

London Diocesan Advisory Committee



CHURCHYARDS AND WILDLIFE

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This paper is for information when considering proposed works in churchyards, and for parishes, when maintaining and enjoying their churchyard.

1. BACKGROUND AND INTRODUCTION

(a) Canon Law F13/2 states that "The churchyard is to be kept in such an orderly and decent manner as becomes consecrated ground". The Churchyards Handbook adds "the churchyard belongs to the whole community represented by the parish, and not simply to the small group of parishioners who worship regularly in the Church."

(b) The primary purpose of every church site is as the community's centre of Christian life and worship. The church itself is built to glorify

God and in which to worship Him. The churchyard was created to provide a permanent resting place for members of the Christian community as close as possible to the place of worship. The building and churchyard and their tombs, both within and outside the building, should always be cared for with this in mind.

(c) At the same time, Christian belief is that the non-human world has value because it is valued by its creator, God. Plants and animals deserve our care too. Managing the churchyard is thus not only a ministry to the human users but also to the species and creatures living there.

(d) The 'The living churchyard project' was developed in the 1980s to inform and challenge the Church's attitudes and practices in churchyard management. Its mission statement reads:-

"To enhance wildlife and its habitat, and burial grounds through conservation management. To create an atmosphere of benefit to grieving visitors, to encourage educational use of churchyards and burial grounds. To aid the understanding of our natural and cultural heritage and its importance in God's creation. To enhance the amenity value of churchyards and burial grounds."

(e) There is thus a growing awareness of the value of churchyards as both representative habitats and as refuges for threatened species. Churchyards form a patchwork of sites making it more likely that threatened species may be able to disperse and take refuge from one site to another. Additionally, because of their value as amenities for enjoyment by the public, they are important in educating the public about conservation.

(f) In Europe, increasing awareness of wildlife conservation has led to The European Directive for Habitat and Species which will introduce new European areas to be known as Special Protection Areas (SPAs). Their designation may need careful consideration as regards the use and maintenance of buildings within them.

2. BALANCING "GREEN" ISSUES WITH THE CARE OF THE FABRIC OF THE CHURCH AND CHURCHYARD

(a) The churchyard of a Parish Church is subject to the jurisdiction of the Bishop. The legal ownership is usually vested in the Incumbent. The responsibility for maintaining the churchyard belongs to the PCC, unless the churchyard is "closed" and this obligation has been passed to the Local Authority. Responsibility for tombs remains with the families by whom they were erected. But what if they cannot be traced? The PCC may still be liable if injury is caused by an unsafe tombstone, and for

maintaining fences and walls. A duty is owed to persons using a private or public right to pass through the churchyard, under the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act of 1949, even those who may not be supposed to be in the churchyard at all, such as merrymakers using it as a short cut at night.

(b) Whilst the use and development of the churchyard as a place of nature conservation is to be encouraged, the PCC's duty to maintain it to the required standard must not be forgotten. The degree to which wildlife should be encouraged without prejudice to any physical structure depends on the character of each churchyard. A balance is needed, and priorities need to be established. For example, although plant growth may be permitted on robust materials of lesser historic value, it may need to be strongly discouraged on fragile materials of great historic or architectural importance.

(c) In many circumstances, lichen and even some varieties of small plants may enhance the appearance of stonework and have no ill effect. In other circumstances, for reasons of maintenance or appearance, the growth will need to be removed. Examples are algal slimes on vertical surfaces, especially paving, and certain acid-secreting lichens which can cause the deterioration of building materials such as copper, zinc or lead sheet, marble, limestone and glass. Priority will always need to be given to the protection of the fabric.

3. THE QUINQUENNIAL INSPECTION

(a) The Quinquennial Inspection Scheme was established in accordance with the Inspection of Churches Measure 1955 and the Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure 1991.

(b) The purpose of the report is to serve as a general survey and condition report on the fabric and contents, with general recommendations upon works required. It should identify any significant threat to the integrity of the fabric, and to the premises as a capital and a heritage asset, as well as for purposes of beneficial use. It should also draw attention to any threat to any valuable articles arising from the condition of the fabric. In particular it should warn of any apparent hazard to health and safety.

(c) The Scheme continues to advise that "Particular consideration should be given to the advisability of inspecting any such parts which may affect safety of persons or the well being of the principal building - for example retaining walls, ledger slabs, kerbs and edgings, diseased or unstable trees and tree roots which may affect foundations, collapsing tombs, loose gravestones."

(d) Appendix A states that “The inspection is to include, so far as is practicable, all significant features which are visible of the site and the building, together with their fixtures and significant contents and covering in general terms all aspects of conservation and repair”.

(e) Appendix A, when referring to the first report by a Quinquennial Inspector and in subsequent reports if there has been any change, also requires that a brief summary of the following are included: “In the churchyard, a list of trees, noting any subject to tree preservation orders where this can be ascertained ... Any other fauna and flora, such as bats, where these may affect the condition of the building or churchyard”.

(f) From the above information it can be seen the findings of a quinquennial report will need to be taken extremely seriously if the wildlife in question is found to be having a detrimental effect on the building’s structure. The report may for instance recommend the removal of plants growing from the brickwork of a boundary wall prior to its repointing. Bird droppings building up around the base of walls can encourage the growth of elder and mallow. Both birds and plants may have to be controlled. Generally woody plants in particular may need to be removed in order to reduce damage to masonry.

4. RISKS & BENEFITS RESULTING FROM WILDLIFE

(a) Proper weight needs to be given to the conservation of the natural heritage alongside other considerations whenever circumstances permit.

(b) In general, some plants can be tolerated to some degree. Lichens may not cause damage, and may not need to be removed from external stonework and mortar. Ferns and soft-rooted herbs can be allowed on less important walls. All these small plants support an enormous amount of minute animal life.

(c) Although of value to wildlife in that it can provide winter food and shelter, ivy can cause great damage to historic table tombs, to the church building, churchyard walls and other structures. If it is allowed to cover the ground it destroys the variety of wild flowers and other flora. The hazards of allowing ivy to grow unchecked therefore outweigh any ecological advantages it may have. It is therefore likely that the growth of ivy will need to be severely restricted with excess growth regularly removed and cut back.

(d) Although their root-like rhizoids may not do any damage, mosses pose a threat when they grow on roofs since they absorb and hold moisture and can keep the surfaces of tiles damp. They can sometimes

help frost to break up stone, but as they are not so keen on colonising badly decaying or crumbling stone their presence can be a sign of sound stonework. Plants along the base of a retaining wall will need to be removed, as they can trap moisture and cause damage to foundations.

(e) Particular care needs to be taken over trees. Too many can make the churchyard overcast, causing damp and damaging walls, buildings, drains or memorials. Felling and planting are subject to faculty jurisdiction, and may require consultation with the Archdeacon and/or the DAC. The Chancellor has issued specific guidance concerning trees in churchyards. They may also be subject to a Tree Preservation Order imposed by the Local Authority. In a Conservation Area the consent of the Local Authority to lop or fell is required in any event. Where trees are next to a watercourse, the National Rivers Authority will need to be consulted.

(f) The fully grown tree needs to be considered. Will it be too close to the church, boundary wall or adjoining houses? Will it harm existing memorials? A particular eye needs to be kept on trees that have self-seeded. Large fast growing species must not be allowed near buildings, especially those built on shrinkable clay ground. Care must be taken that overhead cables are not in danger of being touched. Tree roots may cause brickwork of an adjacent boundary wall to crack. If trees grow too close to the building their leaves can choke gutters and down pipes as well as their roots causing structural or foundation damage. Water damage is very commonly due to gutter and gully defects. Excessive tree cover may also block views of the church and prevent the grass from growing.

(g) When any alterations to the churchyard landscaping are being planned, consideration needs to be given to how this will fit in with existing trees. The area around the roots of any tree must not be fully paved so that it cannot receive rainwater.

(h) The base of monuments forms a special habitat and the temptation should be resisted of cutting the grass closely around them with a strimmer. Strimmers can also damage the stones.

(i) Hedges are more effective than walls as wind breaks, and in enhancing security. Hedge cutting ought, if possible, avoid the nesting season of April to early July, although a hedge on a road junction needs to be diligently trimmed to provide safe visibility to drivers. If a hedge is over 2m high it can support over ten species of birds, which is reduced to three if the hedge is shorter.

(j) Pigeons and starlings need to be controlled. Ledges which resemble cliff faces need to be eliminated and roofs, ledges and rainwater goods protected by netting or their surfaces covered by spikes. These birds are

“Schedule Two” birds under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981, and may be lawfully killed by an authorised person such as land-owner, occupier or agent.

(k) Bats however are fully protected. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 requires that if any work is planned that might affect bats or their roosts, English Nature must be consulted. It is essential to establish whether bats are present in the church. If they are, two disturbances in a winter may kill them. These may take the form of works to roof, crypts and boiler rooms, felling of trees, installation of floodlighting, changes in temperature through installation of a new boiler, fitting of mesh to louvres in a tower, repairing of broken windows, retiling, repointing and repairing of cracks in walls and roof, and replacing doors by those which fit more tightly. Bats are able to use gaps as small as 8mm wide.

(l) Grassland can be a home for many insects, and a feeding ground for larger animals like badgers. If they feed regularly in a churchyard it is important to take them into consideration if altering boundary hedges or fences. Badgers and their setts are protected under the Badgers Act 1991.

5. CARE AND MAINTENANCE OF THE CHURCHYARD FABRIC

(a) If necessary, are walls and tombstones treated with ‘green’ chemicals?

(b) Repointing is best done using a lime-rich soft mortar. A 1:3:12 mixture of cement:lime:sand is often best for both wall and plants. If work proceeds in stages new work can be colonised from the unrepaired parts. It can take 50 years for mortar to weather enough to permit re-growth. Wherever possible the plants should not be disturbed.

(c) If lichen or green mould have made an inscription on a tomb illegible, this can be removed by covering a horizontal stone with a light coating of earth for two or three weeks and then brushing it off. If the stone is vertical, careful use of a blunt wooden scraper followed by the careful use of a biocide will enable the dead moss and lichen to be brushed away.

(d) When repair work is being carried out on tombs and monuments, plants within 1m of the structure may well need to be removed. Care will need to be taken that adjacent plant growth not scheduled for removal is not contaminated if biocide is being used. If spraying is being undertaken, a sheet can be laid over ground plants to protect them. Spraying should not be carried out during windy weather.

(e) When maintaining unroofed monuments, it needs to be borne in mind that lichens function as soil formers. They may enable the establishment of mosses, small plants and even trees. At one time removal of all such vegetation was recommended, but recently a technique known as "soft capping" has been supported by English Heritage (used at Jervaulx Abbey in N Yorks). Grass and other plants are allowed to remain on the tops of walls, as they offer protection to the stones beneath by reducing extremes of temperature and the risks of frost damage.

(f) Creeping plants, although often beautiful, can severely limit essential maintenance works. They can cause permanently damp walls, disturb footings and plinths, scour Bath, Kentish Rag and other soft stone surfaces, they can inhibit access for painting, repair and maintenance, fine rootlets after penetrating minute crevices grow and eventually can exert enough force to split stones. They even pose a security risk if enabling access to higher level windows. It is recommended that the plant be allowed to climb against a stainless steel angle frame strung with stainless steel wire, attached to the wall by brackets or long bolts in tubular spacers. The growth of the plant should be kept well under control and in particular kept away from eaves, gutters and other openings.

(g) Removal of dead ivy must be carried out with care rather than being tugged off the wall. It will need to be carefully cut or pulled out of each joint. Any growth left behind may, when it decays, support and create voids and weaknesses in a wall.

(h) Any historic, listed structures in the churchyard such as lych-gates, mausolea, tombs, and walls can be put at risk by excessive vegetation clearance. Ground erosion and disturbance can result.

(i) The urge to clear everything away when plants begin to die back during the autumn should be resisted, as allowing plants to set seed provides food for birds. Pruning and clearing can be left until late spring. Old logs and dead wood provide over-wintering sites for mammals, frogs, toads and invertebrates, all of which eat pests. Rotting tree stumps provide habitats for spiders, wasps, ladybirds, stag beetles, bats birds and mammals. Some dead leaves at the back of a border are liked by thrushes and other birds, who turn them over looking for snails, beetles and grubs.

(j) Shrubberies and borders can provide shelter and a year round food source. Often old-fashioned "cottage garden" flowers are popular with insects. Bees like hyacinth, crocus, foxgloves and lavender. Bumblebees like larkspurs, Michaelmas daisies and nasturtiums. Butterflies like buddleia. Pyracantha and viburnum provide berries attractive to blackbirds, waxwings and starlings. Sunflowers are popular with

nuthatches, greenfinches and long-tailed tits. Marigolds attract hoverflies and ladybirds.

6. GENERAL MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

(a) Is there an annual management plan? Managers need to take advice from a naturalist and decide the best strategy, based on local opinion, historic heritage and practical matters. To ensure support the ideas need to be explained and communicated effectively by means of a poster, display or article in the parish magazine.

(b) The management plan needs to be authorized by the PCC to give it the status necessary when applying for grants from professional bodies. The plan needs to incorporate such items as tree inspections, maintenance of footpaths and boundaries, planting of bulbs and annuals, pruning of shrubs and hedges, cleaning nesting boxes, removal of litter and briefing of volunteers. Without a plan, the initiative and responsibility may lie in the hands of a few parishioners who may in time have to withdraw.

(c) Are there any schemes for the involvement of volunteers? Insurance covering specific work in the churchyard by volunteers is essential, as is first aid equipment.

(d) Have any discussions taken place with the Local Planning Authority regarding their policies on biodiversity? It is important to establish a good rapport with the Local Authority in order to establish the principle of mutual responsibility for the good of the entire local community. The Diocesan Advisory Committee has prepared a paper concerning Biodiversity Action Plans.

7. WILDLIFE MANAGEMENT STRATEGIES

(a) Are native species of wildflowers, trees and shrubs being introduced? These are better adapted to local soils and climate. They will require less maintenance and are most closely associated with both insects and birds.

(b) Have any surveys been undertaken by specialists (butterfly, bat, botanist, ornithologist, lichen expert, geologist)? Have the London Wildlife Trust, English Nature, the World Wildlife Fund or British Trust for Conservation Volunteers been involved? (The London Wildlife Trust's remit includes site surveys, possible speakers, background resources and educational opportunities).

(c) Are there any nesting boxes (small bird, owl and bat)?

(d) (Grassland is a particularly important habitat, because outside churchyards a large amount of meadowland has disappeared in recent times. A range of grass cutting regimes can benefit many different plants and insects. Does the grass cutting incorporate a mini wildflower meadow area of benefit to wildlife as well as an area of lawned grass? A meadow can be very colourful and will need less mowing than conventional lawns.

(e) How is waste disposed of? A woodpile and recycling are preferable to burning.

(f) It needs to be remembered that the primary aim of conservation is to care for what is already there. The plants and animals in a churchyard will be suited to whatever management they are currently receiving, and may decline or disappear if this management is changed.

8. EDUCATIONAL USAGE: SOME QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

(a) Is there a wildlife trail or tombstone trail?

(b) Has the local history society been involved?

(c) Is the churchyard mentioned in the local parish magazine or local press?

(d) Is there an opportunity for visitors to record personal sightings of fauna and flora?

(e) There could be a display in a local library or hall and involvement of the churchyard in local events.

(f) Is there any co-operation with schools/youth clubs/uniformed groups? The churchyard could be used as an outdoor classroom for local schools.

(g) Is there a descriptive leaflet or board informing the public that the area is a wildlife sanctuary? Details of the purpose of any conservation schemes need to be provided.

(h) A Churchyard event such as a barbeque can be held to show what there is in the churchyard.

9. SUGGESTIONS FOR ACTION BY THE DIOCESE AND/OR THE DAC

(a) Could the Diocese encourage a Churchyard competition? The parishes would need to be kept fully informed as to the criteria used by the judges for assessment those churchyards that are adopting nature conservation policies.

(b) The DAC Office is gathering information on the physical features of each churchyard - its size, boundaries (whether walls, railings, fences or hedges), paths (surfaces), and any seats/benches. There may be special features such as a sundial, water feature, scented garden for the blind, woodland glade for the burial of ashes as well as the flora, fauna and trees which are subject to tree preservation orders.

10. USEFUL ADDRESSES

10.1. Expert authorities

(a) Specialist societies for mosses, liverworts, reptiles, amphibia, fungi, molluscs and insects can be contacted via:

The Natural History Museum (also the British Lichen Society)
Cromwell Road
London SW7 5BD Tel: (020) 7942 5000

The Conservation Foundation
1 Kensington Gore
London SW7 2AR Tel: (020) 7591 3111

Fauna and Flora Preservation Society
C/O Zoological Society of London
Regents Park
London NW1 4RY Tel: (020) 7722 3333

The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds
The Lodge
Sandy
Beds SG19 2DL Tel: 01767 680 551

The Tree Council
51 Catherine Place
London SW1E 6DY Tel: (020) 7828 9928

The Arboricultural Association
51 Catherine Place
London SW1E 6DY Tel: 01792 368717

10.2. Volunteers

(a) The British Trust for Conservation Volunteers provides advice, projects and training courses for groups and individuals wishing to undertake practical conservation works. Local groups of volunteers can undertake regular tasks by request. A series of practical handbooks and training leaflets are provided.

British Trust for Conservation Volunteers
36 St Mary's Street
Wallingford
Oxford OX10 0EU

Tel: 01491 839766

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