

# Case study no. 5

## St Peter of Spixworth

### DIOCESE OF NORWICH



A soprano pipistrelle maternity roost returns each summer to this small rural church to give birth to and nurse their young. The church warden and congregation tolerate the bats and have even found ways to use them for teaching children about wildlife.

#### Location

The village of Spixworth dates from the Saxon period. In Norman times the village was called 'Spikeswurda', either after the river Spikes (now Beck) or derived from Anglo Saxon 'Spic' meaning swine pasture. The suffix 'worth' comes from the Anglo Saxon 'yrth', meaning land gently sloping from water or a marsh. This rural farming community prospered and grew while the Bardolphs were Lords of the Manor (1199-1485). From a population of 10 men (excluding women and children) at the time of the Domesday Book the village has grown to approximately 3,500 people today. Due to its proximity to Norwich, Spixworth is a popular residential area.



The village is surrounded by fields, paddocks and patches of woodland. This lush, green landscape is scattered with ponds and provides ideal habitat for wildlife, including bats.

#### The building and its use

The church of St. Peter, now Grade I listed, was built about 1160 on the site of an earlier Saxon church. The church is built in the Early English style, with walls made of flint and containing stone dressings. The font inside is thought to be Norman, and the church bells are possibly the oldest in



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Norfolk! The tenor bell is from 1350, making it one of the oldest in England. Some other historic features in the church include a 14<sup>th</sup> century piscina and sedilia.

The church has reflected the fortunes of the parish, at times falling into disrepair. In the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> centuries, as the prosperity of the manor grew, the church was enlarged and remodelled. A mention of it was made in 1602 when the “wholl church is greatlie daciaed both in ye rooffe and ye walles”. In 1804 the roof collapsed. The whole church was restored in 1866 by John Longe and at this time, seating for 100 people was installed.

Today, St. Peter is in active use by its congregation, with family-friendly services held every Sunday and a regular coffee morning that offers a place to talk to friends and make new ones. This small, rural church welcomes everyone and modern facilities and wheelchair access ensure a good visitor experience for all. Inside, the peaceful atmosphere is ideal for private contemplation and a moment of calm. The Sunday Rocks offers weekly arts, crafts and bible based teaching for kids, as well as a chance to explore the churchyard and surrounding countryside for interesting wildlife.

### Bats in the church

A sizeable soprano pipistrelle maternity colony, thought to number around 400 individuals, is using the roof void above the south isle of St Peter’s church. The bats are entering the building through a gap in the eaves and droppings on the outside wall below their access point is evidence of this. Inside the church, bat droppings accumulate on the floor directly underneath the colony.



On warm days, the bats can be heard chattering amongst themselves. As the summer progresses, a batty smell can be detected in the corner of the south isle where the roost is located. In the evenings, bats also fly inside the church resulting in a scattering of droppings around the nave and on the pews. When the baby bats are very young and still flightless, they occasionally fall down from the roost and end up on the floor below.

Once the maternity period is over and the young bats have become independent, the colony leaves the church around August to spend the autumn and winter elsewhere. Nobody knows where they go, but each April or May they return to their chosen nursery site where they are left undisturbed by the church wardens and the congregation.

### What has been done

The congregation at St Peter’s have embraced their bats, despite the mess they create. Droppings are swept up regularly, and just before services and events. The church organ, which is in the south aisle, is covered by a cotton sheet when not in use, and an odour-eliminating product placed near-by allows



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the choir to gather round and practise, unperturbed by a batty smell. When levels of bat activity are at their highest during peak maternity season in June and July, the children's corner, also in the south aisle, is covered by a plastic sheeting to protect it from bat droppings. The church is cleaned just before services or choir practice take place.

Each year, a bat event at the church is organised and children from the local schools and the congregation are invited to come along to enjoy some batty crafts and the excitement of bat detecting. This event has proved very popular, with around 30-40 children and accompanying adults attending. The organisers have fun too getting creative and thinking up new bat activities ahead of the event.



The bats in the church have given the congregation an opportunity to consider wildlife in and around their church. As well as bats, the church houses bees, providing a safe haven for these increasingly rare and threatened insects. The churchyard is now carefully managed for conservation and to encourage all kinds of creatures. In one corner, a copse provides valuable habitat for many insects and in late spring and early summer it is a joy to walk through the carpet of bluebells that appear there every year. To celebrate nature, and the bats in the church, a round stained glass panel featuring a flying bat and produced by local glass makers now adorns the window above the children's corner.

### What can we learn?

At this church, the congregation has turned their resident bats into an asset by using them to educate children and adults about wildlife and the importance of considerate care for nature. The bats in the church are looked upon almost as pets, and tolerated despite their shortcomings in the cleanliness department.

Organising events around the bats and other wildlife in and around the church gives St Peter's a positive buzz, and brings in people from the village and beyond.



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## Contacts and further information

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