

Ludlow Swift Conservation Group

The Church of St James the Apostle, Wigmore

Introduction

The 11th century Church of St James the Apostle, Wigmore is in the Diocese of Hereford. It is a Grade 1 listed building and stands on the pinnacle of a hill overlooking the village. The south facing wall is known to house a large colony of Common Swift (*Apus apus*). Substantial work to the church fabric is now necessary and plans are being drawn up. However the future of the swift colony also needs to be considered and this report gives advice on how this can be achieved.

Swifts – an overview



Swifts are in the UK for only 3 months each year returning at the end of April from central and southern Africa. The breeding birds arrive first and return to nests that were used the previous year followed by non-breeding birds who, if mature, will identify a nest for use next year. They do not build nests, instead they use holes in buildings to raise their young. A small concave made from feathers and other material caught when on the wing is made to contain the eggs and this sits on a flat surface within the building – often the wall plate. With such a short breeding season there is

usually only 1 brood of 2 or 3 eggs which hatch in mid-June. The chicks grow to around 40 - 45g before they are ready to fledge at around 7 weeks old. They perform exercises in the nest to strengthen their wings and once they leave the nest there is no going back until they themselves are ready to breed in 2 or 3 years time. Apart from breeding they spend their whole life on the wing eating a wide variety of insects such as aphids, flying ants, mosquitoes, hoverflies and small beetles, catching huge numbers every day. The parent birds also eat most of the chicks' droppings so these are clean birds - there are no great piles of droppings beneath their nests. Swifts are very faithful to their nest sites so any repairs and renovations that seal access to buildings are a real threat to the survival of these birds. Swifts nest almost only in pre-1944 buildings. While 10% of homes built before 1919 can house Swifts, the figure for inter-war housing is 7%, and for post-1944 housing only 1.4%. Post-2000 it is probably nil - because the current techniques and materials used in modern buildings deny Swifts access to breed - it's the same with refurbished or re-roofed older buildings. We are losing our Swifts very fast! Between 1994 and 2007 we lost over half of the Swifts breeding in South East England mainly because so many old buildings – industrial as well as residential - are being refurbished or rebuilt to modern standards, with sealed roofs and walls – with no space left for Swifts. It is worth noting that Bats and House Martins are suffering a rapid decline for the same reasons.

It need not be like this – there is a lot of expertise available now that allows buildings to be renovated to a high standard whilst maintaining room for wildlife. Many local councils are now aware of the problems and are working to help swifts – e.g. Exeter, Aylesbury, West Sussex and several London boroughs

Site Visits



The **eaves in the south wall** of this church – shown in greater detail below – provide excellent access for swifts. The flight path to the high eaves is unobstructed and there is clear evidence that the whole length of this wall is used by swifts.

In contrast the north face would not be used by the birds as there are many trees so there is no clear flight path to allow access to nest sites.

Picture of the south face of the Church of St James taken from Castle Street.

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South wall – site of the swift colony.
There is evidence of swift nest sites along the whole length of this wall.

Ludlow Swift Conservation Group initially visited the church at the end of July. The visit was made during the evening - this is a good time to see the birds returning to their nests as dusk falls. Around 30 swifts were seen flying around the southern aspect of the church with many of them going into nest sites under the eaves along the whole length of the south wall. It was very noticeable that there were no swifts on any other face of the church – and indeed the view of the village afforded from the path in front of the south wall suggested strongly that the only swifts nest sites in Wigmore are in the church.

On 12th September by arrangement with the consultant architect, Hook Mason, and the churchwarden, Richard Bailey, 3 members of Ludlow Swift Conservation Group revisited the church while the architect was on site. Although a physical inspection of the south wall was not possible a detailed high definition photographic record of the site was obtained. The pictures included in this document are available as standalone files for closer inspection.

Findings

The construction of the south wall is ideal for swifts especially around the emergence of the rafters where there are suitable gaps for the swifts to gain access to nest sites. It is anticipated that the south wall has a broad, flat top and that the birds nest on this wall plate.

White streaks on the wall are a strong indicator of active nest sites – these marks are easily washed off by rain so do not tend to last once the birds have left the nest for the season. Absence of white streaks cannot be taken as proof of no nest sites. Photographs of the whole length of the south wall show that there are at least 16 active nests in 2012.

The following series of pictures show the whole span of the south wall moving from west to east. Each rafter end is numbered sequentially and the red crosses indicate the presence of white streaking on the wall. This may not be apparent in the picture but closer inspection has confirmed its presence. A particularly good example of the white streaking can be seen between rafters 20 and 21.



Summary of identified swift nesting sites

By rafters 3, 15, 16, 17, 23, 24, 27, 30, 33, 35, 36, 37, 40

Between rafters 20 and 21, 25 and 26, 26 and 27

It can be seen that near each of the red crosses on the above photographs there are good access points for the birds.



It is noted that previous renovations to the east face of the nave and the south face of the chancel have completely sealed access to the eaves of these parts of the church – perhaps destroying swift nest sites.

Recommendations

To retain this important swift colony it is strongly recommended that

- none of the holes along the top 2 courses of stone are filled or the hole sizes altered in any way.
Discussion with one of the architects on 12th September confirmed that the unsealed wall top which is well covered by the eaves is not detrimental to the fabric of the church
- ivy – or any other climbing plant – is kept well clear of the eaves otherwise predators such as mice may use it to access the nests
- any work to the south wall is completed before the arrival of the birds at the end of April or commenced after they have migrated at the start of August
- no scaffolding is placed against the south wall while the swifts are here as this can seriously block access to the nest sites.
- any work to other parts of the church during the breeding season is considerate to these birds who can be disturbed easily.

Contacts

- Church Warden – Richard Bailey
- Consultant architect – Richard Lamb of Hook Mason, Widemarsh Street, Hereford
- Ludlow Swift Conservation Group – Peta Sams 01584 876818 or swifts@ludlow21.org.uk

Resources

- “*Planning for a healthy environment – good practice guidance for green infrastructure and biodiversity*” – Town and Country Planning Association and The Wildlife Trusts
- <http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/news/2012/07/06/planning-healthy-and-natural-environment>
Swift Conservation - <http://www.swift-conservation.org>
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