

SWIFTS: A CHURCH GUIDE PROJECT PACK



By: Care for Churches

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Introduction to Swifts: A Church Guide Project Pack

We are excited to present Swifts: A Church Guide Project Pack, a simple resource designed to assist you in successfully managing a swift project to install swift boxes in your church. This guide provides detailed information about swifts, why swifts are important and step-by-step instructions to undertake a project to install swift boxes in a church with additional resources linked.

What are Swifts?

Swift (Scientific name: *Apus apus*)

Statistics:

Length: 16-17cm

Wingspan: 45cm

Weight: 44g

Average lifespan: 9 years

Conservation status: Classified in the UK as Red under the Birds of Conservation Concern 5: the Red List for Birds (2021).

Swifts arrive in the UK from April onwards. They then leave in August.

‘Swifts spend most of their lives soaring high in the sky, only ever landing to nest. They are easy to spot as they look like an arrow whirling through the sky, and often fly in groups. Originally, they would have nested in trees or cliffs but now prefer the roofs of old buildings like churches. Swifts spend the winter in Africa but travel to Britain every year in April and May.

They feast on small flying insects by catching them in flight. Insects collect in a special pouch at the back of the swift's throat, where they are bound together by saliva until they form a kind of pellet known as a bolus, which can be regurgitated and fed to chicks. One single bolus can contain over 300 insects, with some holding over 1,000!’

(The Wildlife Trust)



Why the Church?

'Let birds multiply on the earth' (God's blessing in Genesis 1:22)

Swifts are declining rapidly, they are declining at 5% per annum, they are classified as 'Endangered'. They are a dynamic and visible sign of God's intention for life on earth to thrive. That alone gives us a great reason to encourage birds in our church grounds: it is an act of worship to their Creator whilst encouraging others to enjoy creation along with God and us. Installing swift boxes supports the Church's fifth mark of mission 'to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth' can go toward the A Rocha Eco Scheme. It is also an easy and fun way to demonstrate our commitment to restoring a troubled planet. The basic needs of birds - like ours - are simple: safety, food, water and shelter. With a little planning to cover the basics, you will discover that even the smallest patch has potential.

"Then God said, 'Let us make mankind in our image, in our likeness, so that they may rule over the fish in the sea and the birds in the sky, over the livestock and all the wild animals, and over all the creatures that move along the ground'" (Gen. 1:26)

"Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them." (Matthew 6:26)



Initial Glance at the systems

Systems	Method of Production	Visibility Once Installed	Where	Density	Estimated Cost
Tower Boxes	Handcrafted	Invisible to exterior	Perfect for almost all church towers.	Minimum 10	£70-£300
Individual Boxes	Mass Produced	Visible	Simple, quick, and accessible. Best for one-off residential use.	As space allows	£30-£50
Swift Bricks	Mass Produced	Camouflaged	For Large construction and fabric alteration projects.	space allows, minimum 4	£10+
Callers (essential for all projects)	Can be bought or rented	Depends on Location	For a minimum of 2-3 years until swifts have settled and nested.	1	£70 Can be rented

Example of Swift boxes against church tower louvers. (Left: External View. Right: Internal View)



Individual Boxes: DIY Construction

Some DIY designs of external boxes here: [Action for Swifts: DIY swift box designs](#)

Bristol Swifts have created a very helpful guide on how to build different types of swift boxes:
<https://www.bristolswifts.co.uk/swift-nest-box-design/>

Method

1. Made up from 12mm to 15mm thick plywood sheets.
2. Cut the pieces for roof, front, back, and base to sizes indicated. Check dimensions* before cutting side panels (which fit inside the other panels).
3. Swift hole opening size: cut to the precise size 6.5cm long x 2.8cm high and that its base is no more than 3cm above the floor.
4. Nail/screw all joints together.
5. Treat the exterior, but not the interior, with a water-based wood preservative.



Tower Boxes: DIY Construction

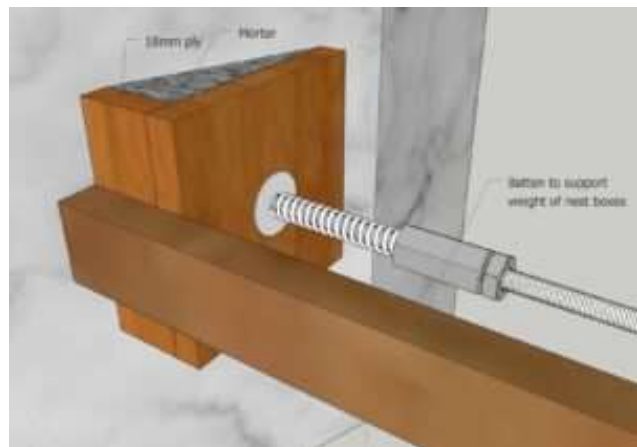
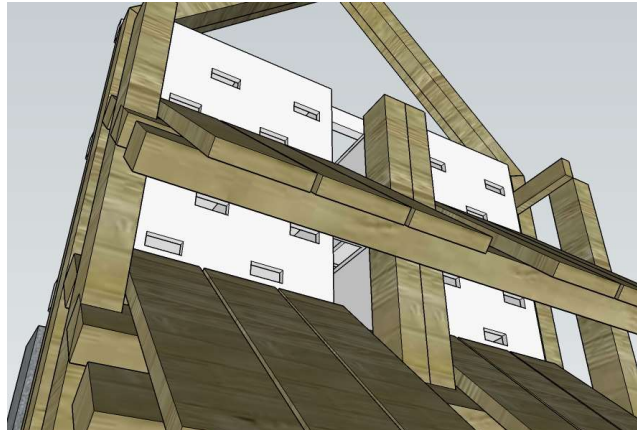
Most experience has been with tailor-made box-shaped cabinets, containing multiple nest chambers.

Box base area: 350 cm²- 500 cm²

Box Height: internal height above 10cm (height defined by louver spacing). Typical dimensions are approx. 30cm x 15cm with height dependant on louver gaps. If high enough 'two floors' of boxes can be installed between each louver. In this case box entrances should be staggered so not directly above each other, see image across.

Frequently there are wooden battens surrounding the louvres that can be used to support the boxes. Should there be no wooden battens, then you can either install battens with stainless screws into mortar (not into stonework) or with bracing bars spanning the reveals, see image across.

Some belfries are not louvred, in which case some creativity may be needed. St John's Bury St Edmunds has a kind of trellis in each opening. These model drawings show what was implemented with small canopies indicating the position of nest box entrances. This has proved to be very successful with over 20 pairs of Swifts in 60 boxes.



Further information:

[Guidelines for installing Swift nest boxes in church belfries – Caring For God's Acre – the conservation charity for burial grounds across the UK \(caringforgodsacre.org.uk\)](http://caringforgodsacre.org.uk)

Tower Box: Step-by-Step

Step 1: Getting a church project started.

The requirements for embarking on a swift project is having a team with energy and enthusiasm as well as a sympathetic vicar, bell captain, churchwardens and Parochial Church Council (PCC). The first thing to do is to visit the belfry to check that such a project is feasible. An exploratory visit should only require the permission of a church warden or vicar. If basic measurements, and photographs (with flash) can be obtained, then custom boxes can be designed, and these designs incorporated in a submission to the PCC.

Step 2: Getting Permission

There was a time that, provided certain common-sense rules were obeyed, swift boxes could be regarded as de minimis, and approval by the PCC would be sufficient. The 'common sense' rules include no interference with bell ringing, no screws into ancient stonework, though stainless screws into mortar between stones is acceptable, and no impact on the external appearance of the church. Following a period when a faculty was required, in April 2020 the rules changed so that bird boxes have been added to 'List B'. This means that, in addition to the agreement of the PCC, the archdeacon needs to be consulted to decide whether a faculty is needed via the online faculty system. The archdeacon should give notice in writing that the matter may be undertaken without a faculty. The archdeacon may impose additional conditions in the written notice. In making your case, you can say that Swifts are declining at 5% per annum, they are classified as 'Endangered'. They make a fantastic show in the summer soaring around the church tower. Unlike some species that nest in buildings, they make little or no mess. However, it may take 2 or 3 years to attract the first swifts.

Step 3: Make

Most experience has been with tailor-made box-shaped cabinets, containing multiple nest chambers. Most louvres are wide enough to accommodate 2 boxes side by side. The boxes can be oriented 'end' on or 'front' on depending on the width of the reveals. If space is limited, front on may be the most suitable to not project into the tower or place strain on batten fixings. The entrance (dimensions as above) should be positioned near the floor of the nest chamber (no more than 3cm above the floor).

A good idea is to make cardboard templates of your design to test fit before cutting any plywood.

Swifts prefer nest boxes containing a nest platform which can be as simple as an 8cm hole in a 12 cm square of 0.9cm to 0.12cm plywood screwed to the floor at the furthest corner from the entrance.

Step 4: Installation

Often there are wooden battens surrounding the louvres in the belfry that can be used to support swift boxes. Should there be no wooden battens, then you can either install battens with stainless screws into mortar (not into stonework) or with bracing bars spanning the reveals.

Access for inspection can either be carried out after the end of the breeding season (September) by removing the whole back, or with simple access doors (recommended). This will be the only maintenance required, no cleaning out of nest material is necessary, but any dead birds should be removed.

Step 5: Attraction calls

Please ensure that all sides of the belfry are Swift-proof before starting to play calls. Playing attraction calls will increase the chances of success and reduce the time taken to attract the first occupants. The call is played for a few hours of the day during nesting season. This is achieved on an electric timer system. Therefore, there must be an accessible power socket with a way to route speaker cables to a call unit near the nest boxes. A timer system and extension cable will certainly help for this setup.

Step 6: Completion

Remember, it may take 2 or 3 years to attract the first swifts into your newly installed boxes. The key is to have patience. Keep a regular eye on any birds flying around or into or out of the nest, and hopefully, before long, your first colony of swifts will nest down.



Frequently asked questions

Q: Will Swift boxes dampen the sound of the bells?

A: As Swift boxes usually do not cover all of the louvres and as they are normally made of 12 mm plywood, attenuation of the sound of the bells is minimal.

Q: Can you see the boxes from outside the church?

A: If a dark stain is applied to the boxes, then they are virtually invisible from outside the church. The external appearance of the church will not be affected.

Q: Will Swift boxes allow bats or other wildlife to enter the church?

A: As the nest boxes are sealed on the inside, no wildlife can get into the church. However do make sure no wildlife is trapped on the inside.

Q: Do Swift droppings foul the church?

A: Unlike Starlings and House Martins, Swifts do not produce large amounts of 'whitewash'. Swifts are clean birds, the adults consume the chick's droppings, and very little in the way of droppings would be produced outside.

Q: Do boxes need to be cleaned out at the end of the season?

A: Swifts use minimal nesting material. Invertebrates reduce the material through the winter. It is not necessary, indeed it is bad practice, to clear a Swift's nest at the end of the breeding season, they need it for breeding the following year. However, if other birds have occupied the box, then it is a good idea to clear it out outside the breeding season.

Q: Does playing attraction calls disturb neighbours?

A: As the belfry is so high, most people do not even notice it and the calls will cease when the colony is established.

Q: Are Swifts affected by bell-ringing?

A: Swifts have been observed on video being momentarily startled when bells start to ring, they then soon settle down. Often, they do not react at all.

Community support suggestions

To build capacity on a project, involving local communities is an effective way to build a strong team. By reaching out to various groups, the workload can be divided and conquered. Consider reaching out to groups such as:

- Local carpenters
- Local DIY merchants
- Men's Sheds groups
- Girl Guides, Scouts etc
- Local Swift groups
- Schools Groups
- Youth Clubs/ Activity Centres
- Community allotment
- Local Bird watching Groups



Funding support

Due to the affordable nature of swift boxes, raising funds to complete a swift project is very easy. If you need additional support with financing a project, please contact local businesses to see if they will sponsor a swift box. On the other hand, local fundraising is also a great way to spread the project's news and gain local interest. Here are some fundraising ideas:

- Turn it into a game: Hold a sweepstake for the community to bet on a swift box, first to be occupied wins a prize.
- Swift Bingo- Create a bingo card for the community, as they see birds entering the boxes they can cross off a box, first to a line or full house wins a prize.
- Holding stall or a fair is a great way of teaching the community about the work you are commencing and a way of raising money.
- Birdwatch and bring your own picnic in the churchyard. Entrance fee can go towards financing the swift boxes.

The British Birds Charitable Trust Grant: [How to apply | British Birds](#)

‘Grants are awarded to a wide range of projects, up to a maximum of £3,000.

Each application will be evaluated on the basis of how the project meets the Charitable Trust’s charitable objectives – promoting the study and conservation of birds and their habitats. We focus on the birds of the Western Palearctic and UK Overseas Territories.

Successful applicants are expected to provide a written report on their project for publication in British Birds, which can be by way of a brief informal report.

The deadline for grant applications is 30th September in each year, with successful applicants usually receiving funding by 31st December.

Projects can be funded for more than one year, at the discretion of the Trustees.’

Your Church Buildings Team

There are currently 6 of us in the team at Diocesan House, three full-time and three part-time:



Nicholas Cannon

Church Care and
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Nick is the Secretary of the Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC), dealing with faculty and 'List B' applications. He is also Secretary of the Diocesan Churches Trust, which directly administers a small number of churches in the Diocese.



Eliza Greenwell

Church Care Adviser

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Eliza deals with faculty and 'List B' applications. In addition, she oversees the Diocese's programme of Quinquennial Inspections and the appointment of parish architects and runs the [Exploring Norfolk Churches' website](#).



Frances Jackson

Historic Church Buildings
Support Officer (Part-
time)

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Frances role-shares with Anna and provides support and advice to parishes, organises training, and helps coordinate the Church Buildings Ambassador scheme. The role is part funded by Historic England, and Frances works with them on the Heritage at Risk register in our Diocese.



Nicola Lewis

Church Buildings Support Officer

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Nicola supports the management of the Diocesan Churches Trust. She will also take forward and monitor the Minor Repairs and Improvements Grant Fund. Nicola is one of thirty new Church Buildings Support Officers across the country, a role made possible through a £2.8 million fund released by the Church Commissioners



Margaret Mallett

DAC Administrator (part-time)

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Margaret deals with general enquiries. She also administers the meetings of the Diocesan Advisory Committee and organises the DAC's site visit programme.



Anna Venn-Moncur

Historic Church Building Support Officer (part-time)

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Anna role-shares with Frances, helping to provide support and advice to parishes. She is also currently studying for a master in architecture and has experience working in the architecture industry. Her role is part funded by Historic England.

Other Contacts

Local Swift Support

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National Swift Support

Action For Swifts Network

[Action for Swifts](#)

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<https://www.facebook.com/Action-for-Swifts-1004173086267940/>

Local Swift Group

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Regional Community Support

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