

Swifts in Towers

Project summary & achievements

Since being awarded a grant from the Shropshire Hills Conservation Fund for our 'Swifts in Towers' proposal we have erected a total of 54 swift boxes in suitable church towers in, or close to the boundary of, the Shropshire Hills AONB.

Caring for God's Acre already had the boxes available following a request for volunteers to make swift boxes earlier in the year. However, the grant allowed for the appointment of a suitably qualified joiner who could tailor the construction to each individual tower, ensuring that the boxes were securely fixed and weatherproof, whilst not impacting on the historic fabric of the church buildings.

In order to do this the boxes were secured to a facing plate with holes cut to align with the entrance holes in the boxes. A single, large hole was then cut in the wire mesh behind the louvres and the entire construction fitted in, creating a solid and secure unit and preventing accidental bird ingress to the tower.

Ten local churches were surveyed, but a final shortlist of 5 churches were selected for a number of criteria including:

- An existing swift population local to the church
- Reasonable access to the tower (a solid ladder or stairs)
- Sufficient space to fit a number of boxes between the louvres
- An uninterrupted flight path (ie: no large trees or buildings surrounding the tower),
- An absence of other bird species (Knowbury church was considered, but the tower already housed a thriving colony of jackdaws)
- A supportive vicar & churchwarden.

As swifts prefer to nest in colonies we aimed to install as many boxes as possible in each of the locations to offer opportunities for communal nesting. Boxes were installed in the following locations:

- St John's Church, Doddington (12 boxes)
- St George's Church, Pontesbury (12boxes)
- St Mary the Virgin Church, Bromfield (12 boxes, including one assembled and decorated by local nursery school children)
- St George's Church, Clun (6 boxes)
- St Milburgha's Church, Stoke St Milborough (12 boxes)

A number of swift call systems [Multi-Bird Call Sound System V3 — Peak Boxes](#) were also purchased and installed as part of the project. These are a key element in allowing the birds to find potential nesting sites, indeed Action for Swifts says: *"The playing of attraction calls is the nearest thing to a 'silver bullet' in encouraging Swifts to occupy new nesting places"*.

The call systems comprise a small speaker that can be mounted on top of the boxes and a memory stick with recordings of the distinctive swift screeching calls. They are timed to play throughout the summer an hour before dawn and an hour after dusk.

In three of the sites the call systems were installed in late summer when the swifts had fledged, but not yet started their migration. This is the point at which young birds who have not yet mated start to scout out potential nesting places, so it is hoped the birds may already have been attracted to these sites and could start using them as early as next summer.

The only site where we were unable to install a call system was Bromfield, where we lacked a suitable plug socket (the only one available being Bakelite and dating to the 1940's!). However, there is an established colony of swifts nesting at Bromfield Priory Gatehouse (approx. 50m away), so it is highly likely they will find the boxes in the tower at some point.

Also, at Bromfield we engaged with the local nursery, Little Grubs, who assembled and decorated a swift box that was subsequently erected in the tower. Photos of the installed box were sent to the nursery pupils and they plan to look out for swifts using the tower next summer.

Throughout the project we also liaised with Carol Wood from the RSPB who is planning to install boxes at other churches within the AONB area including Tugford and Holdgate. We shared information about fixing, installation and contacts for joinery.

Public benefit

Clun church does not have louvres and therefore the boxes are clearly visible to anyone approaching the church. Information about swifts and the swift boxes will be made available in the church, hopefully raising public awareness of the birds and the issues they face.

In the other four sites the boxes are tucked behind the louvres and are not visible externally, however, the churchwardens / vicars have made their congregations aware of the boxes and their purpose. At Pontesbury the installation of swift boxes contributed to their Silver Eco-church award and in September I was invited to present their award and talk about the swifts to a packed congregation.

We had hoped to run a public event to raise awareness of swifts and what we can do to help them, but this was not possible given the grant available. However, the real public benefit of this project would be continuing to see these iconic birds animating our summer skies.

Lessons learned

Permission to erect swift boxes requires exemption from a faculty to be granted by the archdeacon.

In order to fulfil this, detailed drawings and information about the fixing methods must be agreed by the Parochial Church Council and submitted to the archdeacon to demonstrate that the boxes will not affect the fabric of the historic building.

The gathering of information and decision making process can take a considerable amount of time, so should we run a similar project again we would start the process well in advance to allow the boxes to be fitted in early spring before the swifts arrive.

Photos



Measuring up at Bromfield



Construction of timber work at Pontesbury



Swift boxes installed at Doddington



Boxes clearly visible at Clun