Wyre Forest Study Group

Kestrels in the Tower

ROSEMARY WINNALL



Figure 1. A hovering Kestrel searching for prey. Rosemary Winnall

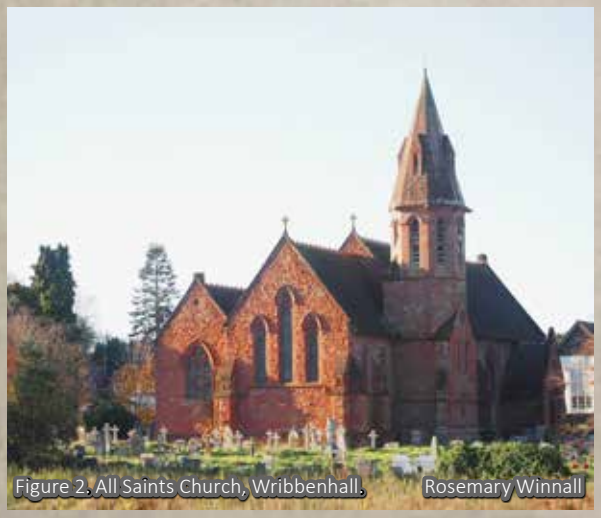


Figure 2. All Saints Church, Wribbenhall. Rosemary Winnall

Many birds of prey have several regular roost sites which may be identified by the excreted 'whitewash', a paste made up of uric acid and digestive material. It is not very water soluble so can last for some time particularly in areas sheltered from the weather. I first spotted 'whitewash' below three windows on the south side of Bewdley's All Saints Church in Wribbenhall when I visited in August 2024 (Figures 2 and 3). I could also see pellets on the windowsills and a few old ones in the drain below (Figures 4 and 5). Examination and dissection of some of these revealed that a Kestrel had been roosting on the window tracery above, although not recently.

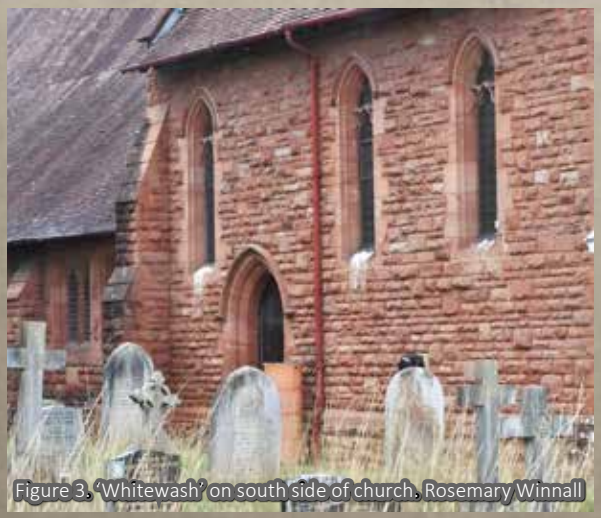


Figure 3. 'Whitewash' on south side of church. Rosemary Winnall



Figure 4. 'Whitewash' on church window ledge. Rosemary Winnall

Wyre Forest Study Group



Figure 5. Old bird pellets in drain below. Rosemary Winnall

(When compared to Owl pellets, Kestrel pellets are smaller and paler, usually have a point at one end, and contain fewer bones. Owls eat their prey whole, whereas Kestrels usually peck the flesh off their prey, leaving most of the bones - Figure 6.)



Figure 6. Female Kestrel feeding on small mammal, Bliss Gate, 17th July 2020. Rosemary Winnall

When I spoke about Kestrels in my talk 'Churches and Nature' a member of the audience mentioned that Kestrels used to nest in Wribbenhall church tower, and so the quest to find out more began. Talking to long-standing members of the church I learned that this was indeed true and Kestrels had been regular nesters in the tower over time and it was thought that photographs had been taken by John Robinson in the 1990s.

So, I spoke to John (who'd been at that time English Nature's Warden in the Wyre Forest) who kindly related his experiences. He had spotted the tell-tale white droppings whilst driving past the church and soon obtained permission to set up a hide in the tower to photograph the birds at the nest.

He was able to access the tower with the help of the late Ray Summerfield who looked after the building and churchyard. The steep shaky steps up the tower were not easy to climb whilst carrying camera equipment and hide materials. In addition, at every visit John had to wind the church clock whilst he was up there to ensure that the weights and wires were up and out of the way! The adult birds were accessing the tower through an east-facing opening and there was already a large amount of old nesting material in place on the floor, brought in over the years by Jackdaws, Stock Doves and Kestrels with a few unhatched eggs still present providing proof of nesting. It was a tight squeeze for John to set up a board across the space to act as a hide with appropriate holes for discreet viewing and camera lens, plus position a wooden box for the photographer to sit on. This was all set up bit by bit over a few visits and left in place for a while before John started his photography. At first the clock chiming made him jump as it was so loud, but the birds were used to this and John soon followed suit.

Kestrels, like most birds of prey, lay their eggs at two-day intervals and that year the female laid five eggs in total. Whilst the female was incubating the eggs John noted that she would call the male and he would bring food in for her to eat. When the chicks first hatched the female would feed them small pieces from the male's catch, but as they grew bigger both male and female went hunting and fed the youngsters at the nest. Field Voles were the usual prey and there was plenty of good habitat for these small mammals on Maypole Piece above the church. John had a privileged insight into the behaviour of this Kestrel family over many visits and took some excellent photographs (Figure 7).



Figure 7. Male Kestrel feeding young in All Saints church tower. (c) John Robinson

Wyre Forest Study Group

Inside Wribbenhall Church there is a beautiful stained-glass window showing special features of the locality, and I was delighted to see that it includes a tiny Kestrel flying around the church tower (Figures 8 and 9). This Millennium window (designed by Nick Bayliss) was put in by the family of the Rev. Ted Fenwick, and his daughter Dr. Angela Cattanach-Chell, church warden and organist at the church, told me more. The commemoration text is:

In loving memory of the Rev. D. Edward Hartwig Fenwick 1905 – 1997

Given by his family to the parish of All Saints 2000

The Reverend Ted Fenwick was a well-respected Anglican priest who served in the Parish of Benfieldside in County Durham for at least 15 years, and then in the Parish of Lapworth in the Birmingham Diocese. When he retired he acted as a non-stipendary Priest in the Parish of Solihull and often visited All Saints Church with his wife whilst his daughter was organist.

In recent years Wribbenhall Church had a building assessment undertaken by the Diocese and it was realised that the accumulation of bird nesting material and their droppings was affecting the wooden floor of the tower and it was deemed that the material had to be cleared, the floors repaired and the vents closed to prevent further bird activity. So, in July 2023 the tower was cleared, the woodwork repaired and treated, and the vents shuttered. So sadly, Kestrels won't be nesting in the church tower for the foreseeable future, but they will continue to be celebrated in Wribbenhall through the attractive church window.

Kestrels are now on the UK's Amber List of Birds of Conservation Concern as they have become less common in recent years due to many changes in our countryside and its management. Whilst checking some of the old West Midland Bird Club annual reports I noted several Kestrel records of interest:

• 1958 - one feeding on a dead cat in Exhall on July 23rd.

• 1975 – Kestrels using motorway verges to hunt for prey.

• 1985 - 19 Kestrels seen in the air together on July 27th over the Malvern Hills.

• 1986 - still breeding in Birmingham city centre.

When we were living in Bliss Gate (1998-2021), we would often see Kestrels perching in our tall garden conifer tree overlooking meadows which provided good vole habitat. They used to nest regularly in an ancient dead tree in my neighbour's garden until it was cut down for safety reasons. We quickly purchased and erected a Kestrel box on our land but the Kestrels departed and were only seen rarely after that. They never used the box, but each year it attracted competing Stock Doves, Jackdaws and Tawny Owls. The Tawny Owls invariably won, either for nesting or for roosting!

In early 2006, when the winter weather was especially cold, I used to put out extra food on the ground in our meadow to attract larger birds and



Figure 8.Memorial window in All Saints Church, Wribbenhall. Rosemary Winnall



Figure 9. Celebrating Kestrels in the memorial window. Rosemary Winnall

Wyre Forest Study Group

mammals. I collected roadkill rabbits and obtained fatty offcuts from our friendly butcher. These were pegged to the ground so that I could successfully use my remote camera to record animals. Buzzards were daily visitors but they always waited in the trees until the Carrion Crows started feeding, and then they would fly down. A cautious Raven eventually plucked up courage to fly down to feed, and on two occasions a Kestrel flew in to peck off pieces of meat (Figure 10). On another occasion when the temperatures were below freezing and prey must have been in short supply, a Kestrel surprisingly shared a cooked chicken carcass with Buzzards.

Although Kestrels no longer nest in Wribbenhall Church tower, it is hoped that they will continue to be seen in and around Bewdley for many years to come, so long as local meadows are managed to encourage voles, and the birds can find safe nesting places.

Acknowledgements.

I'd like to thank several people who provided information about breeding Kestrels in All Saints Church, Wribbenhall, especially John Robinson who provided me with interesting details about his photography sessions in the tower and kindly let me use one of his excellent images. Heather Flack told me about the kestrel in the church memorial window and took me to see it, and Angela Cattanach-Chell generously gave her time to talk to me about the tower repair details and history of her family's window.

Thank you all!



Figure 10. Female Kestrel feeding on meaty scraps, Bliss Gate 29th January 2006. Rosemary Winnall