

## **Saving the Fulbourn Swifts**

### **Introduction**

In 1966 164 homes were built to form the Windmill Estate in South Cambridgeshire. Many are now in need of replacement. As owners of a large proportion of the properties South Cambridgeshire District Council (SCDC) has worked closely with Accent Nene Ltd (Registered Social Landlord) on the planned re-development.

The local community had expressed early concern for the site's swift population. A site visit made it apparent how many swifts were present and how the local residents enjoyed seeing them return every summer. Subsequently, the issue was raised at pre-application planning meetings and Swift Conservation was consulted for advice.

Fortunately, planning policy now demands greater weight be attached to conserving "urban" biodiversity. It was agreed that conservation of the site's swift population would be a challenge that should be aspired to.

Observations showed the birds were finding suitable nest sites in gaps between the flat roofs and the pre-fabricated wall units (a Bison Wall Frame System). Each building could offer eight or more nest sites and is probably the main reason for the large population found at the site, although a local street name *Swift's Corner* suggests a presence of swifts in the area even prior to the estate being built.

Known for their extreme site fidelity, the potential disruption to the birds' traditional nest sites would have been huge if the whole site was re-developed at once. However, it was confirmed at an early stage that a phased re-development could be undertaken. This was very important as it enabled different boxes to be trialled and their success to be monitored. Furthermore, the retained active nests would ensure that breeding adult birds remained on the estate so as to encourage newly returning birds to search for unused sites and newly placed nest boxes. One of the largest challenges to conserving swift populations appears to be establishing new breeding colonies – therefore retaining breeding sites should be a primary consideration for conservation projects.

### **Early lessons learned**

Schwegler No.17 triple chamber nest boxes were first trialled. Due to the delayed demolition of some dwellings in the nesting season of 2007 a number of these boxes were erected immediately above the previously closed-off nest sites of swifts. However, the birds repeatedly tried to access their former sites, ignoring the new boxes. No breeding within the No.17 boxes could be confirmed although some dark feathers and possible nesting material was found in one.

Picture 1 – the No.17 swift box directly above a blocked swift hole



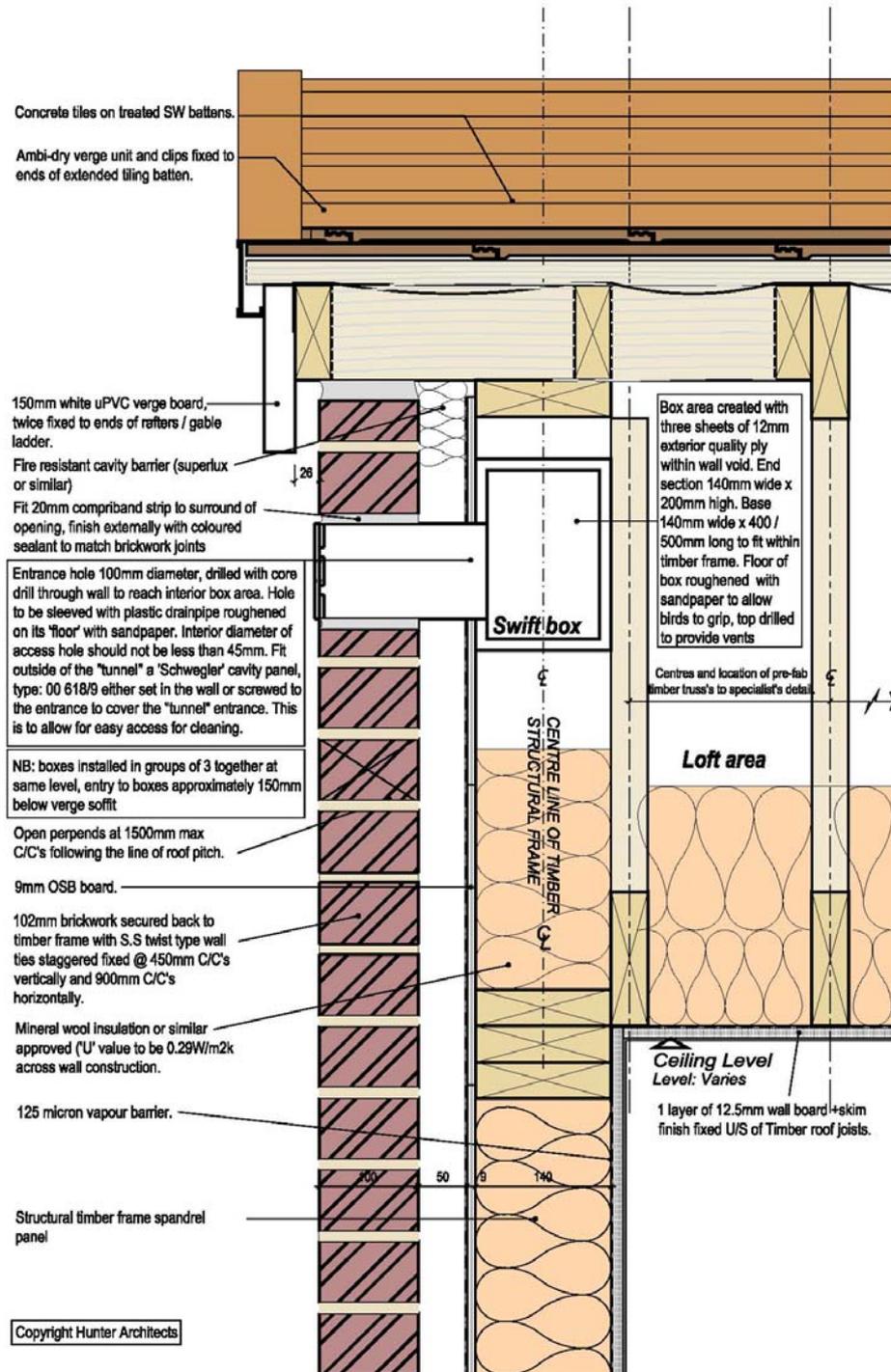
In 2008 the triple chamber nest boxes were relocated to allow demolition to progress. More nest sites had been blocked-up so more nest boxes were put up. This time, 12 wooden Zeist type boxes were located on properties that remained in the control of Accent Nene and were not set for demolition for several years. The poor weather of 2008 made monitoring the boxes impractical. The success of the Zeist boxes was considered to be low if not zero (although some locals reported seeing birds enter them).

## The Hunters Architects bespoke design

In 2009 the first new houses were being constructed. From the experiences of previous years there was a reluctance to use externally mounted nest boxes. Instead, following discussions with the scheme's architects Hunters with input from Swift Conservation, it was decided to trial an internal nest box design (see diagram 1).

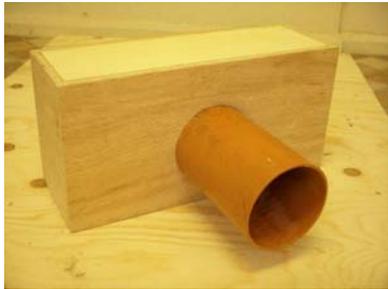
Diagram 1 – Internal swift box details (courtesy of Hunters Architects)

# Swift box detail



The box was sized so that it could fit between the studs of the buildings' internal construction (see pictures 2 & 3).

Picture 2 – internal box with vent holes still to be cut



Picture 3 – internal boxes fitted between stud work and insulation



The external cavity panels then gave the internal box a finished appearance (see picture 4) and also excluded pigeons. In total 75 internal nest sites were provided.

Picture 4 – Internal boxes with cavity panels fitted.



To ensure birds had a choice of new nest sites, 50 1MF Schwegler double chamber boxes were also erected in pairs on suitable walls, i.e. greater than five metres in height with a clear flight path (see picture 5). To generate interest in the new boxes swift call CDs (available from Swift Conservation) were played to catch the attention of passing birds. As a colonial nester swifts can become interested in sites where they believe birds are already nesting.

All of the swift features were built into, or added onto, properties that were to remain in the control of Accent Nene Ltd. This gives a greater level of confidence that the new human occupants will not remove them, or be concerned if they were considering the house for purchase. Walls with no, or few, windows were selected to further reduce possible concerns of conflict between birds and humans.

Picture 5 – externally mounted Schwegler 1MF double chamber boxes



### **Commitment to swifts**

The commitment to conserving the swift population can perhaps be measured in the quantity of boxes that Accent Nene Ltd and their main contractors, Kier Partnership Homes, were willing to provide in fulfilment of the planning condition (see box 1). In phase 1 125 new swift nest sites have been provided, plus 10 starling boxes, and 9 sparrow terraces.

### **Box 1 – planning condition for biodiversity**

Prior to any form of development or demolition full details of the nesting measures to be proposed for swifts, house sparrows and starlings shall be submitted for approval. The plot locations and elevations shall be provided. The scheme shall be monitored for a period of three years from the completion of the development with an annual report provided to the local planning authority following cessation of the bird-breeding season in September. (Reason – PPS9 seeks to maintain, enhance or restore biodiversity. The conservation of swifts, house sparrows and starlings in the context of this development is considered to be locally important.)

In 2009 Kier Partnership Homes employed the services of Applied Ecology Ltd to undertake detailed surveys of the site in advance of any demolition. The surveys have confirmed 72 active nests making this the largest (known?) swift colony in East Anglia and possibly England.

SCDC has continued to have a close role in the project and organised a community swift survey. This gave residents the chance to learn more about the birds and to understand the various measures that were being deployed to conserve them.

Significant publicity was generated for the project, culminating with the BBC filming for a regional programme (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=QwwnqcgZQ2o>).

And significantly, the former Windmill Estate has been re-branded as The Swifts, demonstrating how species conservation can be good for the local community and housing associations alike.

A similar number of swift boxes are expected in future phases. By then it is hoped that young swifts will have taken to the various new boxes and we will have more knowledge about the specific nesting requirements of the Fulbourn swifts.

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**Credits**

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