

<https://www.churchofengland.org/connectivity/why/walkhampton>

Case study: St Mary the Virgin, Walkhampton

An interview with the Ven Nick Shutt, Archdeacon of Plymouth

The Venerable Nick Shutt LLM is Archdeacon of Plymouth and was, until recently, Rector of West Dartmoor Mission Community and Vicar of St Mary the Virgin, Walkhampton – a medieval church on the edge of the sprawling green wilderness of Walkhampton Common in Dartmoor, Devon.



"The current church has been here since about 1450, but we know from records there was a church here in about 1341 because an Archdeacon wrote and said 'It's falling down. Please do something about it.'"

Although St Mary the Virgin wasn't about to fall down, an extensive reordering project was completed in recent years. The works included the installation of glass screen doors, the restoration of an old wooden screen, a new kitchen, drainage, and a spiral staircase ascending to halfway up the church tower.



As part of the work, Archdeacon Nick identified an opportunity to bring St Mary's into the "digital future" and to broaden the potential uses of the church, outside of regular worship, by bringing connectivity into the building.

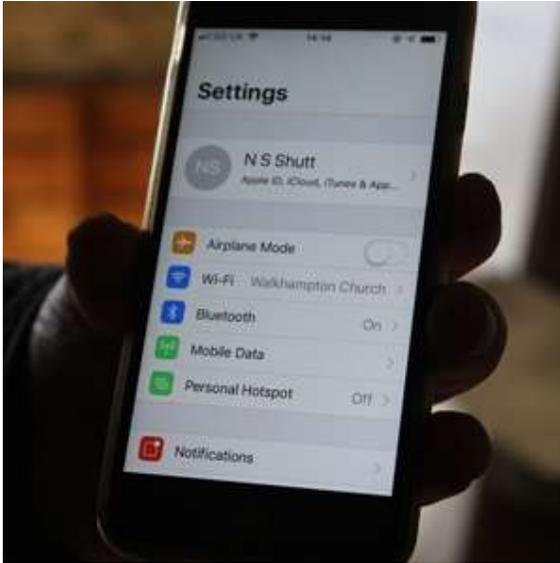
Situated some way above the village, the church – just like the many small farms and hamlets on the edge of the common – was unlikely to benefit from any planned roll-outs of fibre-optic broadband. So Nick and his team looked into the possibility of bringing broadband to St Mary's; not only to serve the church itself, but also to bring connectivity to the local community.

"As part of our community service, we looked into whether we could be somewhere where a transmitter could be placed. We were in touch with Airband, and they were also keen to see the project move forward. We made an application to the Diocesan Advisory Committee for an installation on top of the church tower."



Working with Airband, Nick's team were able to secure a faculty for the installation of wireless broadband infrastructure on the tower of St Mary's; which was, once installed, able to transmit wireless broadband to

remote, poorly served homes and businesses in the area. The reception from the community was very positive, with plenty of take-up and broadband speeds increasing considerably.



Airband also provided free WiFi for St Mary's as part of the arrangement, which Nick says has been very useful for meetings. The availability of WiFi has also made the church an even more attractive destination for "Champers":

"One of the things we are involved with, with the Churches Conservation Trust, is 'Champing' – Church Camping. It's a great offer, if people want to come and stay here, to know they'll still be connected to cyberspace if they're going to camp overnight in this church."

Nick would recommend that anyone working in a church building in an area with poor internet speeds looks into the possibility of a community wireless broadband project. While it won't necessarily be feasible or desirable for every rural church, it can be a great way to future-proof the building itself, while also serving the wider community in a thoroughly modern and much-needed capacity.

