



Bedfordshire  
Cambridgeshire  
Northamptonshire  
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# Churchyards

and their management for wildlife

Protecting wildlife  
close to home



The Church of England  
Diocese of Ely



# The importance of churchyards

Grassland habitats within churchyards have become havens for wildlife following the extensive loss of ancient, unimproved meadows and pastures. These meadows and pastures were once rich in wildflowers, butterflies and insects largely due to the management which consisted of low intensity grazing and/or cutting. Since the Second World War this traditional management has been replaced by the widespread application of fertilisers and herbicides and large scale reseeding and ploughing. Nowadays, churchyards can form the remaining fragments of old, unimproved, wildlife rich grasslands and they are often the last refuge within a parish for the species and habitats that they support. Even churchyards that are less rich in wildlife have an important role to play in linking sites and making it possible for threatened species to move from one site to another.

## Some of the important animals found in churchyards

Churches and churchyards are important habitats for a wide range of species from insects and butterflies (meadow brown, peacock and painted lady butterfly) to amphibians (frogs and toads) and reptiles (slow worms) to birds (swifts, martins, swallows, barn owls, sparrowhawks) and mammals (bats and hedgehogs).

**Bats:** The number of bats in the UK is rapidly declining and churches and churchyards are popular homes for them. Bats and their roosts are protected by law. If any work is planned to trees and/or churches then it is highly recommended that you consult your local Natural England office as the work could result in the disturbance of bats or their roosts.



Bolnhurst churchyard, Bedfordshire

## Good churchyard management

The first step is to conduct a plant survey of the churchyard during the spring and summer by identifying and noting as many grasses and flowers and their location, as possible. This can help to decide which mowing regime would best suit the grassland. Dramatic changes in the management regime can have very damaging effects on the grassland so, if any changes are to be made, then this should be done gradually and the vegetation should be monitored to look for any changes in composition.

## Grassland habitat

There are different conservation mowing regimes listed on the next page that aim to conserve the maximum diversity within a churchyard. Obviously, it is not possible to use all in a churchyard because conservation management is a balance between what is possible and what is acceptable. Understandably, areas around tended graves and path systems should be regularly cut.

## Conservation Area

Usually where the rare or maximum density of wildflowers is located.

**Mowing regimes:** *Always rake up and remove cuttings.*

**Spring flowering grassland:** cut once in February/March if the vegetation has grown and then leave the area uncut until mid June and continue to cut every four weeks until the end of the growing period (September/October time).

**Summer flowering grassland:** commence cutting in March and continue to cut every four weeks until the middle of May. Leave the vegetation uncut until the end of July (8-10 weeks) and then cut every four weeks until the end of the growing period.



**Spring and summer flowering grassland:** cut the vegetation in February/ beginning of March and then leave until after the end of June. Commence cutting in July and continue to cut every four weeks until the end of the growing period.

**Late summer flowering grassland:** some flowers do not set seed until late summer, such as devil's bit scabious. Try to cut around these plants until they have set seed and then cut as normal.

**Butterfly and Insect Area:** cut once in mid July and rake cuttings off afterwards.

**Amphibian and Slow Worm Area:** cut once in October to a height of 10-12cm (4-5 inches). These areas are recommended to be around the edge of the churchyard.

## Trees

are likely to be one of the oldest and most distinctive features in a churchyard. They provide a food source (fruit and seeds) and nesting and roosting sites for birds. Bats can be found in the hollows and cracks of trees. Trees also provide refuge for mammals and insects.

Churchyards often provide homes for veteran trees which are considered to be in the ancient stage of their lives and they are important biologically, culturally and aesthetically because of their age. Before any work occurs on existing tree then:

- A Faculty or Archdeacon's permission is needed.
- Check whether the tree is subject to a Tree Preservation Order or lies within a Conservation area. Contact your local planning authority to find out.

Parishes can undertake the routine maintenance of trees such as pruning but please try and keep this to the absolute minimum as too much pruning can permanently damage trees. Any major work such as pollarding, coppicing or felling should be carried out by trained Arborists. Please consult your District Arboricultural Officer.

**Planting new trees:** this is not always environmentally friendly. Planting new trees on grassland will shade out and eliminate many of the important plants that live in churchyards (e.g. cowslips, burnet saxifrage, pignut). Planting should only be considered when old trees are felled or they are approaching the end of their life and new ones are required to replace them. Trees will often propagate themselves naturally by seedlings or suckers which will produce healthier saplings however they should be removed quickly from areas where they are not wanted (i.e. from grassland and monuments).

## Boundary hedges

A thick hedge provides a valuable habitat for over-wintering insects and a fruit, berry and nut source for feeding and nesting birds. Trim to an approximately A-shape to create a hedge that is thicker at the base and narrower at the top. Try to leave a gap of between 2 — 4 years between cuts or divide the hedge up into 3 or 4 sections and cut one section each year. Trim the hedge between September and February which is outside the bird nesting season.

## Scrub

is a term used for woody plants such as bramble and elder, which invade grassland that has been neglected for a while. Scrub provides protection and food for wildlife — birds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians and insects — but is very invasive if left unmanaged. Scrub should be prevented from encroaching onto grassland by annual trimming around the edge between September and February.



## Gravestones and stone walls

Gravestones are important sites for lichens and mosses, which vary according to the type of stone, its age and its exposure to the sun and weather. Lichens are slow growing and long lived, some as old as the gravestone itself. Mosses and lichen on stoneworks should be left untouched, if possible, as they do no harm to the stone.

## Compost heap

provides a home for fungi and invertebrates which in turn become food for frogs, toads, slow worms and birds. Grass snakes as well as hedgehogs may overwinter in the heap because of the warmth. Compost heaps need to be sited away from the base of trees and away from areas where the nutrients could leach out and enter running and standing water. Compost heaps should be contained within a small area away from frequently visited parts.

## Bonfires

Composting plant material is much better for wildlife than burning however if a bonfire is required then it should be carefully sited on hard standing or in an area with little botanical interest and away from trees. The same burning site should be used each time and this should be kept small. Thistles, docks and nettles tend to colonise burnt ground.

## Sowing wildflower seeds

This practice is discouraged in churchyards. Sowing seeds can introduce non-native plants or at least plants that are genetically different from those in the churchyard, which can spoil and eliminate the existing and natural flora. If you choose to sow wildflower seeds then please ensure the seeds are sourced locally and are of native origin (visit [www.floralocale.org](http://www.floralocale.org) for more information). Local and native seeds are better adapted to local climatic conditions and are much more likely to develop and persist in the sward.

# Some Churchyards are County Wildlife Sites (CWS)

CWS are areas of land recognised as being important for their wildlife. Found on public and private land they play a vital role in the conservation of the UK's natural heritage.

**For further information about churchyard management and County Wildlife Sites contact your nearest Wildlife Trust office:**

## Bedfordshire

Laura Downton, The Wildlife Trust, Priory Country Park, Barkers Lane, Bedford MK41 9SH  
Telephone: 01234 364213  
Email: [laura.downton@wildlifebcnp.org](mailto:laura.downton@wildlifebcnp.org)

## Cambridgeshire

Christa Perry, The Wildlife Trust, The Manor House, Broad Street, Great Cambourne, Cambridge CB23 6DH  
Telephone: 01954 713532  
Email: [christa.perry@wildlifebcnp.org](mailto:christa.perry@wildlifebcnp.org)

## Northamptonshire

Heather Ball, The Wildlife Trust, Lings House, Billing Lings, Northampton NN3 8BE  
Telephone: 01604 405285  
Email: [heather.ball@wildlifebcnp.org](mailto:heather.ball@wildlifebcnp.org)

## Publications

Caring for God's acre is a registered charity that provides events, training and information, please visit [www.caringforgodsacre.co.uk](http://www.caringforgodsacre.co.uk)

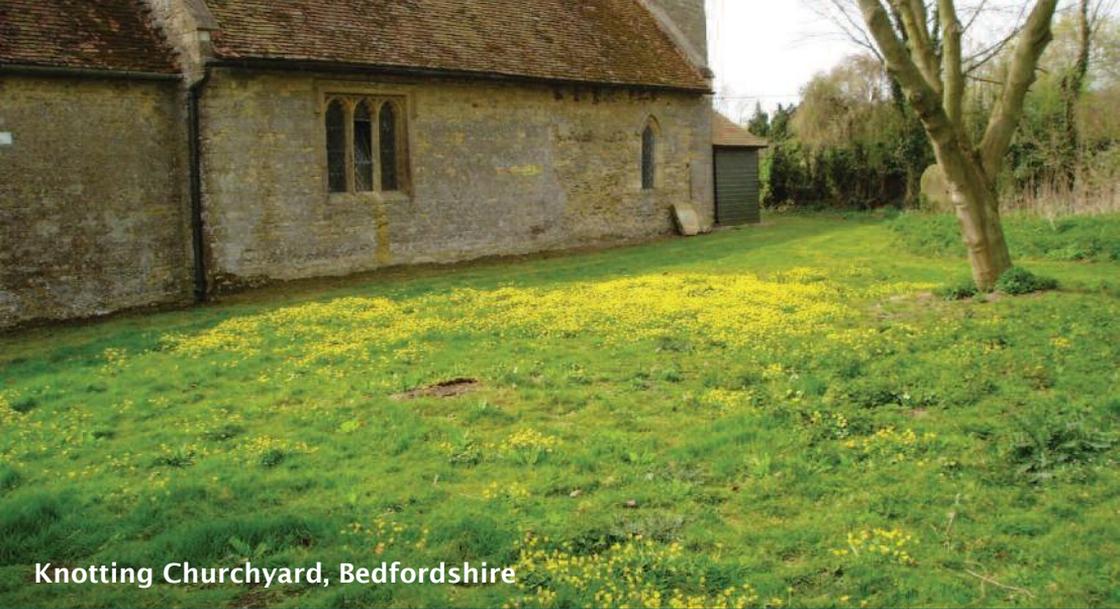
Cooper, N. (2001) *Wildlife in Church and Churchyard: Plants, animals and their management* (second edition), Church House Publishing.



Small Tortoiseshell

## Top tips

1. Maintain long established patterns of management.
2. Do not use chemicals (fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides).
3. Remove grass cuttings.
4. Leave small plants and lichens on walls and monuments.
5. Site bonfires and compost heaps away from trees and botanically rich grassland areas.
6. Plant trees for the future, but with caution.
7. Inspect trees annually.
8. Do not dig graves close to trees; keep 10 m clear to be safe.
9. Maintain established pollarding regimes.
10. Seek advice on surveying and caring for the churchyard.
11. Maintain a list of plants and animals seen in the churchyard.
12. Erect bird and bat boxes. No faculty is required if they are fixed to trees but may be required if you want to fix them to a building—contact the DAC.



## Knotting Churchyard, Bedfordshire

### Sources of advice for Church Of England Churchyards

Before making any changes, *please consult in the first instance*, the Priest, Parochial Church Council (PCC), Parish Council and/or the Diocese for your area.

#### Bedfordshire contact

Judith Evans is promoting the Living Churchyard Project on behalf of the Diocese of St Albans. The Living Churchyard Project – aims to help churches manage their churchyards in a wildlife-friendly way, while being sensitive to the needs of all the users and in particular to its primary function as a

resting place for the dead. If you would like to find out more then please contact Judith Email: [livingchurchyards@stalbands.anglican.org](mailto:livingchurchyards@stalbands.anglican.org) or Tel: 01727 851748.

#### Cambridgeshire contact

Diocese of Ely, Diocesan Environment Committee, c/o Diocesan Office, Barton Road, Ely CB7 4DX.

#### Peterborough and Northamptonshire contact

Diocese of Peterborough, The Diocesan office, The Palace, Peterborough PE1 1YB. Tel: 01733 887000 Email: [office@peterborough-diocese.org.uk](mailto:office@peterborough-diocese.org.uk)

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