

## MANAGING PLANTS GROWING ON WALLS



**Suffolk has few natural geological outcrops, so our ancient buildings and stonework provide a unique habitat for a range of wall plants that would otherwise be unlikely to occur in the county**

Churches and churchyards are particularly important for these plants. The antiquity of the buildings allows colonisation by slow growing lichens that can take over a hundred years to grow only a few centimetres. The geology of the stonework is often varied. When coupled with different aspects and natural weathering, this offers a wide range of microhabitats, each supporting a distinctive plant community. Cool north-facing roofs and walls are ideal for shade-loving ferns, mosses and lichens. In contrast, a sunnier aspect may be colonised by plants adapted to hot, dry conditions such as the diminutive rue-leaved saxifrage or the succulent houseleek that often grows on roof tiles.

Lichens, mosses, ferns and small, flowering plants cause little or no damage to stonework and are an important part of the character and natural heritage of our churches. However, some larger species, particularly woody plants such as ivy, bramble, elder and buddleia can have a detrimental effect. It is therefore important that such plants are managed to ensure they are not damaging either the buildings or the more delicate plant communities.

With the aim of ensuring that parishes can preserve their church buildings whilst at the same time maintaining the special plant communities that they support, the Diocese of St Edmundsbury and Ipswich and Suffolk Wildlife Trust have drawn up the following guidelines.

## FERNS, MOSSES AND LICHENS

It is recommended that these plants be retained wherever possible. If removal is necessary for restoration work, some plants should be left undisturbed to allow re-colonisation (see also section on phased repair and restoration overleaf). If plants are localised or in low numbers, it should be possible to work around the plants. Small ferns can be left in place and mortar applied around them as necessary. Mosses can cause problems if allowed to build up on north-facing roofs as they hold water; this can cause premature deterioration due to frost damage, particularly on red clay tile roofs. The quantity of mosses can be reduced by carefully scraping some of them off.



Lichen Susan Stone

## FLOWERING PLANTS

Small flowering plants such as whitlow grass, rue-leaved saxifrage, biting stonecrop and houseleek should be retained wherever possible following the recommendations above for ferns, mosses and lichens.

Larger flowering plants such as wall flower and pellitory of the wall present something of a dilemma, as they are very much part of the characteristic flora of stonework, but can become quite woody and penetrate the mortar. Probably the best approach is to remove any plants causing damage to the structure and paint the stumps with a glyphosate-based herbicide. Spraying is not recommended as it results in the destruction of surrounding lichens. It may be possible to retain some of these larger flowering plants at the base of the wall in the footings.



Biting stonecrop *Sedum acre* Susan Stone

## TREE SAPLINGS, BRAMBLE, BUDDLEIA AND OTHER WOODY PLANTS

These plants can penetrate stonework and be very damaging. It is difficult to remove or extract these plants without causing worse damage. It is therefore recommended that plants are cut off as flush as possible to stonework and the cut surface be painted with a glyphosate-based herbicide. Spraying is not recommended as it is damaging to surrounding stonework flora. Once the root has died, it may be possible to carefully remove it, or, if this is likely to damage the masonry, the root can be left to rot away. The cover provided by woody plants can support breeding birds. Cutting back should not be undertaken during the bird-nesting season (mid Feb – end July).<sup>1</sup>



Self sown sycamore Susan Stone

## IVY

Immature strands of ivy growing from the bottom of the wall can be pulled off, but if it is penetrating the stones, bricks or mortar it should be cut off at the base and the stump painted with a glyphosate-based herbicide. The ivy above the cut will die back and lose its grip. When completely dead, the ivy can be removed, taking care not to disturb historic masonry.

If ivy is well established or has reached the arborescent stage it may support breeding birds. As above, cutting back should not be undertaken during bird nesting season (mid Feb – end July).<sup>1</sup>



Ivy Susan Stone

1. It is an offence under section 1 of the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 to intentionally take, damage or destroy the nest of any wild bird while it is in use or being built

## GENERAL GUIDELINES

### LIME MORTAR

The use of soft lime mortar is recommended for repair and restoration as it is breathable, reasonably resistant to frost, and allows moisture transfer through the mortar rather than masonry units, which is good for the long-term conservation of ancient masonry. It also gives a more natural 'weathered' look to stonework and supports lichens and ferns.

### PHASED REPAIR AND RESTORATION

Whenever feasible, it is recommended that repair of walls is phased rather than an entire wall all at once. Islands of lichen-rich mortar should be left to allow re-colonisation. Sound areas of mortar should be selected for the islands. Architects may be able to recommend renovation in stages at each quinquennial.

### USE OF HERBICIDES

To avoid damage to stonework and valued plants, the use of herbicides needs to be carefully targeted. Spot treatment by painting with suitable herbicide is preferred as it is very accurate and there is no drift.

Spraying of the footings of churches to stop tree saplings and ivy establishing at the base of the wall is best avoided. If spraying is considered absolutely necessary it should be restricted to the crack at the base of the wall by protecting the footings and base of church wall with sheets of plywood during spraying.

If herbicides are used, it is important to be aware of and adhere to the legislation requiring people to hold the necessary certification for herbicide use and to implement necessary health and safety measures.

### LISTED BUILDING LEGISLATION

The majority of churches and many ancient buildings and monuments are protected by listed building status and it is important to ensure that any work complies with this legislation. These guidelines have been drawn up in consultation with English Heritage, however further information on listed building legislation and advice on specific situations can be obtained by contacting; English Heritage - East of England Region Telephone: 01223 582700

Website: [www.english-heritage.org.uk](http://www.english-heritage.org.uk)





Lichens Susan Stone

## TOMBSTONES AND BOUNDARY WALLS

In addition to the church itself, tombstones and boundary walls of the churchyard can also be important for wall plants. Old headstones, particularly those of limestone, are valuable lichen habitat and are vulnerable to damage by the inappropriate use of herbicides around headstones, cleaning, repositioning and shading. Many of the principles for management in these locations will be similar to those set out above. However, there may also be scope for considering slightly different management options such as retaining and managing some ivy as habitat on walls of less architectural interest. More information can be found in the Suffolk Wildlife Trust fact sheets on Ivy and Churchyard Management.

**IF YOU HAVE ANY FURTHER QUESTIONS RELATING TO THESE GUIDELINES PLEASE CONTACT:**



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