

A guide to Churchyard Management

Many of our churchyards have escaped the agricultural development and intensification that has caused the dramatic loss of semi-natural habitat seen elsewhere.

For this reason churchyards can be very important for wildlife, providing a refuge for wide range of wildflowers, birds, animals and invertebrates. With sensitive management this wildlife can be encouraged without detracting from the spiritual and contemplative role of the churchyard.



Grassland

The grassland found in churchyards is unlikely to have been fertilised or reseeded and is therefore often rich in wildflowers which are now so scarce elsewhere. Careful management of all or part of the churchyard to favour these wildflowers, offers a unique opportunity to safeguard this valuable habitat in a place where it can be enjoyed by parishioners and visitors alike.

Flower-rich grassland does not thrive on neglect! If left to its own devices, it will be overtaken by scrub and invasive plants such as nettle and hogweed. To maintain the floral diversity the grassland needs to be cut and the clippings removed. Cutting should be timed to allow the grasses and other species to flower and set seed. In most situations July is the best time for cutting, but this will vary depending on the local conditions and the range of species present. A further cut and rake off in September/October is often beneficial.

Suffolk Wildlife Trust is happy to offer advice on the best timing and frequency of cutting for individual churchyards and other aspects of grassland management.

It is very important to rake off and remove clippings – if left on, they smother delicate plants, and increase fertility which encourages rank growth at the expense of wildflowers. If clippings are left to dry for a few days after cutting, this enables the flowers to shed any ripe seed and insects to make their escape. Cut vegetation can either be removed off site or piled up in an out of the way corner where it will provide a useful habitat for creatures such as hedgehogs and slow-worms.

The selection of areas to be managed for wildflowers, will depend not only on where the most wildflowers are, but also on the layout and use of the churchyard. In order to maintain a 'cared for' appearance, it is important to keep grass short adjacent to the main paths and to allow access to regularly attended graves. Cutting paths through the longer grass areas, and carefully defining their edges by regularly mown grass, shows that the 'wildlife areas' are part of a plan and allows visitors to appreciate them easily.

If there is space, leaving some areas uncut throughout the year is beneficial. Seedheads are a food source for birds and many invertebrates overwinter in long grass. The precise boundaries of these areas can be varied with cutting every 3 years to prevent the development of coarse grass and scrub.

Other Habitats

The variety of stone in boundary walls, gravestones and the church itself provides habitat for a range of mosses, ferns, lichens and drought tolerant plants. Unless such plants are causing serious damage, they should be left intact and simply enjoyed! Whenever possible ivy should be left on walls to provide nesting sites and a late nectar source for insects. If trimming or removal is necessary, care should be taken to avoid the bird nesting season (March – July).

The trees and hedges of churchyards are valuable for wildlife providing food, shelter and nesting sites. Any necessary trimming or cutting back should be done in the winter months to minimise disturbance to wildlife. Some of the prunings can be used to create dead wood habitat piles. If new trees are to be planted, use native species and avoid planting where they will shade out wildflower areas.

Mature trees and the church itself are often home to bats which come to feed on the wide diversity of insects in the churchyard. Bats are fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). Care should be taken to avoid taking any action that may disturb or threaten them.

Key Principles:

- Pathways to and around the church and those to tended graves should be kept mown, together with access to compost heaps.
- All grass cuttings should be raked up and removed from wildflower areas. Removal of grass clippings from other areas is also desirable.
- Clear boundaries between closely cut grass and the longer wildflower areas demonstrates that the churchyard is well-managed rather than neglected.
- Lichens, mosses and wall plants should not be removed from gravestones or walls.
- Avoid the use of chemicals.
- Information boards which explain how and why the churchyard is managed are beneficial and encourage interest.

The sensitive management of a churchyard will not only help Suffolk's wildlife, but can bring many benefits by:

- encouraging interest in the church and its surroundings by parishioners and visitors
- encouraging local involvement in the management of the churchyard
- providing a unique educational opportunity for people of all ages to learn about our natural and cultural heritage.

A well managed churchyard is a beautiful place, which is not only a vital refuge for wildlife, but is also a focal point of the parish. The churchyard can be both a place for quiet reflection, and a place of interest where a variety of wildflowers and associated wildlife can be enjoyed. The churchyard will be a valued asset at the heart of the community.