

**MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE
CHURCHYARD OF
ST MARY MAGDALENE, WHIPSNADE**

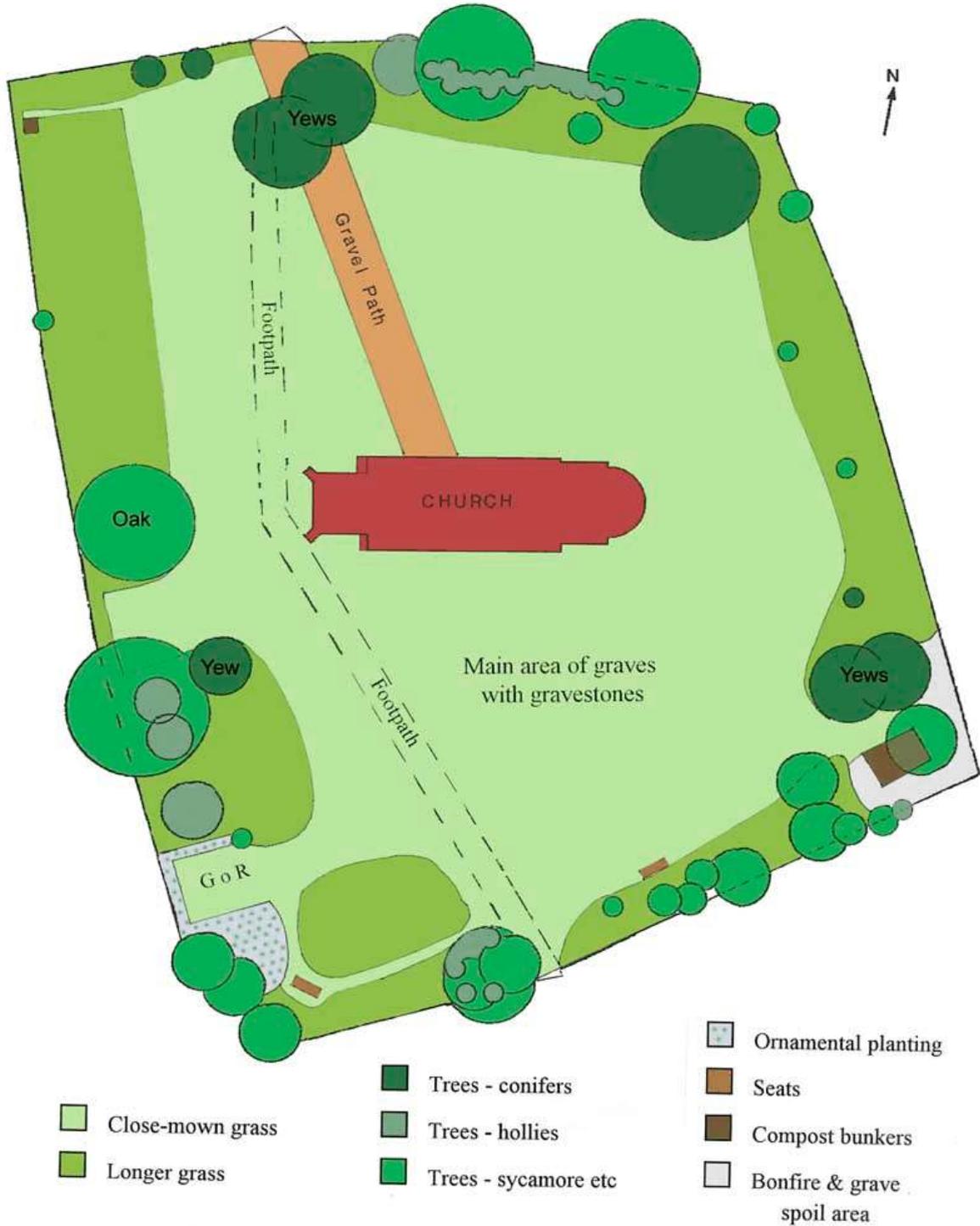


SKETCH MAP OF THE CHURCHYARD OF ST MARY MAGDALENE, WHIPSDNADE

Based on a plan drawn by Pam Ward before 1993 up-dated to February 2009.

Areas of tree canopies etc are only indications, not to scale.

Margins of close-mown and longer grass areas will change year-on-year depending on the situation at the time. G o R = Garden of Remembrance



MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR THE CHURCHYARD OF ST MARY MAGDALENE, WHIPSNADE

OBJECTIVES

1. To maintain and develop the churchyard in a way that befits and enhances the beauty of the church, provides both a proper and fitting resting place for the dead and a suitable setting for ceremonies, such as weddings, that are held in the church, and meets all legal requirements for the health and safety of those using the churchyard.
2. To maintain the churchyard in the most cost-effective manner and to ensure that actions taken now do not jeopardise cost-effective maintenance in the future.
3. To recognise the wildlife conservation value of the churchyard and to maintain and whenever possible enhance this aspect while meeting objectives 1 and 2.
4. To encourage participation whenever possible by members of the congregation and others in the management of the churchyard and in activities, such as the village fete, held there so as to increase the spirit of fellowship and common purpose within the community.

BACKGROUND AND GENERAL PROPOSALS

The churchyard serves a number of purposes and its management must seek to achieve the best possible compromise between the various needs.

To meet **Objective 1** it must be kept generally neat and tidy. In particular the areas around the more recent graves must be maintained to a high standard. This should take priority over other activities. However, as set out in **Objective 2** the cost of all work must be kept in mind and especially the likely effect on future costs. Although some things might seem very desirable now they might add greatly to maintenance costs in the future.

In relation to **Objective 3** - there has been a growing realisation countrywide in recent years that many churchyards are havens of great importance for wildlife especially in urban or intensively farmed areas. The Church of England has drawn attention to its responsibility for caring for our environment both generally and on its own 'estate'. Some dioceses have actively promoted this aspect of churchyard management. Whipsnade ranked high in a survey of wild plants in Bedfordshire churchyards in 1987. In 1993 the County Ecologist recommended some conservation measures. Initially these were focussed on 'conservation areas' around the periphery of the churchyard where the grass was to be left to grow long before a hay-cut in late summer. However, it has become clear over the years that the close-mown grass contains many interesting plants, some of which do not occur in the longer grass areas. Removing the grass cuttings over more than 20 years has reduced the fertility of the soil favouring wild flowers rather than grasses. So the whole churchyard needs to be managed sensitively. This means being aware of the requirements of the significant plants and other wildlife in each area and adapting mowing and other activities accordingly. The result of trying to do this so far has been colourful patches of wild flowers that enhance the beauty of Whipsnade churchyard and are much appreciated by visitors.

The 2006 Quinquennial Report stated that "The churchyard is very well maintained" and went on to make various recommendations. These are flagged up (QR 2006) in the sections that follow.

The planting of further flowers should be viewed with caution. This must not be done in such a way as would increase management effort and costs in the future. Bulbs should be naturalised in blocks to simplify mowing. Planting annual flowers around the Garden of Remembrance proved unsuccessful because they took time to look after and were food for rabbits.

Objective 4 - encouraging people to help with maintaining the churchyard has met with only limited success. In contrast holding the summer fete in the churchyard has been a great success involving the whole community and bringing people into the churchyard who had never visited it before. However we need to be careful that this type of use does not conflict with the other objectives.

Other issues:

Noticeboard - the churchyard would benefit from having a good quality noticeboard to explain why and how the churchyard is managed.

Bonfires - should be confined to one site only, in the south-east corner.

Dog fouling - The churchyard continues to be fouled by dogs and every effort should continue to persuade dog owners to prevent this. The sign on the notice-board may lose its impact unless renewed at intervals.

Appendix 1 contains some more information on earlier management of the churchyard.

PROCEDURES

This management plan was first approved by the Parochial Church Council (PCC) in 1993. It was hoped that it would provide a basis from which annual work programmes could be drawn up but the number of people able and willing to help with the work has been so small that forward planning has proved difficult to implement. The management plan should be reviewed about every 5 years by the Fabric Committee and re-submitted to the PCC for approval.

All work and planting in the churchyard should be in accord with the management plan. Anything different should be agreed by the Fabric Committee or, if substantial, by the PCC. All work involving trees, including the planting of new trees, requires approval from the Diocesan Advisory Committee. Any removal or pruning of trees also requires six week's notice to the Local Authority because the Churchyard is within the Whipsnade Conservation Area.

GRAVEL PATH

The gravel path needs to be resurfaced to make access easier for the elderly and disabled and to remove the need to apply weedkillers. Adding a ground-level stone or brick edging, in keeping with the church (matching the edging to be added to the Garden of Remembrance) will help in the maintenance; it will also, looking to the future, take small memorial plaques - when space has been used up in the Memorial Garden.

GRAVEL SURROUNDS OF CHURCH

The gravel and concrete 'drain' surrounds at the base of the church walls must be kept free of weeds. They need to be dug out, the sides nearest the grass lined with geotextile fabric and refilled with 75/100mm reject gravel with the top 50mm finished with 19mm shingle. This would improve drainage and reduce the need for regular applications of a persistent weedkiller.

GRAVES

Although many of the more recent graves are well tended a number of older ones remain untidy. An economical way of maintaining these graves has yet to be developed. Some unmarked grave mounds still need to be levelled to facilitate mowing. Gravestones need to be checked at least twice a year for safety (QR2006). Older gravestones tend to develop a covering of lichens. These are valued both in their own right and as habitat for other wildlife. They should not be cleaned off unless the inscription needs to be kept legible as on the stone in the Garden of Remembrance.

Garden of Remembrance:

The cherry tree provides a delightful show of blossom during the grey days of winter. The shrubs need regular trimming. Despite the thick mulch overlying a membrane there is a continuing problem with encroaching weeds. A ground-level stone or brick edging, in keeping with the church, might reduce this problem and simplify maintenance as well as taking small memorial plaques.

SEATS

The seat adjacent to the Garden of Remembrance was installed in 2000 by the Parish Council to mark 50 years of peace. It has proved popular. The second seat on the south side was put in place in 2005 in memory of Margaret Ashmore.

BOUNDARIES

Hedges should not be cut during the bird-nesting season.

Northern Boundary – the existing hedge is cut annually. Its height should be kept at about 4 ft so that the view of the church is not obstructed. For the eastern third there is no proper hedge and the boundary is formed by holly and various deciduous trees. These have been cut back to line along the outer edge. Reinstating the inner edge would be a substantial project and although there is scope for improvement at least the present line alleviates the monotony of straight hedge lines.

Eastern boundary with Old Rectory – the fence was replaced in 1996. For most of its length the over-mature hawthorns and other shrubs were then coppiced and the vigorous regrowth is cut each year to maintain it as a hedge. At the north and south ends some new planting is needed to complete this hedge properly. Damage to the fencing needs repairing (QR 2006) .

Southern boundary – along the section east of the footpath gate the boundary is behind a bank created by dumping grave spoil. Such hedge as is there is very thin and needs much interplanting. The bank contains a good area of bluebells and also primroses. Both are spreading naturally and this should be encouraged. To the west of the footpath and the large holly the hedge is also very thin and needs filling in.

South-west Corner – the large sycamores need to be thinned and the hedge reinstated (QR 2006).

Western Boundary - cutting down the tall holly trees behind the Garden of Remembrance has resulted in an excellent section of holly hedge which along with the rest of the existing hedge is cut annually. Some infilling of gaps is still needed at the north end.

Brambles infest the hedges in many places needing constant attention to prevent them spreading out into the grass.

TREES

No more trees should be planted in the churchyard except perhaps as replacements for trees which have had to be removed. Requests for trees to be planted as memorials should be diverted towards other forms of memorial, eg there may be scope for planting a few more shrubs.

Existing large trees should be inspected by a specialist at least every 5 years (QR2006).

GRASS AREAS

The close-mown areas - cut to a height of 1 to 2 inches every 3 weeks or less often when growth is slower. Cutting at this height will (a) avoid skimming the humps and creating unsightly bare patches and (b) allow low-growing plants, such as bird's-foot trefoil and heath bedstraw, to flower and set seed.

Remove the grass cuttings every time the grass is mown. This reduces the fertility of the soil and the vigour of the grass allowing wild flowers to compete more successfully.

Weedkillers or fertilisers should not be used.

Ensure that the surrounds of all graves are trimmed neatly and not littered with grass cuttings. Bulbs should not be planted in the close-mown areas as they make mowing more difficult.

The close-mown areas are now quite rich in wild flower plants although these are rarely able to flower. Occasionally leave areas uncut for a few months in rotation, particularly during July and August to allow the taller flowers to bloom and set seed.

In autumn a colourful selection of waxcap fungi, including one Red Data Book species, appear in the close-mown grass, especially in the area to the east of the gravel path. In the past these have often been destroyed in the mowing. Try to avoid the main clumps until they have died back naturally.

The longer grass areas - a copy of the previous revision of this plan was sent to Sue Cooper, manager of the Caring for God's Acre Project (CfGA) in the Diocese of Hereford in 2006. She commented that the mowing regimes needed modifying and her recommendations are included in this plan. Although a late-summer hay cut had been the standard recommendation for maintaining wild flower meadows, experience here and elsewhere has shown that a more flexible regime gives

better results on a small scale. In particular the rank growth of grass in wet weather can smother flower seedlings, especially when it falls over to form a dense rotting blanket. It also provides an ideal habitat for slugs which eat the seedlings. The CfGA recommendation is "Never leave the grass to grow long for more than 10 to 12 weeks as this will allow coarse grass to take hold".

The simplest approach is to designate areas for spring, summer and autumn flowers and mow them accordingly. Within these areas there will be small patches that need to be treated differently. The plants do not remain in the same places year after year and those doing the mowing need to be aware of this and make changes as necessary.

Check the whole area regularly and remove by hand any undesirable species, eg docks, nettles, ragwort, hogweed and creeping thistle.

Plant daffodils and other spring bulbs in clumps to simplify grass cutting. Any new plantings should be in areas where there are fewer wild flowers.

Normally mow the longer grass areas with the cutter set to 3-4 ins. The boundaries with the close-mown grass can be adjusted year on year depending on manpower available to cut and pick up the grass etc.

East of the entrance gate - near the gravel path the ground is in the shadow of the yew tree and little grows there. In the more open parts there are planted ornamental daffodils, an increasing area of bluebells and small patches of wood anemone, goldilocks buttercup and barren strawberry. Treat as a spring flowering area and mow first in mid to late July to allow the daffodil foliage to die down and the bluebells to set seed. (In recent years this mowing has been timed for one section to be cut short for a marquee for the village fete.) Check the wood anemone and goldilocks buttercup foliage and, if it is still green, leave it uncut until later. Mow several times from early August until late autumn.

Along the eastern hedge - this is currently the main snowdrop area in the churchyard. The splitting-up and replanting of the snowdrops in 1995 was very successful but recently they seem to have declined. There are several possible reasons for this: they may just need dividing again; the regular cutting of the hedge may have reduced the shade allowing the bank to become too hot and dry; rabbits, squirrels or mice may be eating them. Move some to other places to ensure a continuing good display. After the snowdrop leaves have died down completely, mow regularly until late autumn. There are a few plants of musk mallow near the grave stones and by the yews; leave these to set seed.

Along the southern boundary from the compost heap to the footpath gate - mow the flat ground throughout the season. Bluebells are spreading out from the bank. Leave these uncut until they have died down and set seed. Apart from a few primrose and betony seedlings that have appeared there is little else in the grass though a single common spotted orchid flowered in 2008, the first orchid in the churchyard.

Keep the nettles around the compost heap and fire site under control.

From the footpath to the Garden of Remembrance - Don't mow the patch of goldilocks buttercup by the large holly until the leaves have died down. Otherwise mow the remainder of the area along the hedge until the end of May and then leave until autumn. It currently contains few

flowers but hopefully some may spread there from the adjacent area. (Some winter aconites were planted in 2007.) Keep a narrow path mown between this and the adjacent area to indicate that the latter is left long by intent and not by neglect. The latter is one of the best wild flower areas in the churchyard. In spring, bugle and pignut flower there, followed later by betony and in September by a glorious display of devil's-bit scabious. The latter is popular with bees and butterflies and with people who use the seat. This area is mowed in late September or October after the scabious has set seed.

From the Garden of Remembrance north to the first yew tree - this is perhaps the most difficult area to manage successfully. Beside the Garden of Remembrance there is a good display of planted daffodils in spring and east of this a colourful mixture of summer-flowering plants including betony, field scabious and common knapweed. Although the latter is a good source of nectar for butterflies and other insects it can out-compete other desirable plants. Ant hills amongst the knapweed are a hazard for mowing. There is a small patch of lady's bedstraw on a mound which has flowered well in the past but in 2008 was almost swamped by vigorous grass growth probably due to a second successive wet summer. A single plant of star-of-Bethlehem flowered a few years ago but has not flowered since although the clump of leaves is larger. It may need dividing.

Timing mowing in this area is not easy. The area with betony, field scabious and common knapweed contains little grass and can be left until late autumn after seed is set but would need at least one early cut if more grass appears. Elsewhere the daffodils and star-of-Bethlehem preclude mowing until at least early July though there is a risk of cow parsley becoming dominant. The access path to the Garden of Remembrance must be kept close-mown and wide enough for people to stand during the interment of ashes. If possible it should be aligned to avoid as much betony as possible.

Along the western boundary from the oak tree to the small compost bunker - mow most of this area regularly until mid May and then leave until August to flower before cutting for the remainder of the season. There is a good display of sorrel, fine grasses and the yellow flowers of hawkbits. The exception is near the gravestones where there is a patch of wood anemone. Don't mow this until the leaves have died down. Of late one section has been cut early to accommodate a marquee for the village fete in July.

Along the northern hedge from the small compost bunker to the entrance gate - this is the warmest and driest spot in the churchyard and usually contains the most grasshoppers. Mow once or twice early and then not until September when the flowers have set seed and the grasshoppers will have laid their eggs.

APPENDIX 1

History

No early photographs of the church have been found yet so we have no clues as to what the churchyard looked like before about 1960. The presence of plants such as bluebell, yellow archangel and dog's mercury suggest that the surrounds may have been more wooded at some time. Betony and devil's-bit scabious may have been planted in centuries past as medicinal herbs. Up to the early 1960s the grass was cut by scythe and used as hay. A photograph from that period shows long grass in front of the church and several tall conifers along the west boundary. These would have been some of the Scots pines that once surrounded the churchyard. Photographs from the tower in 1981 show much of the grass long and blackthorn and bramble invading. Only the north hedge appears to be trimmed. From the mid 1980s much of the grass was close-mown. The cuttings were usually removed though this lapsed for a few years in the 1990s.

APPENDIX 2

Significant Items of Work identified as needed at 2002 Revision:

1. Resurfacing of gravel path to church door ---- **not done in full** (awaiting extension and new water main down the path)
2. Digging out and relaying of gravel around the church ---- **not done**, awaiting extension
3. Clearing out of compost bunkers and improving access to do so ---- cleared out once but needs doing again
4. Laying or cutting of hedge along eastern boundary ---- hedge cut and maintained since
5. Removal of deteriorating cherry trees on eastern boundary ---- done.
6. Cutting of holly and sycamore trees on south side of Garden of Remembrance to reduce shading - holly cut and resulting hedge well maintained; sycamores not yet done
7. Stone or brick edging to Garden of Remembrance ---- **not done**
8. Completing the painting of the iron railings around the grave in the south-west corner ---- railings and stone bases removed (QR 2006)
9. Removal of ivy where it may damage trees and general removal of brambles -- done where needed
10. Levelling of some unmarked grave mounds ---- most done

APPENDIX 3

Future work needed in addition to mowing, hedge cutting and other routine maintenance:

1. Resurfacing of gravel path to church door and installing stone or brick edging. (see above)
2. Digging out and relaying of gravel around the church. (see above)
3. Clearing out and repair of compost bunkers.
4. Planting hawthorn to fill gaps in hedges and repair of east fence.
5. Cutting sycamore trees on south side of Garden of Remembrance and reinstating hedge.
6. Installing stone or brick edging to Garden of Remembrance.
7. Completing levelling of unmarked grave mounds.