



CARING FOR GOD'S ACRE

Sue Cooper

Ox-eye Daisies and other wildflower species in a Kent churchyard. Nick Spurling/FLPA

The estimated number of churchyards and chapel yards in the UK stands at more than 20,000, and the average ground coverage of each works out at about one acre (0.4 hectares). The result is approximately 8,000 hectares of green space: a substantial opportunity for nature conservation.

'I like that ancient Saxon phrase, which calls the burial ground God's Acre!'

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow

When the Living Churchyard and Cemetery Project (LCCP) was set up in 1985 by English Nature and the Council for the Care of Churches, it became the first scheme to promote the conservation of burial sites in the UK. Managed by Eve Dennis, the project stimulated county Wildlife Trusts to establish their own Living Churchyard projects, some of which still operate to this day. About 15 years later, however, the LCCP came to an end through lack of funding.

This could have signalled the death of a worthwhile concept. Fortunately, despite the passing of the LCCP, a new organisation was to pick up the torch. Caring for God's Acre (CfGA), which was inspired by Eve's initial work, was a European LEADER-funded project through The Shropshire Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB). In 2000, CfGA became an independent registered charity with the sole aim of promoting and supporting churchyard and burial-ground conservation. The papers, reports and books from the LCCP were delivered to Caring for God's Acre for safekeeping, and fresh life was breathed into the movement.

Linked environments

Burial sites have much in common in terms of habitat wherever they are, despite the infinite variety of local features such as aspect, altitude and rock type. Found in every imaginable situation from moor to marshland, city centre to country



Wall restoration at Bredwardine, and Slow Worm hibernaculum in a churchyard wall. Caring for God's Acre

parish and coastline, 'God's Acre' is often the oldest enclosed piece of land in any parish (Lees 1996). The value of such places for wildlife has been recognised since the end of the twentieth century (Cooper 1997).

What connects them all, or the vast majority of them, is that very fact that they are enclosed, and the establishment of churchyard boundaries to prevent the grazing of animals dates back to the thirteenth century. The parson would be allowed to graze his horse and cow, and churchyard hay was part of the stipend (Burgess 1980). One story from the eighteenth century tells of an archdeacon making a visit and finding turnips growing in the churchyard. 'I hope to see no such thing on my next visit,' he growled at the vicar. 'I can assure you, Archdeacon, that you will not,' came the answer. 'I plan to grow barley next season' (Greenoak 1993).

Those boundary walls were generally constructed either as dry-stone walls or with lime-mortar, and much of their vegetation is of conservation importance, as around 20 species which rely upon those walls for their main habitat are now rare in the wild. Native species such as Wall-rue *Asplenium ruta-muraria*, Maidenhair Spleenwort *A. trichomanes*, Rustyback *Ceterach officinarum* and Southern Polypody *Polypodium cambricum*, all regularly recorded on lowland churchyard walls, are now more abundant on those walls than elsewhere in the wild (Gilbert 1996). Where there are churchyards with lime-mortared walls in an area characterised by granites and other acid rock, their importance is even greater. One of the few kinds of moss able to colonise acid rock is *Grimmia dissimulate*, found in 2005 in

15 churchyards, mostly in south-east England, with only two or three occurrences on natural outcrops (Porley 2005).

In Herefordshire, a total of 23 churchyard walls has been restored sympathetically during the last seven years by volunteers. CfGA trains local people in this traditional skill while repairing the wall and conserving the vegetation, so far as possible, in the process. Plants are removed and stored carefully before being replaced, and on one occasion, at Mansel Lacey, a bumblebee nest was rescued and successfully rehoused in the wall. The Slow Worm *Anguis fragilis*, a churchyard animal, can also be safely rehoused after wall repair.

Within those churchyard walls can be found the most significant collection of old trees in Europe, and in England and Wales approximately 800 Yews *Taxus baccata* aged 500 years or more have been recorded. The churchyard habitat is a critical one for the conservation of large-girthed Yew trees (Moir *et al.* 2013). In fact, three-quarters of Britain's ancient Yews are found in churchyards, and not all have legal protection through Tree Preservation Order status, a situation that the Ancient Yew Group, CfGA and other organisations are seeking to redress. One of the Ancient Yew Group's founders, Toby Hindson, says that 'The last few years of our work have seen the Yew come out of the darkness and into the light of scientific scrutiny.' The work of the group has provided evidence of old Yew records, the trees' state of health and an up-to-date gazetteer of *Taxus baccata* L. in England and Wales.

Churchyards are, in most cases, at least as old as the oldest part of the church, and many date



Veteran yew, Ratlinghope, Shropshire. Sue Cooper

back well over a thousand years (Rackham 1986). As their meadow habitat has never been fertilised apart from through its primary usage as a place for burial, this has ensured that many remain semi-natural grassland, and quite often the only such grassland in a parish. There is an increasing interest in their management for conservation, with the result that some churchyards are now properly managed as *de facto* meadows (Peterken 2013). Churchyards are, of course, visited for reasons other than wildlife, and to protect that meadowland CfGA manages the sensitive matter of grave-visiting via simple guidelines on where to leave grass to grow long, where to close-mow and where grass can be left at a medium length. A mosaic of grassland heights such as this is beneficial for wildlife. Advice is given also on when best to cut and which are the best tools for the job (Caring for God's Acre 2013). Scything has experienced a renaissance with the increasing use of the lightweight Austrian scythe, as a zero-carbon method of grass-cutting that can be used in fairly tight spaces such as churchyards. According to the Scythe Association of Britain & Ireland, the

number of people teaching scything is growing. For small sites CfGA also promotes the use of a wooden hand-haybaler, adapted from an American homestead design. Volunteers enjoy using this tool, which makes compact, small hay bales that can be sold for pet bedding and animal fodder.

What, then, are the effects of these efforts? Here, we present five case studies which demonstrate the encouraging work and results being achieved by professionals and volunteers to conserve these 'Living Sanctuaries' and the vast congregation of plants and animals sheltering within them.

St Albans

The Living Churchyard Scheme in St Albans Diocese was first promoted in 2006, and since then the awareness of the importance of churchyards for wildlife has steadily increased. A number of churchyards are now being managed for conservation, leading to requests for botanical surveys, undertaken by the respective county Wildlife Trusts. Several churchyards have been discovered to have grassland of sufficiently high quality to allow them



Scything at St Weonards, Herefordshire, and hand haybaler. Caring for God's Acre

to be designated as new County Wildlife Sites (CWS). These include St Michael and All Angels, in Millbrook (c. 7 miles south of Bedford), which was designated a County Wildlife Site in September 2012. The site supports three acid-grassland indicators, eight neutral and neutral/calcareous indicators, two strong neutral and neutral/calcareous indicators and one strong calcareous-grassland indicator. The area of U1 *Festuca-Agrostis-Rumex* NVC community is 0.1ha and MG5 *Cynosurus-Centaurea* NVC community is 0.02ha. The site meets CWS criteria for both neutral-grassland and acid-grassland recognition.

All Saints, in Little Munden (c. 7 miles east of Stevenage, Hertfordshire), met the CWS criteria

for neutral grassland and calcareous grassland in 2010. Large areas are managed to allow the wild flowers to set seed; 106 species of lichen have been recorded, and butterflies and moths are also being recorded. The churchwarden has printed photographs of every plant and lichen found, and the intention is to use the churchyard as an outdoor classroom for the neighbouring primary school. St Mary, in Reed (c. 10 miles north of All Saints), has also met the CWS criteria for neutral grassland.

In 2013, churches in the diocese were encouraged to request lichen surveys. The uptake has been good, and a number of exciting finds recorded. In particular, *Lecania coeruleorubella* was rediscovered on a church in Hertfordshire. The last British record of this lichen was the original type, gathered from Yorkshire in the nineteenth century.

Training in botanical skills. Caring for God's Acre



Bristol

Arnos Vale Cemetery, in Bristol, is a fine example of a burial site where the competing demands of a large, active cemetery have been sensitively balanced with the ecology of the site in order to conserve important urban habitats. The 45-acre Victorian cemetery, originally located outside the city, became surrounded in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by housing. After a period of neglect from the 1970s onwards, the cemetery was rescued from dereliction in 2004, when the Friends of Arnos Vale collaborated with Bristol City Council to create the Arnos Vale Cemetery



Nightingale in scrub. Paul Hobson/FLPA

Trust, to take it through a restoration phase and beyond. A £5million Heritage Lottery Grant was awarded for restoration projects.

Today, the landscape is managed carefully to conserve its habitats, including extensive areas of secondary woodland, bramble scrub, unimproved grassland and semi-improved grassland. The cemetery's importance within the city is recognised through its designation as a Site of Nature Conservation Interest.

Ecological surveys carried out in 2004 identified areas which are now prioritised within the site's landscape management plan, and other areas which are rarely worked in. Regular grass-cutting in more formal presentation areas helps to achieve a managed appearance around the buildings, while extensive areas of thick bramble scrub are retained through non-intervention, offering important nesting habitat to many resident bird species, and occasional notable visitors such as Grasshopper Warbler *Locustella naevia*, Pied Flycatcher *Ficedula hypoleuca* and Nightingale *Luscinia megarhynchos*. Such areas may be cut back on 3–5-year rotations, to allow for regenerating edge habitat and to help to create a mosaic of varied habitats. The most recent full bird survey, in 2011, showed variations but no net loss in bird numbers since the initial survey of 2004, following several years of management to control encroaching scrub from the grassland.

Sizable pockets of unimproved grassland, containing 18 indicator species, are managed as meadows, with one single cut in late summer, while other areas are left long for overwintering insects and invertebrates. Overgrown Ivy *Hedera helix* has enveloped hundreds of graves, particularly within the oldest areas, and its management is carefully considered in order to retain important habitat for birds, insects and bats. Where Ivy has completely smothered graves, its presence can be problematic, as it can make headstones top-heavy and cause them to subside or collapse. In many cases, however, the Ivy appears to be the only thing holding the monuments together, and its removal is therefore selective and managed. A programme of annual tree-thinning aims to improve the woodland structure, which is composed almost entirely of self-seeded Sycamore *Acer pseudoplatanus* and Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*.

Community engagement has been a key factor in achieving ongoing sustainability of the cemetery as a whole. From the numerous committed landscape volunteers through to tour guides and receptionists, the level of community involvement has steadily increased over recent years. This degree of voluntary support has opened up opportunities to develop community engagement further, including a programme of exciting outdoor-learning and Forest School activities in the new Underwood

Centre, a timber-framed shelter and rustic space set deep within the woodland. The Cemetery Trust will continue to offer much to its varied user groups through keeping both enterprise and sensitive management at the core of its values.

Yorkshire

The Yorkshire Living Churchyard Project was launched in 1985 as a joint project between the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT) and the Diocese of York. One of the sites, St Chad's, in Leeds, is a large churchyard which includes an oak believed to have been a sapling in the reign of Elizabeth I. St Chad's has a mosaic of grass lengths: areas at the front of the church are close-mown, apart from an area which is rich in Yorkshire hay-meadow grass species and is labelled the mini-hay meadow; grass in an area of recent graves is kept at medium length and that in the area of older graves is mown in August. This mosaic of grass lengths is of benefit to wildlife and thus a way of achieving the aim. The grass is cut with a strimmer, and then raked up (to keep the soil fertility low). Hay is piled up at the periphery of the churchyard in order to create habitat for invertebrates.

Various surveys over the past few years have recorded plants, birds, mammals, butterflies, fungi and molluscs. The Mid-Yorkshire fungus group surveys the churchyard in most years and in October 2013 ten species of waxcap were recorded, including the Churchyard Waxcap *Hygrocybe calyptriformis* and, perhaps fittingly, Dead Man's Fingers *Xylaria polymorpha*.

Dead Man's Fingers at St Chad's, Leeds. Caring for God's Acre



A survey of molluscs of the churchyard in May 2010 recorded a total of 33 species. Twelve species of butterfly have been recorded, and Cuckooflower plants *Cardamine pratensis* are left uncut for Orange-tips *Anthocharis cardamines*. A border of 'cultivated' plants provides pollen and nectar from early spring to late autumn for bumblebees, which nest in old mouse holes in the tussocky area of grass.

The churchyard at Far Headingley is a place for learning, with community events and activities such as the Bat Watch organised by West Yorkshire Bat Group. Leeds University students use the site and a plant survey has found five ferns, including Hart's Tongue *Asplenium scolopendrium* and Scaly Male-fern *Dryopteris affinis*. Summer-flowering species include the typical ones – Cat's-ear *Hypochaeris radicata*, Meadow Vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis*, Bird's-foot-trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*, Oxeye Daisy *Leucanthemum vulgare* and hawkbits *Leontodon*. The local project leader, Suzanne Dalton, believes that a dedicated, employed 'churchyard officer' is essential for the success of the project. 'It is very valuable for churches to have the authority of an external organisation,' she says. 'When changing the maintenance regime of the churchyard, the PCC takes more notice of an outsider than of a member of the congregation.'

Dorset

The Dorset Living Churchyard Project has successfully supported churchyard conservation for the past 22 years, with more than 100 churches involved and around 25 churches taking part in the annual award scheme each year.

Many of the Dorset Living Churchyards contain remnants of ancient unimproved grassland, and the project has proved that appropriate management can support species-rich grassland, occasionally turning up important species such as Bee Orchids *Ophrys apifera* (at St Catherine's, in Holworth), Autumn Lady's-tresses *Spiranthes spiralis* (at St Peter's, in Bournemouth), Southern Marsh-orchids *Dactylorhiza praetermissa* (at St Mary's, in Puddletown, and St John's, in Bere Regis), and Spiny Restharrow *Ononis spinosa* (at Stour Row churchyard).

Through the project two simple key messages on grassland management have been promoted. One is to cut and remove cuttings regularly so as to



Wildflower patches among the older graves at St Mary's, Sixpenny Handley. Graham Feldwick

reduce fertility and vigour of coarse grasses, and the other to avoid leaving large areas unmown for the entire summer.

Rotational management of areas of churchyard grassland is encouraged, with some areas left as 'spring' meadows and others cut regularly early in the season and then left for a few weeks as a summer 'hay' meadow. Alternatively, around the newer graves, where grass needs to be kept short, there has been some success with leaving small patches uncut for three to four weeks, to allow flowering before the area is cut again, while a different area is left to grow.

One churchyard that has done particularly well after only three years of conservation management is that of St Peter, in Portesham. Following years of close mowing, the churchyard has wildflowers, including a Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis*, blooming in small 'islands'.

St Mary's, at Sixpenny Handley, has been another success story, and extracts from an article written by the key organiser of its group give an insight into the scale of work involved: 'The first time I saw this churchyard, it appeared somewhat neglected... the first job was to catalogue the plant species present. Not an easy task, as some of the jungle was impenetrable. It actually took three of us the best part of four years to clear the whole churchyard. Having got this far, a management plan was established, with seven main areas, each with different grass-cutting and tree- and shrub-pruning regimes. A stone

wall cleared last winter is to be observed for the build-up of lichen in future. The more that is done, the more we realise there is to be done.'

Wiltshire

After attending a Living Churchyard seminar in 1997, Ivan Randall, who grew up in the Wiltshire village of Lower Stanton St Quintin, was inspired to take the idea back to his village, where like-minded people were recruited to help. In March 1998, St Giles Living Churchyard Project was born.

A churchyard management plan was drawn up and local people were informed. Apart from in sensitive areas, such as path edges, the Garden of Remembrance and wedding-photo sites, the decision was to let all the grass grow before carrying out a survey. Among the discoveries were Self-heal *Prunella vulgaris*, Cuckooflower (sometimes known as 'Lady's-smock'), Primrose *Primula vulgaris*, Burnet-saxifrage *Pimpinella saxifraga*, Red Campion *Silene dioica* and violet species *Viola*. The main change was to the grass-cutting regime – short areas, spring meadows, summer meadows and long grass, as the Living Churchyard Project advised.

Yellow Rattle *Rhinanthus minor* has been successfully introduced. Three species of bat have been recorded, including Brown Long-eared *Plecotus auritus* and Serotine *Eptesicus serotinus*, which use the church as a roost. The Cotswold Fungus Group also confirmed an unusual earthstar species – *Geastrum striatum*.

Ten work sessions are organised per year, and these provide an opportunity for people to help out when time allows, for practical tasks or just a chat and refreshments. A unique interpretation board to inform visitors and locals has been erected, and there is also a Geocache installed and a blog site.

Conclusion

CfGA is aware that conservation management at burial grounds depends upon people's continued appreciation and support and on the acceptance of nature conservation as a fitting use for such sites by those responsible for them and by the public in general.

There can be conflicts of interest. To some people, conservation means untidiness and wilderness, which may be thought of as disrespectful,

Growing partnerships

CfGA makes use of partnership-working to extend its effectiveness.

- A w with Amphibian and Reptile Conservation is helping to record Slow Worms *Anguis fragilis* and Grass Snakes *Natrix natrix* in churchyards. A record card is available on CfGA's website.

- The restoration and repair of churches can have a serious impact on Swifts *Apus apus*, which make use of these ancient buildings for nesting. Swift Conservation provides information and training in support of the conservation of Swifts, and an example of their activity can be seen at the Church of the Sacred Heart in Reading. Oxley Conservation was working on its restoration when dead Swifts were found in the spire; they had entered via decorative holes in the stonework in search of nest places and become trapped. Richard Oxley obtained permission to put nestboxes in the spire and, thanks to a gift from a local sponsor, nestboxes made from recycled plastic plank were designed to fit inside the spire, allowing the birds to enter via the existing decorative holes. A new sound system was also donated and is in use, playing Swift calls at appropriate times during the brief nesting season to attract them to the new nest places. There is a lively population of Swifts locally in Reading, so this should be a popular nesting site before long.

- A relatively small number of churchyards and cemeteries have special designations. A total of eight cemeteries is listed on Natural England's website

as Local Nature Reserves (LNR), and even fewer churchyards are listed. Churchyard LNRs include St Denis's, in East Hatley, Cambridgeshire, and Dagenham Village Churchyard Local Nature Reserve and St John's Wood Church Grounds Nature Reserve, both in London. Four rural churchyards within the Shropshire Hills AONB are in the process of becoming County Wildlife Sites. The mechanism for achieving this status will appear on CfGA website as a case study, aimed at encouraging and supporting others to consider this option.

- A framework for the protection of the historic environment, known as the National Heritage Protection Plan (NHPP), has been developed by English Heritage (EH). EH's own Action Plan has been developed in response to this, setting out what it will do to understand threats faced by the historic environment, understand what makes the historic environment particularly significant, and seek out unknown assets through survey work.

- The Diocese of London, in partnership with the Dioceses of Southwark and Chelmsford, is running a project to survey the fauna and flora, habitats and ecology of churchyards across Greater London. This survey, called 'Churchyards Ecology Survey', is Phase A of a longer-term project under the banner 'Churchyards for London'. Phase B, to follow, will include three themes: churchyards for communities, churchyards and heritage, and churchyards for biodiversity.

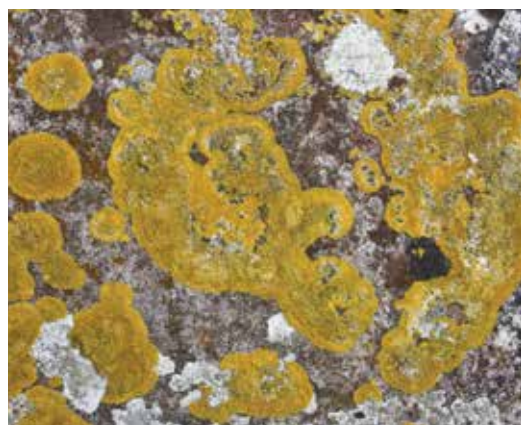


Grass Snake sheltering behind a gravestone. Caring for God's Acre



Front and back of Swift nestboxes in a Reading spire. Richard Oxley





***Caloplaca flavescens* and other lichen species on an old gravestone in Somerset.** Bob Gibbons/FLPA

reflecting poorly on the community. There are further problems concerning health and safety and the perceived amount of work involved in conservation management.

The long-term success of burial-ground conservation projects has yet to be fully evaluated. The case studies featured here and the experience of CfGA over the past years, however, indicate that successful, sustainable projects do exist. There is also increasing evidence through the evaluation of CfGA's projects—The Rural Heritage Project 2003–06; Lifelong Learning Project 2003–06; The Churchyard Task Team Project 2007–12; and CfGA's current National Project 2012–6—that there is growing enthusiasm for and interest in burial grounds and their conservation among partner organisations and, most importantly, the general public. CfGA, with the support of its President HRH The Prince of Wales, its patrons, members and funders, aims to continue campaigning, and developing its work in support of the conservation of these historic sites for the benefit of people and wildlife.

CfGA's present four-year project, supported by Heritage Lottery Fund, is undertaking work across England and Wales. 'The Beautiful Burial Ground conference' is being taken to 15 regions, and a special Churchyard and Burial Ground Action pack covering 31 different topics has been produced. Case studies are appearing on the website, training in habitat management is taking place, an education pack for primary schools is available, and a National Cherishing Churchyards

Week is promoted in June each year. For further information, visit www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk.

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God's Acre sign. Caring for God's Acre



Sue Cooper is the Director and one of the founders of Caring for God's Acre, a national Charitable Incorporated Organisation with a membership.