

THE PEREGRINES OF LOUTH

An account of the events
leading up to the successful breeding
by a pair of peregrine falcons
on St.James' Church

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Front cover: Peregrine photograph – John Clarkson (1948-2023)

Back cover: A peregrine's-eye view of St. James' – Christina Belton

Introduction

For many years, man has given the peregrine falcon (*Falco peregrinus*) a hard time. From the late 1700s gamekeepers, custodians of the shooting estates, regarded the peregrine as vermin and shot or trapped them whenever they were seen over the red grouse moorlands of the north, and pheasant or partridge grounds further south. The first 'Wild Birds Protection Act' was passed in 1880, but the peregrine was not on the schedule of named species. Later Acts gave some degree of legal protection, but were generally ignored by the gamekeepers. The new 'Protection of Birds Act' of 1954 included total protection for the peregrine and its eggs for the first time, and marked the dawn of an era of greater public concern for wildlife conservation in Britain.

From around the 1840s, egg collecting became a fashionable pastime and peregrine's eggs were sought after as a prize item for any collection due to the rarity of the bird and the attractive and variable colour of the eggs – cream with heavy red and brown markings. As an example, photographs exist in London's Natural History Museum of one Dorset collector with 64 eggs taken from local peregrine nests in a single year. 'Egging', although illegal since the 1954 Act outlawed the practice, still continues today.

Domestic pigeons, bred from the wild rock doves, have provided a huge population of feral pigeons. The peregrine's predilection for domestic pigeons caused it problems in WW2, when in July 1940, the 'Destruction of Peregrine Falcons Order' came into force. The need to protect carrier pigeons made it lawful for any authorised person to kill peregrines and destroy their eggs in order to protect the pigeons. The Order remained in force until 1946 and resulted in the shooting of almost 600 adults and immature birds, mostly on the south coast, with many eggs also destroyed. The slaughter reduced the peregrine population to around half its pre-war level, with the bird virtually eliminated from some southern counties. Post-war, peregrine numbers began to revive and almost reached pre-war levels, when another disaster occurred.

The introduction of organochlorine pesticides such as DDT in the late 1950s that were sprayed on freshly-sown seeds as a protection against crop pests, not only killed the pests, but the seed-eating birds – finches to pheasants. Predators such as the peregrine died after ingesting the still highly active pesticide residues in the bodies of their prey. A side effect of the poisoning was the thinning of the peregrines' eggshells, so of those birds that did manage to lay eggs, many suffered failure due to egg breakage. Peregrines therefore died, clutches were reduced, and brood sizes fell from 3-4 eggs, to 1-2.

The 'Silent Spring'¹ effect is well-documented; suffice to say that by 1961 the peregrine population plummeted to around 40% of its pre-war levels and only 68 pairs were known to rear young². It is thought that if this decline continued unabated, the peregrine falcon in Britain could have been extinct by 1967. However, it was that year that signs of a hoped-for recovery appeared following restrictions on pesticide use, and the 1971 survey showed the population had increased to 54% of pre-war levels, with successful breeding up from 16% to 25%.³

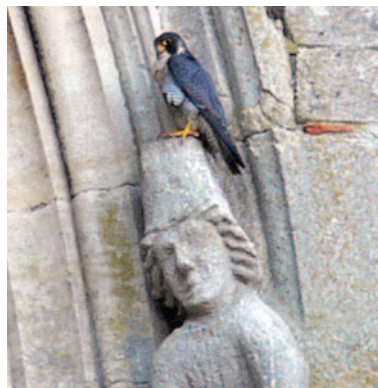
Since then, peregrine numbers have continued to slowly recover, and by the late 1990s had reached pre-decline levels over much of their former range. However, in southeast and east of England recovery has been slow, and the range is now contracting again in northern Scotland.⁴

2007-2008

In his book 'Birds of Louth' published in 2007, John Clarkson⁵ reports just one sighting of a peregrine, in November 1993. Julia and I moved into a property overlooking St. James' Church in October 2006 and with clear views of the east and south sides of the church from our bedroom and garden, we began recording the birds seen on the church tower and spire. On the afternoon of 18 December 2007, we spotted a pair of peregrines flying around the tower, giving the local jackdaw population heart palpitations!

The next few weeks brought regular sightings – sometimes a pair, other times an immature female. Birds were seen stooping at passing pigeons, bringing in prey to pluck, and frequently returning to the church at dusk to roost. There was enough activity to warrant a nest tray being constructed by Wildlife Conservation Partnership volunteer and Lincolnshire's bird of prey expert Bob Sheppard⁶, who had made similar trays for the nesting peregrines on St Wulfram's Church, Grantham. The nest tray was installed on the north side of the walkway on 12 February 2008.

However, by that time, reports of the birds were becoming few and far between, and although the birds were still seen in the vicinity there was no sign that they had adopted the nest tray. Some local birders thought that the birds were possibly too immature to breed that year, while others considered the opening of the tower to the public in previous years was hampering the birds' possible nesting efforts. It was certainly the case that the nest tray would be accessible by anyone climbing the tower when it opened at Easter, and a small notice requesting visitors not to go round to the north side, would become an open invitation to the curious.



After no sighting in April, on 9th May at 22.40 I spotted something flying around the spire of St. James', illuminated by the church lights. Looking through binoculars, it turned out to be a peregrine, which settled to roost on one of the crockets on the east side of the spire. This confirmed a study I had read recently about urban peregrines hunting night-migrating birds over major cities making use of the illuminations.⁷

So, a more diligent recording of the peregrines began, augmented by reports from other birdwatchers, particularly at times when we were away from the town.

One of the first photographs of a peregrine on St. James' Church, an adult male on the east side of the tower. September 2008.



Juvenile on a crocket, east side of the tower – a favoured location in the early days. November 2008.

During August two peregrines were seen together, though looking at photos taken, there appeared to be three different birds – an adult male and female, plus a first-year female. This combination gave rise to some speculation regarding breeding. The male appeared to be equally settled with either of two females, only one of which seemed to be present at any time, so it was expected that the older female would see off the juvenile whenever she was around. If the adult female was a resident bird, we thought they could breed in 2009. However, it was

possible she was a wintering bird from further north that would depart in the spring, in which case the juvenile female would take up position, claim the territory and defend it next winter, after which she should be able to breed in 2010. If only it was that simple!

It had been expected that as normal, the tower would be closed to visitors at the end of October, which would give the birds time to assess the tower as a secure nesting site. However the tower remained open while the shop selling charity Christmas cards was in operation. I was asked by concerned members of the Lincolnshire Bird Club (LBC) to approach the church volunteers regarding closure of the tower; this I did, one response being “this is a church, not a falconry.”

2009-2010

So into 2009, and after several weeks where no peregrines were sighted, one was seen on 28 January landing on the north side of the spire with prey. This was followed early in February by a pair that made regular appearances for some days.

Sightings then became sporadic until June, when a single bird was present for much of the month, but was frequently disturbed by visitors to the tower. I noted one occasion in particular on 11 June, when a peregrine circled the tower a number of times calling loudly



Remains of a golden plover (left) and woodcock (right) retrieved from the tower walkway.



Nest tray with gravel on the north side of the tower walkway.

before eventually flying off. Could it have had anything to do with two couples in their late teens, who spent 45 minutes there at that time, shouting to people below, waving their arms around, spitting and throwing cigarette butts? If I were a peregrine, I'd relocate elsewhere! I subsequently climbed the tower to check the nest tray, and it was easy to see why the birds

failed to nest – the only protection given to the nest tray was an old door, wedged on the north walkway and so close to the tray that it was possible to reach around the door and touch it!

2010 started well; birds, often a pair, were present for most of the month and by the end of January, they sat close together – could this be the year? However, on 2 February the LBC were informed that the Church Council had met the previous night to discuss the implications of having peregrines nesting on the walkway around the tower, and decided that they no longer wanted to encourage the birds to nest, which would result in having to stop public access to all of the walkway. Whilst this was disappointing news for all birdwatchers, we had to respect the church's decision that it had to cater for the needs of the wider public.

A week later, John Clarkson and Bob Sheppard met with the Rector, Canon Stephen Holdaway and Churchwarden Robert Haynes. The meeting was amicable and positive. Bob outlined the biology and the legal framework and the church representatives informed us of the difficulties they faced through loss of goodwill from visitors who 'may have travelled a long way' to enjoy the



The old door (left) on the north walkway, which was supposed to keep visitors away from the nest tray that was just beyond, and (below) a makeshift notice on the west walkway, that had already been trampled down when I visited on 11 June 2009.





Male (tiercel) peregrine on the south side of the tower. September 2010.

panorama from this, the highest parish church in the country, and the consequent loss of income.

The outcome was that the tower would be closed if the birds show evidence of breeding. The tower was closed in any case until 5th April, by which time we should have known either way. If breeding occurred, the tower would remain closed until the chicks were well established, after which, limited access would be permitted. Furthermore, Robert Haynes agreed to sponsor a web-cam.

The pair of falcons were visible for much of February and odd days in March, but a visitor to the Church on 5 April was disappointed to be told that there had been no signs of breeding on the nest platform and that pictures from the web-cam were no longer being shown in the church. By this time, the pair hadn't been seen together for about three weeks and the male had been absent for several days at a time. 5 April was also the first day of the new 'visitors season'; the coffee shop opened, and visitors climbed the tower.

Positive signs that a pair might breed were seen in September 2010, when on the 17th, there were great views of a male that had been calling throughout the night, and a female, performing aerobatics whilst he continued his familiar call and she screeched and yapped. They chased each other, came together and tumbled downwards before parting and gaining height again. They eventually flew off northeast, leaving passers-by stunned by the display, which I thought would hopefully be the precursor of greater things next spring. Sightings such as this continued throughout the remainder of 2010, with several reports of prey being shared.

2011-2012

As 2010 closed and 2011 dawned, there were definite signs that the two birds had bonded. They were calling to each other when bringing in prey that they subsequently shared, and roosted close together. However, once again, the tower had been open to visitors until Christmas. In the pub before Christmas I encountered the 'Team Vicar'. I started chatting to mutual friends about the peregrines, when the Team Vicar piped up "You realise the church will lose £600 if the tower has to close?" I explained about the benefits to the church if the birds nested, but nobody was convinced, so once again, I could foresee an uphill struggle to get the church on our side. (This Team Vicar has since relocated.)

With frequent sightings of the pair during January and February, the camera installed by the nest tray was re-linked to the TV screen in the church. When Julia and I went to view the screen on 18 March we had to ask for it to be switched on. There was no activity, although we had seen a single bird below the walkway on the east side. Whilst there, visitors were allowed to climb the tower and when we questioned this, we were told that the peregrine activity was mainly at night and if they were seen to be breeding, the tower would be shut.

However, peregrine sightings dropped from 25 days in January, to just 2 in April. The major problem appeared to be public access to the tower, which occurred as early as March putting paid to any nesting activity, even if nesting overtures had already been made. It was a known fact that peregrines will not tolerate any human disturbance around a potential nest site.

Sightings throughout the rest of 2011 were sporadic, but on 21 October, I noted that a peregrine flying towards the church was attacked by a carrion crow, one of a flock that had been hanging around the town that afternoon. The crow initially chased off the peregrine, but it managed to get back to the church a few minutes later.

Early in 2012, there were tantalising glimpses of single birds and sometimes a pair, but by April there was little of note. It was thought that these winter sighting suggested that the church was used as a roost probably by Scandinavian birds that spend the winter here, departing during first week in April (peregrines breed some weeks later in Scandinavia than they do here) and on 10 April it was decided to remove the nest tray for the remainder of the year.

2013-2014

In January 2013, St. James' had a new Rector – The Reverend Nick Brown – replacing Canon Stephen Holdaway who had retired in October 2011. On 3 March, I checked the

LBC forum on their web site and read a post from Bob Sheppard. He reported that for the past fortnight he had been in discussion with the Rector who had been considering the situation regarding the opportunities for peregrines to nest on the St. James' tower walkway. With regret he had decided that the nesting tray would not be installed in 2013 nor in the future. The main reason for the decision was that the church wished to retain year-round access to the tower walkway. He said they earn a reasonable income for charging visitors to climb the tower, and 'many visitors travel long distances' to do this and would be disappointed to have the opportunity denied to them. Bob proposed that a line be drawn under this situation, the wishes of the church be respected and LBC members not ask for the nest tray to be installed in the future.

As if in protest, the birds went missing for some weeks in the summer, but by the end of August they were back, with either a single bird or a pair noted throughout the autumn and winter, although surprisingly, there were no records during December 2013.

2014 seemed to be following the same pattern – peregrines recorded throughout January, February and March, but then few sightings until August, after which, singles or pairs became regulars on the church for the remainder of the year.

2015

2015 began as 2014 ended, with one or two peregrines present on the church most days. At the end of January I found the remains of a wading bird below the church tower, followed by the remains of a red-legged partridge at the beginning of February.

Throughout February and March, sightings of the pair increased to the point where we thought the birds were attempting to nest. On 25 March at 07.50, the male flew from the southeast onto the castellations on the east side of the tower and dropped directly down onto the walkway. An hour later the second peregrine arrived, flying in from the east. It alighted on the south face of the tower and drop down onto the walkway there, presumably walking round to its mate. John Clarkson logged the following report on the LBC web forum that evening:

'A pair of Peregrines has taken up residence on Louth St James' Church and has been roosting at the site for at least two weeks with birds being seen regularly throughout the day, often displaying and calling. Geoff Mullett, Phil Espin⁸ and I have been monitoring their behaviour and attendance. It became apparent that they may be attempting to breed. This presented an immediate problem as visitor access to the tower was due to start this Saturday 28th March. I contacted Bob Sheppard to discuss what might best be done and he in turn spoke to Nick Brown, the Rector.

The upshot was that Bob came to Louth this morning to assess the site and he, along with the Rector, Churchwarden Robert Haynes and me, ascended the 197 steps to the top of the tower. There is no gravel or debris the peregrines could use to nest on at this level so it seemed unlikely that they would breed here. There was plenty of evidence of their presence with parts of woodcock, lapwing, golden plover, oystercatcher, pigeons and starling littering the area. We

returned to street level where we were joined by Churchwarden John Troughton and discussed how to proceed. The options were to continue as normal and ignore the peregrines and allow visitor access – perfectly reasonable as there was no clear evidence of nesting. The alternative would be pro-active and enable the peregrines to breed. This would be inconvenient to visitors who travel some distance to take in the view from the tower and would result in a significant loss of income for St James'. However, I am delighted to say that the latter course of action was agreed.

At 3pm Bob, Robert, Geoff Mullett and I returned and carried bags of gravel, a tray and a CCTV camera, all provided by Robert, up to the top of the tower and installed them. If they go ahead and breed I hope that the birds will attract visitors who will be generous in helping recompense St James' for their loss of income. I would like to thank all concerned, and especially the St James' staff, for their time and their generous and positive attitude.

Geoff has informed me that the Peregrines returned to the site at 17:50.'

Bob Sheppard explained why the nest tray was placed on the cold, north face of the tower. He said *'The peregrine is used to bleak conditions in its usual mountain or sea-cliff habitat and cold winds don't affect them and the chicks are always brooded when small if the weather is cold. Very little rain falls from the north in the UK so it is the driest aspect to put the tray. The big danger is from the heat of the sun, and the rain that in the UK comes from the west. When the chicks are old enough not to need brooding, they can become over-heated very quickly in the afternoon sun, and the westerly showers can also soak them. The north and east are therefore always the preferred natural sites peregrines choose, and we try to mimic that with the nest tray.'*

The following day (26 March), the peregrines were seen via the camera link to have found the nest tray and excavated a depression in the gravel in preparation for egg-laying, we hoped. From then on, the TV screen in the church nave was closely watched for tell-tale signs, and on 1 April a church volunteer reported that the female was on the nest tray at 13.15, though no eggs had been seen. On 2 April a small crowd gathered around the TV to watch both birds on the nest tray. The female shuffled around in the gravel for a while, before leaving with the male. I recorded that signs were really positive; even the church volunteers were excited!

Throughout the next couple of weeks, both birds were seen on the nest tray where the female was seen to be 'scraping furiously' on 4 April and food passes between the pair were occasionally witnessed. Finally, the first egg was seen on the morning of the 15th. Bob Sheppard supplied a report for visitors to the church:

'For most of the time the female will not sit the first egg. In fact she will only properly incubate from the third or even the fourth egg. The egg(s) will often be in the tray with no visible signs of the parents, which is perfectly normal. The adults are not far away and will soon see off any intruding crows, buzzards, etc.

There is a long wait between eggs. It can be as little as 48 hours or as long as 72 hours. Usually it is around 54 hours, so the whole clutch (usually 4 eggs) can take between 6 and 9 days before it is complete.



Female on the nest tray, 6 April 2015. Photo from the TV screen. (Photo Chris Marshall)

The female will do most of the incubating, which lasts about a month, sometimes letting the male have a turn whilst she feeds and preens. Most of the observations I have made over the years show the males to be quite clumsy birds when getting on and off the eggs so the female doesn't usually leave him in charge for too long!

The male does all the hunting during incubation, and will catch a lot of blackbird-size prey such as woodcock, golden plover, starlings, etc. Sometimes he will hunt at night, using the lights of Louth to illuminate waders that often move around in the hours of darkness.'

When the church was opened at 08.30 on the 17th, a second egg was spotted, having arrived overnight or early that morning.

There was some spectacular action that day; in the morning, the male stooped from a great height to attack a curious carrion crow and chased it off, then at 16.00 there was a very noisy food exchange when the male brought in a pigeon. The female flew from the nest to collect it, and could be clearly seen perched on the spire, gorging herself.

On 21 April the third egg was seen, although it was thought to have been laid two days previous. Bob Sheppard produced an updated report:

'The female will now begin incubating the eggs. Until now she has just stopped the eggs from chilling, particularly at night. It is likely she will lay a fourth egg, probably sometime later on today, as eggs are laid at intervals of 2 to 3 days. For those monitoring the TV screen, the next month might seem a bit quiet. The female can sit almost motionless for hours on end, then one day at the end of the third week of May all eyes will be on the tray to see who can spot a tiny glimpse of white fluff showing the first chick has hatched. They are at their most beautiful in their first two weeks of life before they lose their white downy feathers and start to develop proper peregrine plumage.'

The 21st was a quiet day with a sparrowhawk, then a juvenile rough-legged buzzard passing overhead without any fuss, while the male peregrine watched proceedings from the spire. Another noisy food-pass at 17.00 was seen, then it was all quiet again.

Bob supplied an updated report on 24 April when it was clear that the clutch would consist of three eggs. He suggested that incubation would last about a month. The shortest incubation on record being 29 days and the longest 33 days, so the first chick could be expected between Tuesday 19th May and Saturday 23rd May.



*Adult male on the spire crockets.
17 April 2015*

For the next month, those monitoring the birds had some worrying times. While one adult was usually seen on the TV screen incubating the eggs, there were periods when the pair took to the air for up to an hour – how were the eggs keeping warm?

On 12 May I reported that the female was still on the eggs, but the male had not been seen or heard for a week when a kill had noisily brought in. The female left her eggs for over 4 hours on the 9th, when the weather was particularly bad, although she had been in attendance most of the time since. Where was the male? Those of us less experienced in the vagaries of the bird world had a few sleepless nights, while Bob was more upbeat – he'd seen all this before!

On 17 May, a feral pigeon attacked a visiting juvenile peregrine when it landed near the pigeon's nest. For some minutes, the pigeon swooped on the resting peregrine, sending feathers flying. The sound of the juvenile complaining vociferously was the first call from any peregrine in Louth for 12 days. Later that day, the nesting female chased off this persistent juvenile before returning to her eggs.

Then, on 22 May, the first chick hatched at 13.10, followed on the 23rd by a second. Word spread and visitors to the church crowded in to see the new-borns. The coffee shop did a roaring trade; Julia and others supplied home-made cakes for the shop to sell and donations were left in the dish by the TV screen, which together, more than made up for the loss of income incurred by the tower being temporarily closed.

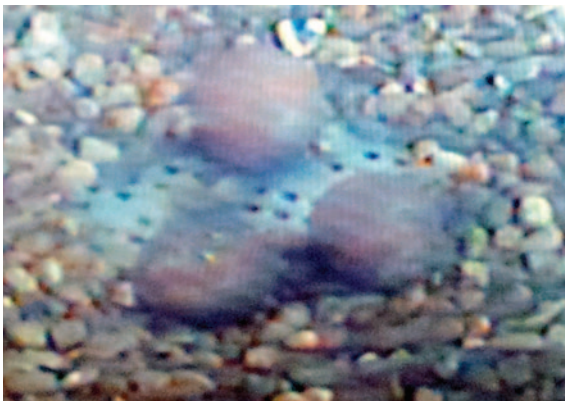
Finally, at 11.40 on 24 May, visitors were relieved to see three chicks on the nest, being fed by both adults. Bob provided

another report: *'Today, two adults were observed at the nest tray so all is well and the chicks should get plenty of food.'*

It is one of the wonders of the bird world how the huge female peregrine is able to feed tiny scraps of meat to these little bundles of fluff!

Slowly over the next few days there will be more action on the nest tray following a very quiet month. The male will continue to do the hunting, usually plucking the prey before handing it

The clutch of three. 27 April 2015. Photo from the TV screen. (Photo Chris Marshall)





Three chicks with the female. 24 May 2015. Photo from the TV screen. (Photo Chris Marshall)

over to his mate to feed the chicks. He will also cache food nearby for her to collect. She will brood the chicks whilst they are small to protect them from rain and sun, but on warm days they will often be left alone, although the female won't be far away – any buzzard or crow flying too close to the church will feel her wrath!

The speed at which the chicks will grow is amazing. A week after their feathers start to darken, the chicks will leave the nest tray and find another spot on the walkway. They will be rarely seen after that until they begin to exercise their wings on the parapet in preparation for their first flight.'

For the following three weeks there was much activity, both on and off the nest tray; the adults brought in regular supplies of food and the chicks were visibly seen to be growing. Then on 8 June Bob informed us that they would be ringing the birds that week.

So, on 11 June Bob Sheppard, Alan Ball – both licensed ringers – together with trainee Daniel Wade climbed the tower while I was asked to remain at ground level to reassure concerned locals that nothing untoward was taking place. As a matter of course, the ringers always inform the local police of their intentions in case anybody contacts them to report shrieking birds. Wise precautions as the adult birds quickly spotted the ringers on the walkway and immediately began flying round the tower, screaming at the intruders. The juveniles could also be heard calling and the cacophony attracted passers-by and brought nearby residents from their homes to find out what was happening. Although the whole



Nesting changeover. 24 May 2015. Photo from the TV screen. Compare the size of the chicks (above) and (below) – just 12 days apart.



Chicks being fed. 5 June 2015. Photo from the TV screen. (Photo Chris Marshall)

process took just eleven minutes, a large crowd had gathered and they had good views of the adults circling the spire, with the female being far more aggressive than the male, who flew at a greater height and was less vocal.

With the ringers enjoying their tea and cake in the coffee shop, we learned that the three juveniles were all males, weighing 580g, 630g and 715g. Each chick now had two rings, a metal BTO (British Trust for Ornithology) ring on its right leg bearing a unique number, and a large orange plastic ring on its left leg with a black letter and number that can be read from a long distance with a telescope. Orange is the colour used for peregrines in the East Midlands, and so together with the identification number – our birds are W3, W6 and W9 – they can be individually recognised.

After about an hour, the birds settled down and life for them went on as before. Later, Bob sent me a further update, which on reading, I found somewhat disconcerting!

'The chicks will soon leave the nest tray to wander along the walkway. They will rarely be seen then, until they begin learning to fly next month.'

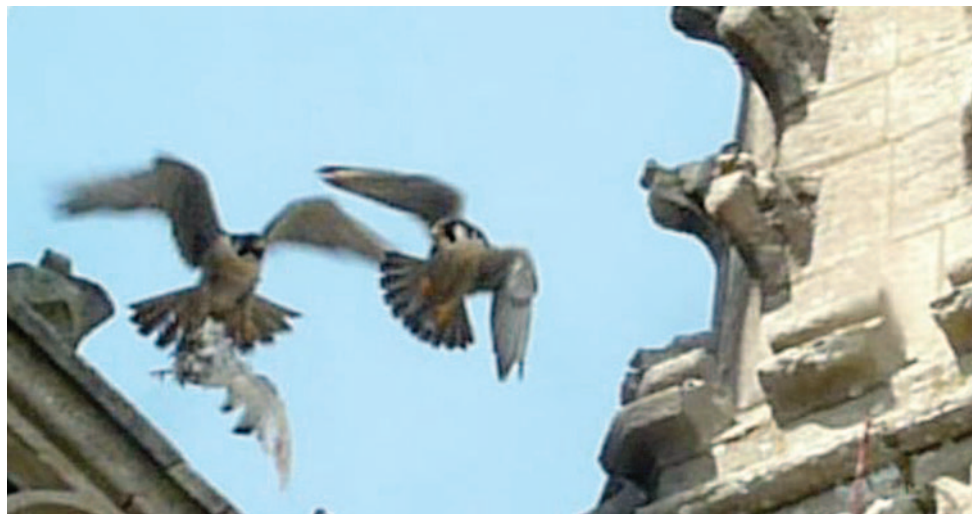
At this stage they become vulnerable to falling off on windy days. They rarely hurt themselves but the ground around the church is not a good place for a young peregrine. If seen, put on a pair of gloves, pick the bird up and put it in a box. Carry it up the tower, open the door to the walkway and tip it out of the box...'

First, catch your peregrine, I thought!

By the third week of June, viewers of the TV screen could clearly see the juvenile plumage showing through the fluffy white down and a week later the transformation was complete. Around this time, sighting on the TV screen became a rarity as the juveniles went



Adult pair with prey on the southwest pinnacle, 9 June 2015.



Food pass on 11 June 2015.

‘walkabout’ around the tower walkway, then on 30 June a juvenile was seen looking through the castellations on the tower; I got my gloves and box ready!

On 30 June, Churchwarden Robert Haynes emailed Bob Sheppard to enquire when the tower could be reopened and to ask for help clearing the debris from the walkway. He also reminded Bob that the LBC had promised a donation to St. James’ to compensate for the loss of income. Bob replied, suggesting the tower could be opened from 24th July, which will have given the chicks every opportunity to learn to fly well. A few weeks later, LBC paid St. James’ £250 from Club funds.

Things now moved apace. By 6 July, one of the juveniles was regularly seen on the parapet exercising its wings, with another looking through the castellations. The third hadn’t been seen at this point, but all three kept up a constant, monotonous screeching, their appetites insatiable.

At 09.00 on 8 July I photographed the larger of the three on the nave roof, with the other two calling down to it. We had just missed its maiden flight, but it was the first time we had seen all three since they were ringed. We also missed its return flight, for on 9 July all three were seen together on the tower again.

I was away from home on 11 July when I had a call from John Clarkson to say there was a juvenile sitting on a car bonnet in Westgate. I hurried home to see a very unhappy youngster perched on the church’s perimeter wall by the traffic lights. John had already caught it once and tried ‘launching’ it, but it only flew for about 50 metres before encountering a brick wall, where it managed to cling to the vertical surface for a short time before dropping down to this lower wall. It was clear the bird couldn’t be left in this situation, so John and I tried to catch it again with a view to taking it back up the tower, but we were unsuccessful, and instead, the bird flew at an alarmingly low height along Bridge



The two rings – a metal BTO ring with a unique number, and an orange plastic ring (orange denotes an East Midlands bird) whose number can be read at a distance.

(Photo Bob Sheppard. 11 June 2015)

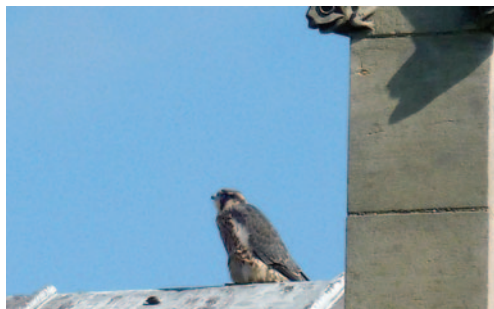
Street, crash-landing on the roof of the Old Mill House and sliding down to the guttering where it remained. It was some time until the three juveniles were seen together again.

Meanwhile, the other two siblings were honing their flying skills and on 14 July, one of them made its first kill, which it dumped unceremoniously on the roof of the nave before starting the messy business of plucking. Its brother was in close attendance, but the spoil wasn't for sharing and it was eventually dragged over the apex of the roof and out of site.

Throughout the remainder of July and into August, we were treated to some spectacular views of the juveniles, on one occasion a bird took up residence on our next-door neighbour's chimney pot for a time; then a few days later, two of the siblings engaged in a high speed chase though our garden, well below roof height, avoiding the trees and disappearing around the far side of the neighbouring Rectory.

As August drew to a close, these close-up antics ceased and although the birds were seen and heard frequently on the spire, their forays took them further afield, returning usually at dusk to roost. During this time at least one of the adults would be in attendance, though there was no visible contact between adult and young.

13 September 2015 was the 500th anniversary of completion of the church spire, celebrated by a huge firework display. We did wonder if that would frighten the peregrines



We just missed the maiden flight of one of the juveniles (left), but caught its second one (right). Photos from our bedroom window, 8 July 2015.

away for good, but within 30 minutes of the smoke drifting away, an adult could be heard calling from its perch on the spire, and a second bird flew in soon after.



First one, (above left), then finally all three juveniles (above right) are seen together for the first time on the parapet. 9 July 2015.

Below – W6 showing his admirers his new ring, before testing his claws on a brick wall on 11 July 2015. (Photos John Clarkson)





W6 on a car bonnet in Westgate, (photo John Clarkson), before flying along Bridge Street and crash-landing on the roof of the Old Mill House. 11 July 2015.

So, as the year draws to a close, what of our birds? Breeding birds mostly stay in their territories, although a pair may temporarily split up and cover a larger area between them, but young birds disperse in the autumn (most peregrines do not start breeding until they



A juvenile on the church. 11 July 2015. A superb photo by John Clarkson



A juvenile makes its first kill; sibling looks on. Photo from our bedroom window 14 July 2015.

are two or more years of age). Our adult male can be seen and often heard perched on the spire. One of the three juveniles is occasionally in attendance, but the female has not been seen for some time; perhaps she needs a break...

2016

Well, the female did return and the pair were together on and off as 2015 became 2016. The nest tray was repositioned on 8 February and within a week, both birds were seen inspecting it. On occasions, a third peregrine, thought to be one of the 2015 brood paid a visit, flying around the church, but was politely and firmly shown off the premises!

Between 1 and 8 April, four eggs were laid and between 11 and 13 May, all four hatched. On 31 May, the chicks were ringed and all found to be female.



Two images from 2016. Left – Male has just caught and flown in with prey, clearly hard work as he is panting. Right – Feeding the juveniles on a gargoyle, a favourite 'dining table'. 27 June 2016.

2017

2017 was a year of highs and lows for the peregrine watchers! Our pair seem to have established themselves on the church and were often visible during the winter months. The nest tray was put in place as usual and 3 eggs were laid between 3 and 9 April. The chicks



The three chicks being ringed. 6 June 2017



appeared between 12 and 15 May and we were looking forward to some good views on the TV screen in the coffee shop. However, disaster struck on 20 May, when a violent, but localised electrical storm burned out the camera mounted on the tower, and also the TV input. The camera and TV were replaced when the chicks were ringed, but by that time, they were starting to move off the nest and out of site.

The chicks were ringed on 5 June and thought to be 2 males and 1 female. All seemed well and as they grew, were seen through the castellations on the walkway.

The first flight was noted on 23 June and two juveniles subsequently flew strongly, with some spectacular views around the church. However, one of the males fell from the tower on 28 June in foul weather. I caught and returned it after it had been checked by a veterinary nurse who gave it the all clear. It fell again on 1 July and was returned to the aisle roof, where it remained, unfed, until Wednesday 5 July, when it came down again from the roof and we caught it and put it in a box.

I had already phoned Kilton Raptor Rescue (Worksop) as the adults were clearly ignoring the bird. They arrived and after examining the bird, said it was "skin and bone" and had an 'Angel Wing', a birth defect in which the last joint of the wing is twisted, with the wing feathers pointing out laterally, instead of lying against the body. It also had a deformed talon. The bird was subsequently examined by a zoological vet who said there was no chance of release, so it remains in care.

2018

3 chicks hatched (from 4 eggs laid) in early April. When ringed (identification letters PTD, PVD and P3L), they were thought to be 2 female & 1 male (or possibly 3 female) and all have all had adventures in the subsequent weeks.



PTD was blown from the tower in strong winds on 14 June. It was too young to fly – still with its downy feathers. We retrieved it and returned it to the tower.

P3L became grounded on three days – 24, 25 & 26 June. Each time it was returned to the tower.

PTD rescued from the porch roof on 4 July

on 27 June, where it was attacked by the resident herring gulls (that have their own nest in Bridge Street). It was caught and taken to James Street Vets to be checked out, where it was found to be in good shape and well-fed, so was returned to the tower.

The first flight was noted on 24 June, after which, two juveniles subsequently flew strongly, with some spectacular views around the church. However, the nestlings blown from the tower on 14 June by strong winds hadn't been seen again until 30 June, when it appeared on the nave roof. It remained there flightless and unfed until the morning of 4 July, when it dropped to the porch roof, where we caught it.

As last year Raptor Rescue (Workshop) collected it – they are the only licensed centre in the area for protected species – It was examined by a zoological vet who found no injuries or deformities, so the vet wondered if there was some neurological problem that inhibited the bird from flying. It remains at the rescue centre and I've been told it is beginning to fly a little. A contribution to the Rescue Centre's expenses was made from the Peregrine book income.

So, a reasonable end to the 2018 season, and with the other 2 juveniles catching their own prey, the tower walkway was cleaned up by volunteers and opened to the public on 5th July. The adults stayed in the vicinity on and off for the remainder of the year, clearly regarding St. James as 'their territory' and prepared to chase off unwanted visitors.

2019

The year began as previous ones, with the adults seen around the church and 'pair-bonding'. On 21st February, they were seen to copulate on one of the tower crockets and on the 5th April, when the church opened and the TV screen was switched on, the first egg was seen.

The second egg was spotted on the morning of the 8th, followed by the third on the 10th and the fourth on the 12th. 4 eggs is the norm with healthy peregrines (we had 4 in 2016 and 2018), but on the 16th April, a fifth egg arrived, the first record of five anywhere in Lincolnshire. 4 eggs is the norm, but 5 is quite exceptional – most likely related to extraordinarily productive and vigorous falcons. Just 2% of nests have that number, although 6 eggs are not unknown.

By the 23rd May, all five had hatched, but after that, things went downhill. Two of the chicks had died by the end of the month and The falcon was seen to remove them from the nest and out of sight. A 3rd succumbed on the 1st June and by the 5th, just one healthy chick remained. It was ringed on the 7th June and had left the nest tray by the 10th and was rarely picked up by the camera after that. However, we suffered a spell of terrible weather and we could see the adult birds on the spire, making no attempt to protect the remaining chick. On 12th June, it was found dead a short distance from the church this morning – presumably the adult had removed it from the nest and deposited it away from the nest. I was told that it's very unusual to lose all chicks in a brood. It has become clear over the past months that the adult falcon is an inexperienced bird with this being her first clutch of eggs, and she just wasn't able to brood and feed the chicks sufficiently.

2020

Following the disaster of 2019, we designed a roof for the nest tray that would keep the worst of the rain (and hail and snow!) off the birds. This was subsequently modified making it separate from the tray, removing the need for the four legs.



The start of the 2020 season – nest tray with new roof.

With COVID running rampant, access to the church was limited, but Verger Dale Walker checked the TV screen on 11th April and saw the female brooding at least two, and possibly more eggs. Another check on 10th May showed 3 chicks, all look healthy. It was thought they are 2-3 days old, so the earliest so far.

On 29th May, The chicks were ringed this week by Alan Ball under strict health security conditions, and thought to be two males and a female. By 11th June, all 3 juveniles were visible on the tower walkway. On 18th June, the first of the birds fledged, conveniently landed on our conservatory roof! I eventually caught it 3 hours later and took it to the church, only to discover another juvenile had come down in the Rectory grounds the previous night and that had just been returned to the tower. Much shrieking by the adults!

It's worth noting that juvenile peregrines don't cope well if they land on the ground. It's fine if they are undisturbed, eventually they will make it to a higher vantage point, but with roads on all sides of the church, they don't have the luxury of time with busy traffic bearing down on them.

The three chicks were ringed on 29th May





Not many people get a peregrine landing in their garden! 18 June 2020

All three juveniles eventually fledged and by the end of August, had departed to look for their own territories.

This year, our resident peregrines showed extreme territorial aggression towards any common buzzard within sight of the peregrines' nest or the juveniles. Before 2020, we had no records of this behaviour, although we knew the peregrines in Exeter had brought down 21 buzzards in 190 attacks over a 6-month period. We now keep a log of reported attacks, available on the website.

2021

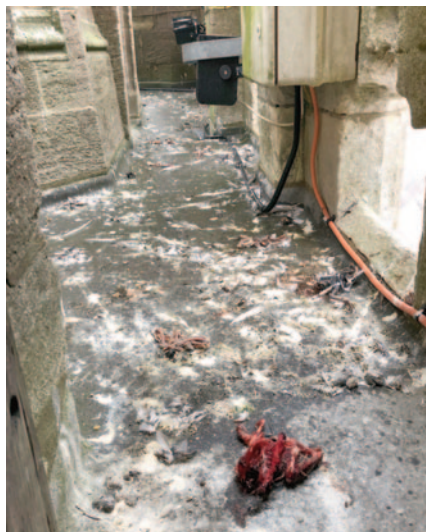
The Lincolnshire Bird Club agreed to sponsor a webcam to monitor the nest tray in 2021. The infra-red camera was installed by Wildlife Windows, supplementing the video to the TV in the



Our new webcam (the black one). The white one above it sends images to the TV in the coffee shop. It meant that for the first time, we were able to get clear images of the activity in the nest and not rely on taking photos of the TV screen.

coffee shop. We have two cameras, a fixed focus one pointing along the east walkway (useful when the juveniles leave the nest) and a zoom camera aimed at the nest tray. There is also the ability to have a split screen, where both cameras are viewable. will be running for the 3 months of the breeding season and should capture all the nest activity day and night.

Our birds made their first visit to the nest tray on 11th February with the cameras recording courtship display from the 22nd February, and the pair copulating on a couple of occasions on the gargoyles. The first egg was laid on 27th March, followed by two others, with the fourth egg appearing on 3rd April. Our cameras made it easy to review the proceedings and



At the end of the season (early July) we have to remove the cameras and carry brooms and buckets of water up the 198 steps to clean up the mess made by the birds, ready for the visitors who pay to get the views from the tower.

record the precise times of laying and hatching, and we could see that the female doesn't start to incubate the eggs until the penultimate one has been laid. This means that all the chicks hatch within a day or two of each other allowing them to grow at the same rate.

We could see that all the chicks were getting regular feeds and growing well, so they were ringed on 26th May – just in time, as in 1st June two of the juveniles 'escaped' from the nest tray. They stayed close by though. Within a few days,

all were away from the nest and often out of sight of our cameras, which only covered two of the four walkways.

By 20th June, three had fledged, with the fourth taking to the air five days later. They remained active around the church until the end of July, after which they gradually left the area.

2022

It's becoming routine now – nest tray installed late January and the peregrines paying their first visits in February. As last year, the cameras recorded their courtship/bonding displays and a brief glimpse of them mating. Four eggs were laid between 26th March and 2nd April and right on cue, they hatched between 4th and 6th May. It was a busy afternoon on the 4th., the first chick emerged at 16.10 – only spotted when we saw the female eating an empty shell, then, less than an hour later, the second arrived.



The peregrines regurgitate pellets. Typically around 4cm in length, they generally just comprise tiny bones and small feathers.

The four chicks were ringed on the 24th May by Alan Ball, a licenced ringer and were thought to be all females. He discovered the remains of a black-tailed godwit, ringed in 2006, on the walkway.

The youngsters successfully fledged between 14th and 21st June and as usual, they tended to roost on the gargoyles and crockets, rarely returning to the walkway. This meant we could remove the cameras and nest tray, and clean up ready for reopening the tower to visitors. By 23rd August, the juveniles were rarely seen, but throughout the autumn and into winter, the two adults stayed closer to their territory than previous years.

2023

The cameras were installed on 30th January. Unfortunately, the east walkway camera worked briefly, then stopped transmitting. All connections were checked, but to no avail, so we just had use of the live-streaming camera for the season.

On 7th February the first visit to the nest by the pair was recorded – the exact same date as last year. The male only stayed briefly, but the female stayed for around 30 minutes creating a scrape in the gravel.

The first three eggs were laid between 31st March and 5th April, with our camera recording the arrival of two of them. The fourth egg arrived on 8th April, a rather longer gap than we had expected. The first three hatched in a 12-hour period on 9th-10th May, with the last arriving 54 hours behind the third.

On 30th May, the chicks were ringed. Unfortunately, the youngest, a runt, was too small to take a ring. It was well-fed, but wasn't developing, so its future was thought to be uncertain. The size difference of the chicks can be compared in this photo.

By 6th June, the juveniles had all left the nest tray and with our east walkway camera out of action, sightings of the birds became sporadic, but on 16th June, we caught sight of our 'little one', the first sighting for 10 days. He still had plenty of white down, but was making progress.

With the other three juveniles flying confidently, it was down to our runt. Our youngster 'fledged' on 30th June and was found grounded on the low wall facing Westgate. Attempts



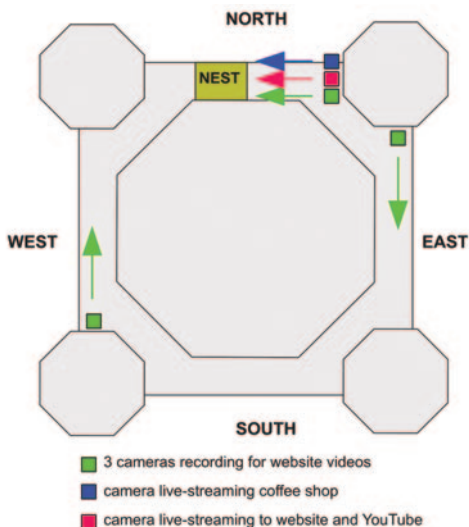
The flexibility of our infra-red camera allows us to see intimate moments such as the moment the eggs are laid.

to encourage it to fly were fruitless, so it was caught by Chloe Drew, who works at the Seal Sanctuary, and together we returned it to the tower walkway, where it sat, scowling at us! By 9th July, with the season is almost at its end, three of the juveniles have fledged and are flying strongly, and our unringed youngster has defied all the odds and has also flown – perhaps not so strongly, but it's doing well. On 12th July the final video from the camera, before its removal showed our youngster flying confidently from the walkway. A happy end to the season.

2024

An introduction to the 2024 season: Lincolnshire Bird Club have paid for a new camera, plus YouTube fees to enable live-streaming 24-hours every day. I've also paid for a camera to monitor the west walkway, so that's 3 sides covered. On 5th February, Wildlife Windows spent eight hours setting up all four cameras. North, west and east are covered, with 2 cameras on the north (nest) side. One will live-stream, the other will let me review footage and upload clips to the website.

Lincs Bird Club have supported this project from the beginning in 2015 and have paid for 3 of the 4 cameras and the licence for the YouTube streaming. Thanks also to those who have donated via the website, the contributions have gone towards the purchase of the extra camera.



References

- ¹ *Silent Spring* – Carson, R. (1962)
- ² *Bird Study* – Ratcliffe, D. (1963)
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- ⁴ *RSPB*.
- ⁵ *John Clarkson (1948-2023) – Former North Lincolnshire Bird Recorder and member of the Lincolnshire Bird Club.*
- ⁶ *Bob Sheppard was awarded the British Empire Medal in 2012 for services to nature conservation.*
- ⁷ *Van Geneijen, P. 2000. Slechtvalken jagen op nachtelijke trekvogels [Peregrines prey on night migrants]. Slechtvalk Nieuwsbrief: Dutch Peregrine Workgroup.*
- ⁸ *Phil Espin – Chairman of the Lincolnshire Bird Club and bird surveyor.*



These images from 24 June 2021 show that the juveniles keep together and will often return to the nest tray to sleep, until they fledge.





Beauty & the Beast

A superb photo taken by Steve Plant

May 2024



www.louthperegrines.org.uk