
Managing Traditional Churchyards for Wildlife

- a Summary

*'The churchyard is a sermon not only in stones but in plants and animals.'*¹

Our churchyards are part of our Christian faith and heritage. Through consecration they are set apart for the reverent burial of parishioners and they are places of contemplation for friends and relatives.

In the church, as in the wider community, there is a growing realisation of the interdependence of all life. *'We are not consumers of what God has made, we are in communion with it'*². As such, and in accord with the Diocesan Environment Policy, it is appropriate that the management of churchyards should respect and encourage the diversity of wildlife within them. This is the responsibility of the parish priest and the Parochial Church Council.

The prominence of churchyards in local communities gives them a role in educating the public about conservation and living in greater harmony with all creation, and in proclaiming the Church's faith that the natural processes of death are followed by the divine intervention of new life.

1 How to proceed

- 1.1 It is best practice to undertake a survey in order to identify what species are present before developing a management plan for the churchyard incorporating areas managed for wildlife. Even where the species are not especially rare, a churchyard has an important role to play in contributing to the patchwork of sites in an area and providing a reservoir that may colonise other sites if the conditions become suitable.
- 1.2 Help with surveys and developing a management plan is available free of charge from Judith Evans, who can be contacted via the DAC Team (see below).

- 1.3 If the churchyard is maintained by the local authority consider asking them if they will adjust their maintenance routine to incorporate wildlife areas. They are often willing to do this if the areas are clearly marked. Alternatively the PCC could consider taking back the management.

2 Grassland

- 2.1 In virtually every churchyard the grassland is the most important habitat. Nearly all our lowland hay meadows, which were rich in wildflowers, butterflies and insects, have been lost since the Second World War due to the application of fertilisers and herbicides, and churchyards are often the last refuge in a parish for the species that they supported.
- 2.2 The management plan should contain mowing and maintenance policies that respect and encourage wildlife in areas of the churchyard that are less frequently visited.
- 2.3 Aim to create areas of grass of different lengths to provide the maximum diversity for wildlife. When long grass is first cut it should be raked off in order to prevent an increase in soil fertility which is detrimental to wild flowers. Preferably add it to a compost heap in a secluded corner of the churchyard.
- 2.4 Do not mow areas containing wild flowers to “bowling-green length” as the plants will eventually be destroyed.
- 2.5 Do not introduce wild flowers to old churchyards without first checking with a conservation organisation.

3 Lichens

- 3.1 Many churchyards have over 100 species and some do not occur in other habitats. A survey can be arranged through the Diocesan Office.
- 3.2 Damage to stonework by lichens is minimal. Do not ‘clean’ them off headstones or walls.

4 Invertebrates

- 4.1 Butterflies need specific plants in order to breed. Some species require long grass on which to lay their eggs, others need specific wild flowers.
- 4.2 Grasshoppers require grass of at least 10cm or 4 inches.

4.3 Log piles are a valuable habitat in an out of the way corner.

5 Vertebrates

5.1 Churchyards are one of the last places providing suitable habitats for slow-worms and lizards. Compost heaps are valuable for sheltering over-wintering grass snakes.

5.2 Churches and churchyards are often important sites for bats, providing both roosts and hunting ground.

5.3 The birds most likely to be dependent on churches are those which require them for nesting sites, namely swifts, martins, swallows and barn owls. All of these are declining in numbers.

6 County Wildlife Sites

Many churchyards have been designated as County Wildlife Sites in recognition of their importance for wildlife. The designation was made by the county council's Biological Record Centre (or the wildlife trust on their behalf) and they are integral in assisting the counties in meeting their biodiversity action plan (BAP) targets as set out by central government. Designated churches should have received notification from their County Wildlife Trust or County Council. The Diocesan Environment Group has also written to designated churches.

In all cases an appropriate management plan should be in place.

7 Protected Species

The Schedules of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 contain the original lists of protected plants and animals, but some changes have been made by subsequent legislation. If in doubt check on the government website: www.opsi.gov.uk/legislation

Note that the following may well occur in churchyards and are protected: some lichens and mosses, most snakes and lizards, the great-crested newt and the natterjack toad, barn owls and their nest site, dormice, bats and their roosts, badgers and their setts. Natural England must be consulted before any work is undertaken that could affect them.

Further information:

www.stalbans.anglican.org/Mission/Environment

www.caringforgodsacre.co.uk

A number of organisations offer grants for the purchase of equipment, training courses and interpretative material.

See The Conservation Foundation's website

www.conservationfoundation.co.uk

References

- 1 ***Wildlife in church and churchyard: Plants, animals and their management.*** 2nd edition. Cooper, N. (2001) - Church House Publishing
- 2 ***Sharing God's Planet:*** A report from the Mission and Public Affairs Council (2006) - Church House Publishing.

Additional information and advice

Available from Judith Evans, promoter of The Living Churchyard Project in St Albans Diocese, via the DAC team:

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