



MANAGEMENT OF RURAL CHURCHYARDS

Recent agricultural practices, county council policies for the management of roadside verges, widespread loss of meadowland and grassland, and the increased use of chemicals both on agricultural land and in gardens, means that churchyards, usually carved out of ancient pastures and often remarkably rich in species have a very important role as sanctuaries for wildlife. They may be thought of as 'genetic banks'. As stewards of God's creation we therefore need to draw up appropriate management plans with care, taking appropriate advice.

❖ **Plant Management**

Managing churchyard flora - which also helps churchyard fauna - should follow the principle of cyclical cutting and pruning, bearing in mind that wildlife can be affected adversely by both overmanagement and undermanagement. Identifying these interests may require the PCC to obtain advice from qualified sources such as Tree Wardens, through local council environmental or planning departments, as well as other environmentally sensitive organisations. These include County Wildlife Trusts; the Forestry Commission; the Farming and Wildlife Group; the Council for the Protection of Rural England; and the Church and Conservation Project "The Living Churchyard" which can supply literature, leaflets, one day courses, videos, slide tape sets, audio cassettes and "do-it-yourself" packs). Addresses for these and other organisations can be found at the end of this appendix.

The PCC could appoint a churchyard supervisor from the parish to co-ordinate proper management. Proper management for wildlife does not result in an appearance of neglect or mess; experience shows that a well-managed churchyard is exceedingly attractive.

❖ **Species to conserve**

Where a conflict of floral interest arises, the main consideration should be given to conserving indigenous species unless there is an important reason to do otherwise. There are recorders for bats, birds, butterflies, lichens, and geology who would be pleased to come make a survey and give advice. Get in touch with your local wildlife trust, county museum, or the Arthur Rank Centre.

❖ **Grass cutting**

While the people must be able to get to their family graves, (the current burial area could be well cut and tidy if not ecologically diverse), at least some of the churchyard should remain uncut until late summer so that seed can set. Close cut paths should be mown round these areas, and through them, to allow access and prevent the area from appearing uncared for. Remaining areas and the borders of the churchyard should not be cut closer than 3 inches, to provide cover from small mammals which provide food for owls, and for other small creatures such as lizards and slow worms. Leave these areas uncut from the beginning of May to mid-July, or to mid-August, (depending on whether you want a spring meadow or a summer meadow - see below), to allow at least some of the meadow plants to flower and seed.

A porch notice or leaflets in the church should explain to visitors how the churchyard is being managed and why. Small notices on sticks can be placed round the churchyard explaining what the aims are in a particular area, or drawing attention to particular plants or butterflies that can be seen there. A churchyard managed with sympathy for wildlife can be tidy and more attractive to people, as well as being a haven for plants and animals. Leaving wildlife areas entails less regular labour and expense, reducing in particular the burden of mowing, though when the long grass in the meadow areas is cut it should be raked up to avoid introducing unwanted nutrients into the soil. Do not spray the vegetation. You replace one problem with another. Docks, thistles and nettles will come up, which are even more difficult to control. But see the following section.

❖ **Trees**

Trees provide shelter and food for birds and insects. Native ones are of the greatest value, particularly in rural churchyards. Particularly recommended are: oak, ash, birch, field maple, wild cherry, holly, rowan, whitebeam, and yew. Trees should be felled, lopped and topped only after taking professional advice, and by qualified, insured tree surgeons. (See also the appendix in the Chancellors Directions).

Do not plant trees too close to walls, tombstones, paths or buildings as tree roots are invasive. Ash saplings around gravestones must be cut down and the stumps treated because the roots can cause terrible damage. This is the only justified use of chemicals. It is generally better to plant trees with long deep root systems rather than shallow spreading root systems.

❖ **Shrubs and trees**

Encouraging hedges in rural churchyards is important for creating good cover and facilitating the movement of wildlife across the countryside. Bear in mind the need for food sources for birds. Again, native species are more desirable than cultivated ones. Depending on the nature of the soil, the following are recommended: broom, gorse, blackthorn, wayfaring-tree, guelder-rose, dogwood, hawthorn, sallow, hazel, spurge-laurel, buckthorn, and spindle.

❖ **Care of structures**

Vigilance should be maintained to prevent damage to existing structures such as church buildings, lych gates, graves stones, walls and fences by ivy or tree roots. Wildlife responds less easily to the redressing of consequences of years of neglect, and because nature is cyclical, consistent annual management is necessary.

❖ **Town and country churchyards**

Management of churchyards in towns and cities is particularly important, because there are so few wildlife havens in urban areas. Even the parks in many places tend to be "sanitised". So urban churchyards must retain managed "untidied" areas as wildlife havens.

❖ **Suggestions for action by parishes**

(From "Wildlife in Church and Churchyard")

Arrange for a competent survey to be made of the wildlife in the churchyard.

Draw up a management plan for the churchyard based on the survey and try to follow it.

Explain the management plan as widely as possible.

Review what is happening in the churchyard and the management plan every few years.

Keep up the traditional way of looking after your particular churchyard unless there are good reasons for change.

If possible, collect up the grass mowings, especially after cutting long grass.

Increase the diversity of the types of grass by mowing different areas at different intervals.

Plants should be tolerated to a degree on stonework. Mosses and lichens are always acceptable, while ferns and soft-rooted herbs should be allowed on the less important walls. Woody plants should be removed.

Planting new trees is not always environmentally friendly.

Trees should be inspected annually.

❖ **Sources of further advice**

Council for the Care of Churches, Church House, Great Smith Street, London SW1P 3NZ
Tel: 020 7898 1000

The Church and Conservation Project, Arthur Rank Centre, National Agricultural Centre,
Stoneleigh Park, Warks, CV8 2LZ
Tel. 02476 853060

Mrs P. Donovan, The Sussex Botanical Recording Society, Oakfield, Buxted, Uckfield, East
Sussex, TN22 4JZ

The Tree Council, 51, Catherine Place, London, SW1E 6DY Tel: 0171 828 9928

The Forestry Commission, 231 Corstophine Rd., Edinburgh, EH12 7AT Tel: 0131 210 0303

The International Tree Foundation, Sandy Lane, Crawley Down, West Sussex, RH10 4HSTel:
01342 712 536

Butterfly Conservation, Head Office, P. O. Box 222, Dedham, Colchester, Essex, CO7 6EY.

Sussex Bat Group, C/o Vic Downer, 26, Command Road, Eastbourne, East Sussex, BN20 8RA

British Trust for Ornithology, The Nunnery, Thetford, Norfolk, IP24 2PU

RSPB, The Lodge, Sandy, Bedfordshire, SG19 2DL

British Lichen Society, C/o Dr F. Rose, Rotherhurst, St Mary's Road, Liss, Hants.

British Pest Control Association, 3, St James' Court, Friar Gate Derby, DE1 1ZU
Tel: 01332 294 288

British Trust for Conservation Volunteers:

West Sussex - Field Officer, West Sussex County Council, Ambassador House, Crane Street,
Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 1LL Tel: 01243 777393

East Sussex - Field Officer, Ore Centre, Old London Road, Hastings, East Sussex, TN35 5BH
Tel: 01424 446395

Institute of Field Archaeologists, University of Reading, PO Box 239, Reading, RG6 6AU Tel:
0118 9316446

The Council for the Protection of Rural England, Warwick House, 25, Buckingham Palace Rd.,
London, SW1W 0PP Tel: 020 7976 6433

For help with action plans and general wildlife conservation matters:

Sussex Wildlife Trust, Woods Mill, Henfield, West Sussex, BN5 9SD Tel: 01273 492630

English Nature, The Old Candlemakers, West Street, Lewes, East Sussex, BN7 2NZ
Tel: 01273 476595 Fax: 01273 483063

Leaflets on mowing regimes and the management of wild flower meadow areas can be obtained
from:

The Church and Conservation Project, Arthur Rank Centre, National Agricultural Centre,
Stoneleigh Park, Warks, CV8 2LZ Tel. 01203 696969 Fax: 01203 414808

See especially the Council for the Care of Churches publication "Wildlife in Church and
Churchyard – *Plants, Animals and their Management*" by Nigel Cooper, obtainable from
Church House Publishing, Church House, Great Smith Street, London, SW1P 3NZ.

A list of useful publications and videos may be found on page 60 of "Wildlife in Church and
Churchyard", or obtained from the Secretary of the DAC.