

Strictly for the birds!

A Surrey parish has reorganised a major rebuilding project - to fit round the migrating patterns of swifts.



The birds nest at St Mary's Church, Oxted every year and are an endangered species. Their numbers have plummeted over the years, often owing to nesting sites being closed over during refurbishment of old buildings.

Determined that this would not happen at St Mary's, the PCC brought in Edward Mayer of the charity Swift Conservation to work closely with the builders to ensure that the swifts' needs were taken into account during the renovations.

St Mary's is Grade I listed and on the 'Heritage at Risk'

Register - or it was. Repairs by the Victorians had led to the softer stone and mortar crumbling away, with very little of the original lime render left.

After several years of hard work, finance was secured from various local benefactors and the Heritage Lottery Fund to enable the building project to proceed.

In order to accommodate the swifts, work near their nesting sites was completed as 'swiftly' as possible, avoiding the breeding season. Scaffolding was sited to avoid obstructing entry holes, and while filling in many of the gaps in the



stonework, the builders deliberately left quite a few! These holes are mostly just below the overhang of the roof and are vital to the swifts.

Churchwarden, Catherine Hough, said: "A neighbour in the old Manor House opposite the lych gate kept us informed of the first arrivals in spring but we were reassured that they would not yet be breeding.

"Gradually more birds filled the sky, perhaps as many as 40 or 50. The builders were still working at height and the scaffolders were not going to be available to take down the upper level for several days.

"So there was quite an anxious wait as the swifts were flying very close to the church. However as soon as the scaffolding was lowered,

the swifts took up residence again... swiftly!"

● Edward Mayer will speak about the work of Swift Conservation at St Mary's Open Day on Saturday 8 September. All with an interest in conservation are welcome - check www.stmarysoxted.uk for times and details.

The Archdeacon and the dragon...



When the Archdeacon of Southwark, the Venerable Dr Jane Steen, heard that St James, Bermondsey's dragon was back from the repairers, she decided to 'inspect' it at ground level, before it returns to its perch.

The dragon is a golden weathervane which usually crowns St James's bell-tower. It was removed for refurbishment while repairs were taking place to the tower.

St James's Vicar, Canon Gary Jenkins, said: "The presence of the dragon on top of a church tower has puzzled people down the generations, but recently an intriguing link was made with the City of London, just across the river.

"The City's coat of arms shows a shield with the cross of St George, supported by two dragons. This has led to the dragon itself being seen as a symbol of London, and to being immortalised in a least one City church, St Mary-le-Bow, whose dragon bears more than a passing remembrance to that on St

James's tower. Perhaps the founders of St James had a link with St Mary-le-Bow. But whatever, it looks likely that our dragon is a link to the City, and via the City, to St George, and via St George, to the triumph of good over evil - and as such it begins to make more sense as a symbol on top of a church".

Has it got a name?

Incidentally, the Archdeacon had the same question that children from St James's School regularly ask... 'has it got a name?' Suggestions to Gary Jenkins please.

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