

CASE STUDY MANAGING GRASSLAND TO REDUCE THE RISK OF WILDFIRE



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

Key Points

- St Marys and St Peter in Wennington was minimally damaged in a wildfire that had a large impact on the local community, burning parishioners' and community members' homes.
- Leaves and grass clippings from the churchyard, which had been put on the neighbouring field of glebe land, inadvertently added fuel to the fire.
- The mowed grass of the churchyard may have kept the fire from reaching the church.



1 View of St Marys and St Peter from the road prior to the fire.

2 The aftermath of the fire surrounding the church.

3 The cleaning process underway in the church interior.

The context

On July 19th 2022, Wennington was the site of a wildfire that destroyed 16 homes and forced the rest of the village to be evacuated whilst the emergency services dealt with the blaze. The source of the fire is unknown, but what is clear is that the hot and dry conditions in the run up to the fire allowed for the quick spread of the flames throughout the village. The fire spread through the glebe land at the back of the church and through into the churchyard, burning at a close distance from the church. St Marys and St Peter was fortunately untouched by the fire, but all greenery with the graveyard and glebe land was burnt away.

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

Previous Level of Preparation

- Prior to 2022, the potential for a wildfire had not really been considered by the church. The churchyard was cared for in a manner similar to many churches around England, mown regularly with clippings and leaf litter disposed of in an area of glebe land attached to the church.
- The glebe land had little identified use at the time of the fire and was therefore allowed to grow wild.
- Due to the heatwave and extended period of drought, much of the grass and leaf litter in the churchyard and glebe land was extremely dry at the time of the fire.

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

During the course of the fire, the glebe land acted as a key area for the wider spread of the fire, connecting both halves of the village and giving the fire access to the churchyard. The churchyard was entirely burnt, but the shorter length of the grass limited the temperature and reach of the fire, saving the church building itself from the flames.

Following the evacuation, as community members were returned to the village, the church was opened and fulfilled a number of roles within the community:

- It became a hub for the spiritual support of the village, including those who were not regular congregation members, continuing to host services as the recovery began.
- On a more practical level, the church acted as a meeting place for the community with the emergency services and fire advisors.

How is the church becoming more resilient for the future?

Whilst the church and community are still recovering from, and coming to terms with the damage caused by the fire, there are a number of actions that will increase the church's and wider community resilience to a similar event in the future:

- Bigger community engagement with the church has refocused the clergy and congregation on the need for investment to reorder the church and make it a more suitable building for community use.
- The usage of the glebe land is being reviewed, no longer as a place to store clippings and leaves but also as a potential community asset.
- The expert advice on grassland management from Caring for God's Acre is that areas of long grass are beneficial, because they are likely to contain more plant and animal life than medium grass and far more than short grass. However, they also recommend that after a 12-16 week growing season long grass should always be cut *before* it goes brown, and the clippings cleared. Aim to cut and rake in early July, particularly in a hot, dry year. See more details here: [A2-Caring-for-Grassland-2022.pdf](#) (caringforgodsacre.org.uk).

How was the recovery funded?

The repair work that is currently underway in the church has been entirely funded through its insurance. For St Marys and St Peter this has covered:

- Extensive cleaning to remove traces and smell of smoke throughout the interior of the building and fabrics that were stored in the church at that time.
- Repairing damage to the inside and, following architect led pressure, the exterior of lead linings in the church's windows that are particularly vulnerable to the presence of smoke.

What could others learn from this case study?

1. Awareness of potential climate risks may change across the year and churches should consider thinking about the individual risks that may present themselves across the seasons.
2. Maintain close contact with the insurance company during the repair process to ensure all necessary steps are taken and actions considered.
3. Be aware of the risk factors associated with longer grass in particularly dry times of year, but also benefits for biodiversity and soil health.
4. Consider the usage of all church land over the year, not only to make best use of it but to limit potential impacts on wider community resilience that may come from it.

"[Hotter, drier summers are] a reality here in the UK now... it's cementing the reality of what we know is happening but now it's right in my back yard"

Clergy, St Mary and St Peter's