

LIVING WITH BATS



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ECO  **CHURCH**
AN A ROCHA UK PROJECT



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WHY DO BATS LIKE CHURCHES?

England's bat populations have declined in recent decades as a result of agricultural intensification, land use change and the conversion of old buildings leading to their protection by law. Happily, numbers of some species are starting to creep back up as a result: <https://www.bats.org.uk/advice/bats-and-the-law>

Churches that have remained largely undeveloped have become disproportionately important roosting sites, providing a range of conditions to support different types of bats throughout the year. Churchyards often host a wealth of insect-attracting wildflowers, which provide a rich foraging area right outside the door: <https://www.bats.org.uk/about-bats/where-do-bats-live/bat-roosts/what-is-a-roost>

Churches are large, complex buildings that provide for different needs that bats have. Sometimes these places of worship can support hundreds of bats, and often multiple bat species are found in a single church:

- Warmer south-facing roofs are favoured by the females in early summer, who gather in maternity roosts to give birth and raise their pups.
- The cooler, more humid areas, such as crypts, can be useful for hibernation in the winter months.
- Cracks and crevices in the supporting timber frame, roof and eaves voids, and roofing tiles can be ideal roosting sites.
- Oddly, the belfries tend to be a bit noisy and draughty, so they're not the best suited areas of a church for these winged mammals!

Some bats are crevice-dwellers, whereas others like space to fly into their roost, or to fly and warm up before leaving in the evening to catch their insect dinner. At least ten of the UK's 17 breeding bat species are known to use churches, with Brown long-eared bats and Common and Soprano pipistrelles the most typically present.



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Usually bats roost in such small numbers that their presence goes unnoticed, but when present in large numbers churches can suffer from bat droppings and urine creating an unsustainable cleaning burden, as well as damage to historic artefacts and fabric. The 'Bats in Churches' project is working with ecologists and church architects to create a range of solutions that can be applied in these cases, allowing bats and church communities to continue sharing the same space in harmony:

<https://batsinchurches.org.uk/>

<https://www.bats.org.uk/advice/information-for-places-of-worship>

HOW CAN I ENCOURAGE BATS TO MY CHURCH OR WELCOME THE ONES THAT ARE THERE ALREADY?

As with all wildlife, consider habitat and food – where will they live and what will they eat? Small decisions like mowing later in the year can allow for wildflowers to set seed and initiatives like #NoMowMay champion this and encourage less regular cutting. A wide range of wildflowers will encourage greater biodiversity into the churchyard and provide richer foraging for resident bats. Provision of bat boxes in mature trees or on the outside of church buildings can also encourage bats into the area: <https://www.bats.org.uk/advice/gardening-for-bats>

<https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions/how-build-bat-box>

Bats, like all mammals, need water to survive, and choose to live and visit areas where there is a source of water nearby. Waterways and ponds also tend to attract insects, a win-win for hungry bats. If it's appropriate, a pond can be a very good addition.

If you think that there may be bats present – whether roosting in the church or visiting the churchyard to forage – information boards and 'batty' events like evening bat walks are a great way to engage the local community. Your local county bat group is often keen to run these and will have access to equipment like bat detectors and projectors for a talk in the church beforehand: <https://www.bats.org.uk/support-bats/bat-groups>



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'Bats in Churches' is running a citizen science survey to help build a better picture of how bats are using churches across the country and attitudes towards them. If you are able to survey your local church for evidence of bats during the summer, they'd love to hear from you. All the information and registration can be found here: <https://batsinchurches.org.uk/get-involved/volunteer-bat-survey/>

If you are planning to employ an ecologist because bats are limiting the use of the church or for re-roofing works, you could think about incorporating a camera into any bat box designs, with a live stream to a monitor in the church building. This can be a very popular and often surprisingly low-cost addition to your public engagement.

The two case studies at the end of this chapter show how two different churches have embraced living with bats.

If you think you might have bats in your church and need advice or if you find a sick or injured bat you can call the free National Bat Helpline on 0345 1300 228.



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LONGER READS & OTHER RESOURCES

Ione Fitzpatrick from Bats in Churches talking about why bats are so precious, along with the issues they can cause: https://youtu.be/c_EY1xKQJ_o

Resources if you have bats in your church: <https://batsinchurches.org.uk/further-information/resources/>

The bat life cycle: <https://www.bats.org.uk/about-bats/a-year-in-the-life-of-a-bat>

Some suggested places to see bats if you'd like to: https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/where_to_see_bats

CASE STUDIES

Supported by the 'Bats in Churches' project and appropriate professionals, Holy Trinity Tattershall, is adapting the way the bats use the church in order to enable people and bats to live happily side by side: <https://batsinchurches.org.uk/projects/holy-trinity-collegiate-church-tattershall/>

St Lawrence Church in Willington have successfully provided bat boxes which prevent the bats making a huge mess of the church: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ojK_ilkDsAM