



DEVON LIVING CHURCHYARDS

GUIDANCE NOTES ON SWIFTS IN CHURCHES

Swifts are one of the most iconic birds of summer

Do you remember the days when the swifts' return to our skies telling us that summer is here? Do you remember their screaming flight, twisting and tumbling through streets and villages, over lanes and fields?

They return each year from their wintering grounds in Africa to use the same building and the same nest location they have used in previous years, bringing drama and excitement to our streets and skies.

Unfortunately, their numbers are declining at 3-4% per annum, and they are now 'Endangered'.

Lack of insects and the poor run of summer weather will have contributed to this, but a more significant impact is likely to be the loss of their traditional nesting sites.

Swifts nest in buildings, and most commonly in the roof space of people's homes, but renovation of old buildings and the creation of new ones with no access or space for nests means they are being left homeless.

In many rural towns and villages the church has become the last stronghold as village buildings are modernised or renovated and old nest sites lost

Swift nest boxes in church belfries

It is becoming a popular idea to place nest-boxes behind the louvres in church belfries. Many churches have lost their Swifts under the eaves as a result of roof renovations, so it is a good idea to try to get them back.

The pre-requisites for embarking on a project like this are a team with energy, enthusiasm and stamina, mains power near the belfry, as well as a sympathetic vicar, bell captain, church wardens and parochial church council. In making your case, you can say they make a fantastic show in the summer screaming around the church tower and they make little or no mess.

It should be regarded as a 2 or 3 year project - and that is just to get the Swifts started.

Our experience has been with making tailor-made box-shaped cabinets, containing multiple nest chambers. Typically, the nest chambers are ~350mm long by ~200mm wide with a height determined by the spacing between the louvres. The entrance should be 65-75mm wide x 30-28mm positioned near the floor of the nest chamber and towards one end. Entrances can be anywhere in the gaps between louvres.

A common question is whether Swifts are negatively affected by the sound of church bells. The answer is no. There are many examples of Swifts nesting successfully within a few feet of bells that are regularly rung. In Haddenham Church, a Tawny Owl nested successfully, for several years, within a few feet of the bells.

Nest sites for swifts can also be provided in other buildings, including new builds and renovations (where integral 'swift bricks' built into the exterior walls at height are best) and in existing dwellings and other buildings (where external special swift nestboxes can be fixed 5 metres or more above ground level).