the number of members of the bell ringing team, especially amongst younger people, as well as provide tower visits to enjoy rooftop views on special occasions.

Mothers' Union. A well-attended branch of the Mothers' Union meets each month and supports St John Somersham in many different ways. Members support various local charities, meet with ladies from the other churches and organise various outings. The group is open to men too.



Top two: Consecration of the new burial land at St John The Baptist Church, Somersham. Overseen by the Bishop of Ely, Rev Simpson, children from Somersham CP School, Whitehall School and members of the Parish (Photo by Cameron James Smith).
Bottom two: Proms Concert with Somersham Town Band (Photo by www.thearagonsingers.btck.co.uk).

REFLECTIONS

Challenges

Youth engagement

St John Somersham runs children-oriented Sunday School twice a month, however, attendance is low.

Community attachment to church fixtures

Despite an architect's suggestion to replace the remaining pews in the nave, in recognition of strong congregation attachment and church building restrictions, St John has no plans to replace them. The pews in the nave and café tables in the Servery area currently create a balanced seating arrangement.

Small and senior congregation

The senior demographic profile of the congregation impacts on congregational fundraising. Most fundraising is done by older members of the congregation and as they get older their physical ability tends to restrict this work.

Lessons Learned

To plan carefully and ahead of major restoration and renovation works

During the removal of old slates in the nave roof, some dust and dirt descended over the thin polythene sheets draped over the choir stalls sagged under the weight of the grit. Professional advice to cover the organ ahead of the renovation meant that the delicate internal working of the organ pipes was saved from dust and debris.

To create a living church

St John Somersham church has experience of hiring out the space for rehearsals by a local

teenage choir for a nominal fee. However, to encourage more community use of the church, the PCC does not enforce the letting fee and rental conditions are negotiable in informal arrangement with PCC members.

To allow sufficient time for new initiatives to be introduced

As an historic church, securing approval to remove rows of pews in the back of the church was a lengthy process. Additionally, there were aesthetic concerns that the new radiators behind the altar would be intrusive. These matters were resolved in the planning and design consultations.

To increase opportunities for further church and community integration

St John Somersham has established links with the independent Whitehall School in the village. The school is keen to engage with the church, supports various activities in the church, and organises prize giving ceremonies and Christmas services in the church without charging fees. To provide an opportunity for people to meet and chat, the church runs social Open Mornings every month and serves coffee and biscuits.

To promote and popularise local heritage

Based on good sales of the three books about the church and the village, the author and the other churchwarden contend that there is a sense of history and interest from the local community to learn about family history and local heritage. Heritage exhibitions of historical artifacts are potential collaborative community engagement opportunities for the church and village.



“We should reach out to the community. I think that sometimes you can, but without knowing or wanting to, you become a little bit insular, and we need to think more outside the box.”

Alan Draper
Churchwarden

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