

CASE STUDY RECOVERING FROM FLOODS ALONGSIDE THE COMMUNITY



N.B. This case study considers only one possible approach, which will not be suitable for every church. Always seek professional advice.

Key Points

- The Parish Church of St Mary, Radcliffe was flooded severely in the boxing day floods of 2015, causing extensive damage throughout the church building.
- The restoration of the church building was a focal point of the recovery for the wider community.
- When threatened again with flooding in 2020, community volunteers and donations of protective equipment protected the church from the majority of water ingress resulting in very minimal damage.



1 The exterior of the Parish Church of St Mary during the 2015 floods.

2 Interior damage to the vestry caused by the 2015 flood.

3 Sandbags preventing water ingress in 2020.

The context

On Boxing Day 2015 high rainfall led to fluvial (river) flooding throughout the North West. The Parish Church of St Mary, Radcliffe is situated right next to the river and was badly flooded along with a significant number of homes including those of multiple congregation members. The depth of water within the church rose as high as 5 feet and caused a huge amount of internal damage.

River flooding is likely to increase in both regularity and severity as a result of climate change in the UK as rainfall patterns shift. While in general there will be a similar amount of total rainfall each year it will be happening in fewer and fewer days. This will put churches like this one at a higher risk of these very extreme events occurring not once a century but potentially once a decade.

For more information, see the [church's website](#) or its entry on the [Church Heritage Record](#).

Previous Level of Preparation

- Whilst the area had experienced some minimal flooding previously, the extent of the 2015 boxing day floods took the community by surprise and came with very little warning.
- The church had almost no areas that would be raised above the level of the water, including the vestry where important documents and records were stored.
- Fixed pews limited flexibility in responding, and the presence of a sump pump within the church basement was rapidly found to be inadequate due to the sheer amount of water that entered the church.

What was the role of the church during and following the event?

As the church was situated near to the river it was flooded almost immediately, and water stayed in the building for about a week before it totally receded. Following this the first stages of recovery were:

- Drying out the building. For a period of approximately 2 months the church was home to huge industrial dehumidifiers to remove the remainder of the damp.
- An extensive period of deep cleaning as on the other side of the park to the church is a sewage works the product of which flowed into the church with the flood water
- Draining the cellar around the burnt out sump pump was, and remains, a challenge for the church
- The pews were able to be salvaged and remain in the church but much of the interior, particularly the office area in the vestry was completely destroyed (including valuable historical record) and had to be completely renovated

St Mary's was able, throughout the renovation, to engage with the local community for whom the church became a symbol of recovery. The church community grew throughout this period, but even local residents who did not attend the church took part in the recovery efforts and celebrations once the restoration work was complete.

How was the recovery funded?

The money for the recovery was covered by the church's insurance policy, however St Mary's has future reordering plans that go beyond the money paid out on their insurance claim so have begun the faculty process and a fundraising campaign to transform the church into a space more suitable for their community and fitted with more extensive fixed flood defences as these could not be covered by the insurance claim.

How has the church become more resilient?

In 2020 there was another significant flood that impacted St Mary's, however the church was able to deploy a number of flood prevention tactics that were effective in limiting the amount of water that got into the church and related damage. Whilst some of this work was as a direct result of the restoration work of which a faculty is being pursued to extend, a significant part of the response came from members of the community who without prompting provided the church with equipment to stop water entering the building including:

- Filled sandbags
- A water snake inflatable flood barrier

The community was able to come to the church's aid, showing the importance of building back together, with the church having become an important place for the community during and after the 2015 flood. The renovation work had provided room for more groups and community events to use the space and engage with fundraising efforts.

What could others learn from this case study?

1. Whilst a church can provide resilience to its community, the community can also enhance the resilience of the church building. Creating and maintaining links with the community following a disaster can create strong and long lasting relationships that benefit both parties
2. When restoring, consider the needs of the community and future climate risks to the church building.
3. At risk churches should consider acquiring flood defences, as even cheaper, portable defences can make a significant difference.

“When it started again. We've sort of put out an appeal... I can't remember where those the water snakes came from. They just turned up at church”

Church Warden, Parish Church of St Mary