Churchyards in a living landscape

Churchyards can provide valuable refuges for a wide range of wildlife. This applies both in urban areas where they are surrounded by buildings and roads, and in rural areas, where they can provide stepping stones in an intensively farmed countryside. It is possible to create wildlife-friendly areas in churchyards without making the site look neglected or reducing accessibility and this leaflet aims to provide some broad suggestions as to how to go about this.

Managing the grassland

Churchyards often contain grassland that has been unimproved for hundreds of years and so contain a rich mixture of plants, many of which may be rare elsewhere. The wildflowers provide a vital source of nectar for insects such as butterflies and bumblebees. The vegetation can also provide shelter for small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and invertebrates. By cutting different areas of grass at different times of the year, and at different heights, colourful displays of wildflowers can be encouraged. In particular, a late cut in August or even September will allow these flowers to set seed.

Grassland management at St Nicholas Church, Sandhurst © Jill Howell

Some points to consider before altering the cutting regime:

- wildflowers thrive on low-nutrient soils, so it is essential to remove cuttings as these add nutrient to the soil and also suppress flowering plants the following year; the cuttings can be placed somewhere out of sight and used to create a compost heap.
- factors such as drainage, aspect, management history and soil type will significantly affect which species will grow on the site; check first whether your soil is naturally chalky, sandy or on clay.
- species such as nettles, thistles and bramble have their part to play in providing food and shelter for various animals. However, they can take over, particularly when situated in the sun. Cutting or grazing for a few weeks during the first spring flush of plant growth, with a second cut in July and, if needed, a third cut in September, can help to control these species. Herbicides should only be applied using spot-treatment or weed-wiping, and only used as a last resort.
- be prepared to keep adjusting the management regime until the results are satisfactory and talk to others who are undertaking similar projects in churchyards in Kent.

Lichens, ferns and mosses

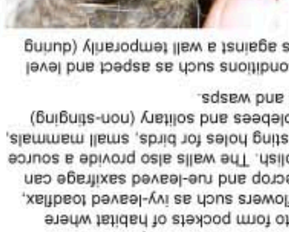
Lichens grow on the stonework of gravestones, memorials and walls, giving them a warmer, aged look. There are many different species, of which 600 or so are found in churchyards in lowland England and half of these are very rare. Lichens are a combination of a fungus and an alga, living together for mutual benefit, and some grow extremely slowly (only about half a millimetre per year). They do not cause any damage to the stone, so if any removal is required to read an inscription, do it on a minimal area using water only. Some lichens in Kent are almost entirely restricted to churchyards.

Lichens growing on a gravestone, Boughton Monchelsea © Anne Waite

Maidenhair spleenwort, growing on a churchyard wall © Anne Waite

Stone walls around a churchyard provide a 'rock-face' habitat that is colonised by delicate ferns such as maidenhair and black spleenwort, and by mosses, lichens and other small plants. Mosses help to form pockets of habitat where wild flowers such as ivy-leaved toadflax, stonecrop and rue-leaved saxifrage can establish. The walls also provide a source of nesting holes for birds, small mammals, bumblebees and solitary (non-stinging) bees and wasps.

All these plants tend to like very specific conditions such as aspect and level of shading. If you need to lean headstones against a wall temporarily (during building works, for example), make sure you replace them in the exact position you found them. Equally, when planning your grass-cutting regime, give some thought to what plants might be shaded out by tall vegetation (in places where it has previously been kept closely mown) and do not leave piles of grass cuttings on chest tombs or piled around the bases of headstones. Avoid using herbicides around the headstones and make sure the stone is not damaged when cutting.


Lichens and mosses are often used as nesting material by birds and small mammals such as this dormouse © Jude Shorter

Small mammals

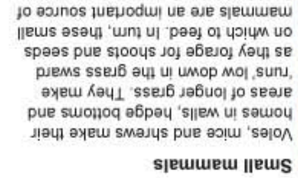
Voles, mice and shrews make their homes in walls, hedge bottoms and areas of longer grass. They make 'runs' low down in the grass sward as they forage for shoots and seeds on which to feed. In turn, these small mammals are an important source of food for birds of prey such as owls and kestrels. Churchyards can also be good territories for hedgehogs.

Pygmy shrew © Peter Redfern/British Wildlife Centre

They require sheltered places such as piles of logs or leaves where they can hibernate and areas where they can hunt for snails, slugs and beetles.

Butterflies, bumblebees and other invertebrates

The holly and ivy present in a large number of churchyards provide perfect conditions for the lovely holly blue butterfly, whose caterpillars need the berries of both of these plants for food at different times of the year. Wild flowers such as lady's smock and garlic mustard are food for orange tip larvae and areas of longer grass provide habitat for meadow brown, gatekeeper and skipper butterflies. If an area of nettles can be left in a sunny, sheltered spot, colourful peacock, small tortoiseshell, red admiral and comma may lay eggs there.


Holly blue butterfly © Tony Connor

Lizards sunning themselves, Broadmeadow © Ashley Best

The sheltered areas in churchyards that are provided by walls, hedges and areas of long grass can be refuges for reptiles such as slow-worms, lizards and the harmless grass snake. Being cold-blooded, these animals like to bask in the sun to increase their body temperature and stone walls and sunny banks are ideal places to do this. They can hide in long grass, compost heaps or in crevices in walls, and also hunt for their prey there.

Birds

Many churchyards have trees, shrubs and hedges that provide nesting sites for birds, including rare or declining species such as the spotted flycatcher and mistle thrush. Planting of shrubs that provide berries during the harsh winter months can encourage birds, including blackbirds, fieldfares and redwings. The provision of nest boxes will help to sustain populations of robins, blue tits and great tits, and owls will sometimes find roosting and nesting sites in old trees or buildings.

Mistle thrush © Amy Lewis

Amphibians

Darker, wetter areas may be used by toads, frogs and newts, as they spend much of their adult lives away from water. Rough areas of grass and hedge bottoms are good places for them to hide and look for insects to feed on, and large stones or log piles can provide shelter. It may be impractical to create a pond, but even an upturned dustbin lid or an old stone sink sunk in the ground can provide some good quality aquatic habitat.

Common frog © Anne Waite

Buff-tailed bumblebee in Doddington churchyard © Richard Moyse

Wildflowers provide a much needed source of pollen and nectar for species such as bumblebees, which have suffered severe declines in the last few decades, and tall grasses can provide a habitat for insects which overwinter in clumps of grass amongst the stems or in the hollow stems of other, more robust plants. Log piles and mini-beast homes also provide shelter for all sorts of species such as beetles, earwigs and spiders, which in turn are a source of prey for other species living in the churchyard.

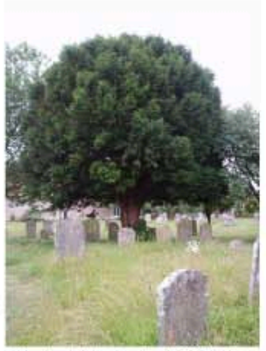
Bats

Of the UK's eighteen resident species of bat, at least eight species are known to use churches as roosting sites and, as other roosting sites such as old buildings decline, churches form an increasingly important refuge. There are rarely 'bats in the belfry' but they often live in the nave or porch or occasionally under roof tiles and lead-covered boarding. They are most active from spring to autumn but may hibernate in unheated parts of a church during the harsh winter months.

Bat droppings can cause problems by corroding brasses and woodwork, especially when large numbers of bats are using the roost, but there are often solutions to be found. However, it is against the law to kill or disturb bats and their roost sites are also protected, even when the bats are not present, so expert advice should always be sought before interfering with a known roosting site or making changes to lighting near roost entrances. If buildings or maintenance works are planned, you are advised to seek advice well in advance of the start of the works.

Trees

Some of the most ancient trees in the country grow in churchyards, including yews that can be over 1000 years old and often pre-date the church. It is important to protect them, as not only are they a living history but they also provide food and shelter for many species of birds, insects and bats. Veteran trees will require regular inspection and management. Planting of new trees can increase the importance of a churchyard for wildlife but should be done to a careful plan, to avoid shading out wildflowers, lichens on gravestones and future damage from roots if placed too close to buildings. Plant trees that are native to Britain wherever possible, as these will have more value to wildlife.


Yew tree in Wye churchyard © C Blackburn

Hedges

Hedges around the churchyard can provide vital nesting sites and their flowers, seeds and berries are food sources for birds, small mammals and insects. Any trimming should be done in late winter to avoid disturbance to nesting birds. Wild flowers such as violets and primroses often grow at the base of the hedge and longer vegetation at the hedge bottom provides shelter for mammals such as hedgehogs, and also for frogs and toads.

Involving people

Choosing to manage an area of a churchyard for wildlife is not a default option, it requires a careful balance between what is good for wildlife and the expectations of the local community. The chances are that there is already a working party or a number of people who would be interested in becoming more involved. Some basic points need to be considered to successfully enhance the site for wildlife and keep everyone enthusiastic:

Cherishing Churchyards event, St Peter and St Paul's church, Tonbridge © KWT

- make a list of what is already being done, by whom and what may have been tried in the past (e.g. some churchyards may have been grazed); ensure you consult with all relevant parties so as to get them on board at the earliest opportunity.
- carry out an initial wildlife survey to see what is already present on site; ask for help from local naturalists if you can. You may want to do several sessions spread out across the seasons.
- produce a short management plan, with a map of the site, showing which areas you would like to see managed, how and at what time of year. This is your starting point: be prepared to adjust the management plan since projects such as grass cutting regimes may need altering and you may wish to include new ideas.
- consider entering the Kent God's Acre Project benchmark scheme or Kent Wildlife Trust's Wild about Gardens Award (Churchyard category) as this can provide a good focus.
- think about budgets, machinery, volunteer input, contractor costs, health and safety considerations, practicalities (scything around multiple kerbstones is not generally feasible, nor is asking a contractor to cut ten areas each to a different prescription) and disposal of arisings such as grass or tree cuttings.
- bear in mind the sensitivities of the local community: it is important that areas with recent graves are mown regularly, as are the paths and other areas most regularly used by the congregation.
- let people know what you are doing by involving people wherever you can (i.e. using willing volunteers), providing interpretation boards or leaflets, writing articles for the parish magazine, giving talks to local community groups, organising annual events and encouraging the use of the site by local schools and scout and brownie clubs.

About Kent Wildlife Trust

Founded in 1958, Kent Wildlife Trust is the leading conservation charity in Kent and Medway. The Trust has five visitor centres and over 60 nature reserves and manages well over 3,000 hectares of land for wildlife. It is an independent charity and receives no government funding. It is a membership organisation with over 30,000 members and relies on membership, donations and grant funding to enable it to carry out its vital work to conserve Kent's natural heritage.

The Trust is a member of The Wildlife Trusts, a network of 47 independent Wildlife Trusts, the fastest growing environmental movement in the UK.

For further information and advice about churchyards, please call 01622 662012 or email info@kentwildlife.org.uk. Alternatively, visit the Wildlife Advice pages on our webpages at www.kentwildlifetrust.org.uk/wildlife-advice.

The Kent God's Acre Project (KGAP)

KGAP was set up in 2009 and is administered by the Diocese of Canterbury. It is a partnership project between a number of conservation organisations, including the Kent Bat Group, Kent Mammal Group, Kent Reptile and Amphibian Group, The Conservation Volunteers, the Countryside Partnerships, the British Lichen Society, the Diocese of Canterbury and Kent Wildlife Trust.

For further information about the KGAP project and benchmark scheme, please call 01227 459401, email cpinchbeck@diocant.org or write to the Revd. Canon Caroline Pinchbeck, Communities and Partnership Director, Diocesan House, Lady Woottons Green, Canterbury CT1 1NQ.

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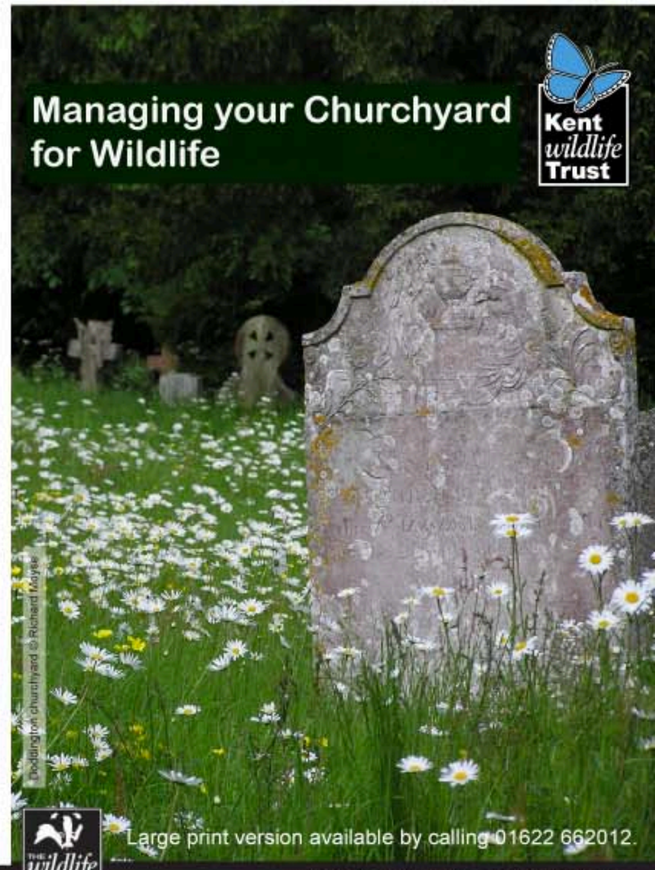
Managing your Churchyard for Wildlife


Bodiington churchyard © Richard Moyse

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