

Eco Church

Case Studies



St Mary's, Hardwick:
Growing Community through Creation Care



The Church of England
Diocese of Ely



Hardwick is a growing village to the west of Cambridge, where long-standing rural character sits alongside more recent residential development. As the village has expanded, so too has the need for spaces that bring people together places that feel welcoming, open, and rooted in the life of the community.

St Mary's Church plays an important role within this context. As part of the Lordsbridge Team, it offers a range of worship and community activities, while also seeking to respond creatively to the changing shape of village life.

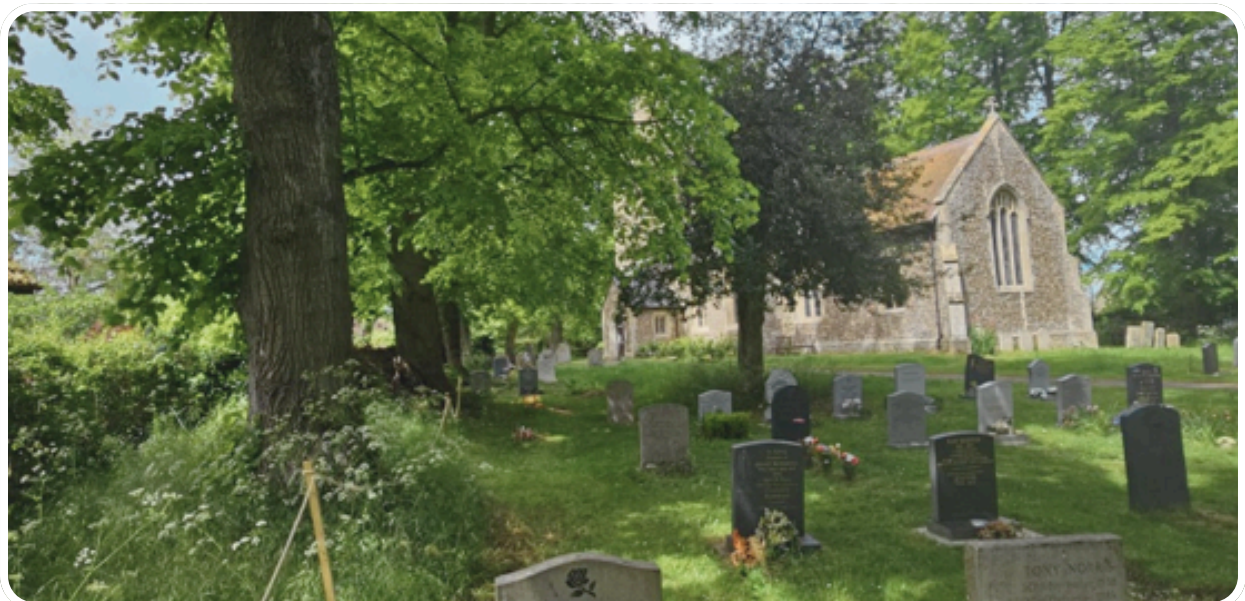


A Living History: The Story of St Mary's

The story of St Mary's Hardwick stretches back over many centuries and is closely intertwined with the life of the village itself. Land in Hardwick has been connected to the Diocese of Ely since as early as 991 AD, and the church has been part of the community's story for well over a thousand years.

The first clear record of a parish church dates from 1217, although the building that stands today is largely shaped by work from the 14th and 15th centuries. Built from local field stones, it is a church that feels rooted in its landscape simple, enduring, and quietly distinctive.

Over the centuries, the life of the church has mirrored the ups and downs of rural parish life. There were long periods when rectors were absent, and times when congregations were small. Yet the church remained a constant presence, adapting as circumstances changed.



The Cabin at St Mary's



Alongside its historic building, St Mary's has invested in a contemporary expression of community engagement: The Cabin.

Opened in 2020, the Cabin is a light, flexible and welcoming space. It includes a main hall, meeting room, kitchen, and access to an outdoor garden area. It was the result of years of planning, prayer and fundraising, and was created as a resource for the whole village.

What the group does: Practical care, week by week

At the centre of St Mary's Eco Church journey is a group that meets every Thursday, coming together not only to care for the churchyard, but also to build community. Over time, this has become a regular rhythm—part gardening session, part social gathering—where practical action and relationship-building go hand in hand.

What makes this group distinctive is the sheer range of activity they have developed, often through small, incremental changes that together have transformed the space.

- Installation of over 20 bird boxes, creating habitats across the site
- Creation of two managed meadow areas, alongside deliberate no-mow zones to allow grasses and wildflowers to grow
- Planting and encouragement of wildflowers throughout the churchyard
- Construction of bug hotels, providing shelter for insects and increasing biodiversity
- Creation of leaf mould and compost systems, helping to recycle organic material and enrich the soil



Growing, planting and learning together

A designated experimental planting area at the back of the church where children can grow plants and learn through hands-on activity.

- A herb bed, offering both practical use and sensory engagement
- A 'hot bin' composting system for food waste, modelling sustainable practices in an accessible way
- Installation of water butts on downpipes, supporting water conservation and practical gardening
- Creating Space for Children and Families
- Regular Wild Church sessions held outdoors, drawing in young children and their carers
- Informal exploration around the pond, bug hotels, bird boxes, and planting areas
- Opportunities for children to plant seeds, observe wildlife, and take part in seasonal activities

These elements work together to create a churchyard that is not only visually attractive, but ecologically active alive with insects, birds, and people enjoying the space.



Reaching Beyond the Churchyard

The group's work extends beyond the immediate church grounds into the wider village:

- Organising a plant sale in the churchyard, drawing the community in
- Taking part in wider events such as the church fete, contributing to the life of the parish
- Leading community initiatives such as planting daffodils at the village sign, creating visible signs of care beyond the church itself

These outward-facing activities help ensure that the group is not inward-looking but actively connected to village life.

Building Infrastructure and Support

The practical work of the group is supported by strong local relationships:

- The parish council has provided funding for sheds, mowers, and equipment, enabling the group to work effectively
- The group has also been involved in fundraising efforts, helping sustain and grow their work

This combination of local support and volunteer commitment has allowed the group to develop steadily over time.

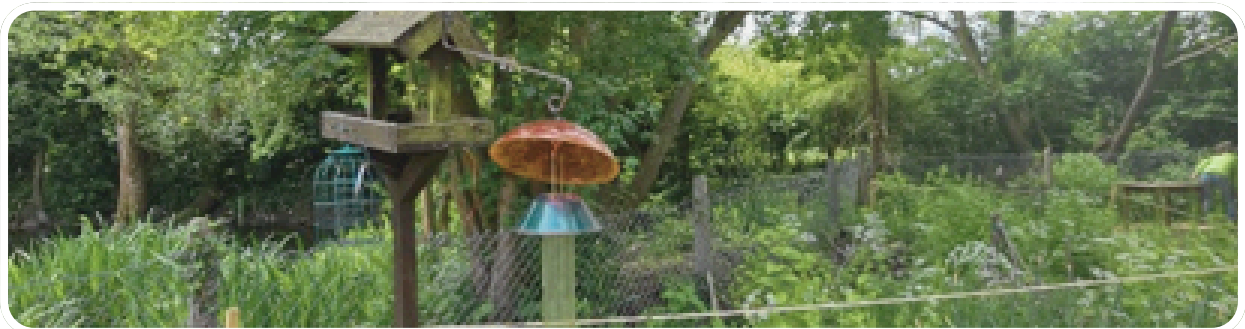


Communicating and Sharing the Story

A key element of the group's approach is helping people understand what is happening:

- Regular “Nature Notes” are produced, explaining seasonal changes, new projects, and wildlife activity
- These updates help people see the churchyard not just as a maintained space, but as a living environment with purpose and meaning

This gentle communication builds awareness and encourages deeper engagement.



A Space Transformed

Taken together, these activities have reshaped how the churchyard is used and understood:

- It is a place for walking, pausing, and exploring
- A resource for learning and education, especially through links with the local school
- A setting for community connection and informal encounter
- And above all, a place of welcome, where people can experience something of the church simply by being there

What began as a small group keeping the churchyard tidy has become a wide-ranging, creative, and relational expression of care for land, for community, and for creation.

Community Engagement: A Model Rooted in Welcome

The Eco Church group at St Mary's has become part of a wider culture of welcome. Beginning with practical care for the churchyard, the group has grown into a social and outward-looking community that connects strongly with village life.

The churchyard now serves as an inviting community space home to meadow areas, wildlife habitats, and activities that attract families, children and walkers. Initiatives such as Wild Church, plant sales, and community planting projects have deepened these connections.

Simple communication, including Nature Notes, helps people understand and engage with what is happening, while strong relationships with schools and local partners have extended the church's reach even further.

What St Mary's would say to other churches

- Start with what you have
- Build community as you go
- Let things grow naturally
- Make your churchyard your welcome
- Create opportunities for children and families
- Share what's happening

At its heart, this approach reflects a belief that care for creation and care for people belong together.