

Churchyards

Churchyards can be important habitats, often containing a mosaic of short and long grassland, hedgerows, scrub, veteran trees, woodland and rocky surfaces which can be good for lichens. With this diverse range of habitats, it leaves potential to attract many species.

Furthermore, unlike many habitats that are surrounded by agricultural land, where there is a risk of run-off from fertilisers and pesticides contaminating sites, churchyards are often free from these chemicals and undisturbed, making them ideal wildlife havens. The grasslands in churchyards may be the last unimproved, wildlife-rich grassland at a local scale.

[Caring for God's Acre](#) is a small national charity which provides lots of useful [advice and guidance](#) on how to more appropriately manage churchyards and burial grounds for the benefit of wildlife and people.

Threats

- Regular maintenance and mowing of the church grasslands can be detrimental to wildflowers.
- Church wall and tombstone maintenance can be damaging to lichen populations.
- Under-managing can lead to the development of thick scrub, which may only have one or two dominant species present. This can cause a loss of biodiversity if more vulnerable, specialist species are not able to establish because of the generalists.

Benefits to the Council

- Helps develop a connection between churchgoers and wildlife enthusiasts bringing the community together; a shared interest may also increase church attendance.
- Improving the aesthetic value of churchyards may attract more people and public approval, although there is potential for some people to object if they are wary of the idea of attracting wildlife which could potentially cause damage, such as badgers.
- Appropriate maintenance of churchyard tombstones and monuments in a way that preserves important lichen populations could enhance their geological interest.

What you can do

- Survey the area in groups to determine what species are growing, there is potential for the council/church to organise surveying parties if there is a keen interest.
- Plant native wildflowers and trees to improve biodiversity.
- Create bug hotels.
- Put up bird boxes.
- Put up bat boxes.
- Develop green infrastructure

- Grassland needs to be cut at the correct time of year, with the clippings removed. Cutting should be timed around late summer to allow the grasses and wildflowers to develop and set seed. Raking off the cut grass is important to prevent the soil becoming enriched, as this will then encourage rank grass to dominate.
- Leave some areas of grass uncut to provide invertebrates, birds and small mammals with shelter.
- Hedgerows and woodlands should only be managed in the winter, as there is less chance of causing wildlife disturbance.
- Ivy, for example on the church walls should not be removed as there is a risk that mosses, fungi and lichens could get damaged. It also provides a nesting habitat for birds and can be an occasional roost for bats.

However, if there is structural damage, which poses a risk to health and safety, work must be carried out. In these circumstances extreme care must be taken to ensure that the work does not contravene the legal protections afforded to nesting birds and roosting bats. If in doubt, please contact Natural England for advice .

Further reading and advice

The Church of England offers advice on Churchyard Management for Wildlife

<https://www.churchofengland.org/more/church-resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/biodiversity>

The Importance of Historic Cemeteries and Burial Grounds

<https://historicengland.org.uk/advice/caring-for-heritage/cemeteries-and-burial-grounds/importance/#Section5Text> - The Importance of Historic Cemeteries and Burial Grounds

Natural England advice on bats

www.gov.uk/guidance/bats-protection-surveys-and-licences

Natural England advice on nesting birds

www.gov.uk/guidance/wild-birds-protection-surveys-and-licences