

## Swift nest boxes in church towers – questions answered.

**Why do swifts need our help?** Swift populations have declined by 60% over the past 20 years, 40% of that figure is within the past 10 years. Swifts, have not really evolved for 50 million years, being perfectly adapted to their aerial lifestyle. Human interaction with the environment over the past few hundred years has reduced their natural nesting sites which were tree and rock crevices. Ancient woodlands cover only 2.5% of our land and the introduction of rat species has likely impacted upon their ground nesting potential. Our land management has greatly reduced their access to their food source, flying invertebrates. Until relatively recently, natural materials used for construction provided crevices for nest chambers, replicating their natural nest sites. However, modern construction methods have increasingly employed the use of synthetic materials which degrade much more slowly, and our houses are sealed for thermal efficiency, significantly impacting swift nest site potential. Providing nest chambers in churches is a great way to help swift numbers and halt their dramatic population decline.



The characteristic call of the swift is becoming increasingly rare—these birds need our help

© Robert Booth

Why church towers? Swifts do especially well in boxes positioned behind the louvres in church towers. These nests are secure from predators, will not over-heat and the seclusion of the louvres seems to be attractive to swifts. Boxes are often relatively easy to fit and the colony will be safe from any development into the future.

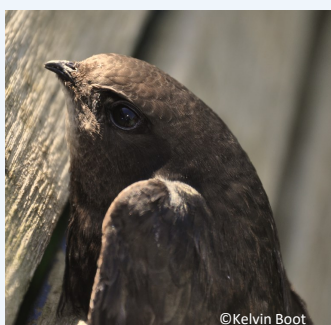
**Why church towers?** Swifts do especially well in boxes positioned behind the louvres in church towers. These nests are secure from predators, will not over-heat and the seclusion of the louvres seems to be attractive to swifts. Boxes are often relatively easy to fit and the colony will be safe from any development into the future.

**Do nest boxes affect the sound of the bells, or in other ways interfere with bell**

**ringing?** No. Scientific monitoring and other research have established beyond question that just as swifts are not affected by the ringing of bells, so the quality of the sound of the bells suffers no adverse effects. Indeed, some bell ringers are involved with nest box installation.

**Do nesting swifts produce mess or a health hazard from droppings, and/or attract vermin such as rats?** The nest chambers are completely enclosed inside the tower, the nesthole behind the louvres providing sufficient ventilation for the birds. Swifts build modest nests of very light materials they find floating in the sky, such as feathers and fragments of dry grass. In the UK swifts only ever raise a single brood of usually two, sometimes three but often only one chick. The adults will eat the droppings until the nestlings are about half grown and then droppings will start to accumulate in the box. The droppings quickly dry and are odourless and do not attract flies or vermin. Outside of the breeding season natural processes of decay and recycling 'clean' the boxes so they need no maintenance to prevent material accumulating inside.

**Does the installation of boxes cause damage to stonework in the tower?** With care and thought boxes can be installed without any effect on the stonework. Boxes can often be secured to the louvre frames and supported on a masonry sill underneath if there is one. Boxes can be braced against walls without any need for drilling.



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**Can the boxes be removed for maintenance?**

Boxes should always be designed and installed with future maintenance of the louvre screens in mind, and this would be a fundamental consideration for the designer.



Swift nest boxes inside a church tower do not affect the sound of the bells. Here eight nest boxes, cover a small proportion of the louvres. Wire mesh over the rest prevents unwanted residents, such as pigeons, from entering.

©John Perkins

**Once the PCC agree on installation, is there a need for further permissions from the church authorities (Is a faculty required)?** Nestbox installations may be undertaken without a Faculty subject to consultation with the Archdeacon. After the PCC agrees that the installation can proceed, a member is required to apply for List B1-19 approval ("The introduction of bird boxes") whereby the Archdeacon may grant permission with conditions as seen fit. The online application process is relatively straightforward and can be accessed here <https://facultyonline.churchofengland.org/>. There is no fee for this service.

**What is the optimum number of next boxes/chambers for a church tower?** There is no upper limit on the size of a swift colony. Colonies of up to 60 pairs (and growing) are thriving in nest boxes provided in modest churches in England. Swifts were once much more common and restoring their abundance in breeding colonies is something to celebrate. Churches provide the best chance we have of doing this.

**Should I be checking the nest boxes for occupancy by opening them and having a look?** As a rule and required by law nesting birds should not be disturbed, so unless one of your team has gained a specific licence, disturbance should be avoided. If the bell towers are frequented by others who may be tempted to have a peek inside, it is best not to provide easy access. However, design the boxes so the rear panel can be unscrewed after fledging to determine that season's usage and to collect data.

**Do the next boxes require any maintenance once they are installed?** Boxes do not need to be cleared at the end of the season. Very occasionally a well grown chick may die before fledging and the carcass is best removed if easily accessible but if not then through natural processes of decay and recycling it will, after a few seasons 'disappear'.

Maintenance of the actual boxes should not be required for many years as they are not exposed to direct weather due to the protection from the louvres.

**How soon do swifts take up residence after boxes are installed?** In some circumstances, boxes can be found by prospecting swifts within hours and if this is early in the year (before June) then they may attempt to breed that year – but this is only likely if attractant calls are being played. More typically the colony establishes by immature birds (2 year old birds) settling and building a nest and roosting in their chosen box in the first year and returning to breed. It can take 3 to 5 years for the process to start – so some patience may be necessary.

**Is there anything I can do to attract swifts?** The sound of other swifts, gives prospecting birds confidence that the location is safe and suitable, so once swifts are in residence, others will be naturally drawn in. To give an early boost to gain swifts' interest a 'swift caller' can be installed. This is a device that transmits the recorded call of swifts, fooling real birds to investigate.

**Aren't 'swift callers' a bit of a nuisance to neighbours, who perhaps have not heard the screams of swifts for many years?**



Swift callers do not have to sound 24/7 and so a timetable can be worked out and the 'swift callers' linked to a time switch that allows them to be turned on and off at predetermined times. Certainly, gaining support of neighbours in the planning stage and agreeing times of least disturbance will reap benefits, including having a group of swift monitors on the church doorstep. Callers are fitted with a volume control and the 'calls' replicate natural calls of swifts in the nest. This creates a call which many people are unable to tell apart from surrounding ambient birdsong. It is important to adjust the volume control to minimise the risk of conflict with neighbouring residents.

**Will swifts be drawn from other traditional nesting sites, and is that a good thing?** Suitable nesting sites are one factor that determines how many birds any area can support. So, the idea is that by providing more nest sites, any local populations will be able to expand into new areas, leading to an overall increase in numbers rather than causing birds to vacate one site to move to another. Swifts are particularly loyal to their nest chamber and will return year upon year to the same one.



**Can cameras be installed to observe the birds and increase local interest and support?** Live feeds of nesting swifts, brooding eggs and feeding young have proven to be a great way of engaging the local community. Access to a constant live feed can be a boon to local schools who can use the visual information across the curricula for real, live projects, using immediate data and observations. There are some box design considerations to factor in for cameras to work well and power and cabling will need to be considered. Images can be made available wirelessly in real time on the internet if connections are good.

**Is special permission required to install swift cams?**

List A (Matters which may be undertaken without a faculty and without the need for consultation), section Church contents, A5-4K, provides provision for 'Portable audio-visual equipment'. As the items are immediately removable, it is likely that they would not require a faculty. Consultation with the particular Archdeacon is recommended prior to installation.

**Are swift boxes easy to build and install?** Each church tower is different, so a thorough appraisal of what can be built, how it is attached and what access is available, needs to be carried out. BUT, anyone with basic woodworking skills can produce suitable nesting boxes. Swift box workshops have been popular community activities and can involve scout groups, schools, retired parishioners, with potential donation of materials from local shops and suppliers.

Further information can be found at:

Church Belfry Guidelines from 'Action for Swifts' <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1f1dGWovCNObdtdbJNNllx8eZuz0kMuHL/view?usp=sharing>

Guidelines for installing Swift nest boxes in church belfries, from Caring for God's Acre

<https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/guidelines-for-installing-swift-nest-boxes-in-church-belfries/>

Further advice can be obtained from:

Action For Swifts provide a useful archive of examples: <http://actionforswifts.blogspot.com/search/label/churches>.

More local information and guidance can be obtained from Devon Swift Project :

[info@devonswiftproject.co.uk](mailto:info@devonswiftproject.co.uk) <https://devonswiftproject.co.uk>



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