

DIOCESE OF CHELMSFORD
DIOCESAN ADVISORY COMMITTEE

**NATURE CONSERVATION IN
CHURCHYARDS**

GUIDELINES TO ASSIST PARISHES



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- Paragraph 1.3
- Policy No 3

NATURE CONSERVATION IN CHURCHYARDS

1 INTRODUCTION

- 1.1 Churchyards all over the country can be havens for wildlife amidst the pressures of urban encroachment, road building and agriculture. In few places is this more obvious than in Essex with its high population and close proximity to London. Outside churchyards pressure for building and agricultural production has greatly changed the face of Essex. It is estimated that 99% of all the old flower rich meadows disappeared in Essex between the 1930's and 1980's. During this period, although there have also been losses in churchyards, they have changed much less and are now one of the strongholds of flower rich grassland in the county.
- 1.2 Managing a churchyard for wildlife does not mean it will become a wilderness. Various areas of grassland in the churchyard need to be managed in different ways to encourage the species that are to be conserved. Grassland managed for the benefit of some wildflowers needs to be cut at particular times of the year to enable the flowers to bloom and set seed, whilst other areas need to be closely mown to encourage other plant species, invertebrates and fungi. The mowing regime will depend on the species present and advice should be sought on this initially.
- 1.3 Managing a churchyard in a way which is both sympathetic to the relatives who tend the graves of their loved ones, and the indigenous plants and animals they contain, is often a concern of the churches. Particular attention should be paid to ensure that attended graves are appropriately maintained and that the views of relatives are respected. With an agreed management plan this task becomes easier and more rewarding.

- 1.4 When planning or re-organising conservation areas in a churchyard, it is important that specialist advice is sought from somebody competent in nature conservation rather than from a domestic garden designer.

2 MANAGING FOR CONSERVATION

- 2.1 **Management Plan** - A management plan is a schedule of actions necessary to achieve an environmentally friendly churchyard, taking into account the measures and attention necessary for the various seasons of the year.
- 2.2 There are four steps to producing a Management Plan. The first step is for a survey of the churchyard to be undertaken to ascertain the current wildlife, so that it is known what is to be conserved. A basic survey would include a sketch map of the churchyard which would have spring, summer and autumn areas clearly marked, together with compost heaps, and other wildlife features.
- 2.3 The second step is to draw up a Management Plan for the churchyard based on the initial survey. The keepers of the churchyard should discuss what is the best strategy for their own particular churchyard, taking into account all the many factors to be considered in the care of the churchyard in addition to wildlife. The church building, the monuments and the historic treasures of the site must not be jeopardised by the promotion of wildlife conservation. Management Plans need to be realistic.
- 2.4 Thirdly, the management must be explained to all to ensure local support. Interpreting what people can see is essential if they are to understand and appreciate churchyard conservation. A detailed plan, or a list of plants and photographs of birds found in the churchyard, is often a good way of encouraging more help. The encouragement of schools to assist with conservation projects is recommended.

2.5 The fourth and last step is to review the Management Plan every few years. When a Management Plan is put into effect it is inevitable that minor changes will have to be made. Sometimes these changes will be due to the change in weather pattern, or the lack of necessary equipment. After each season it should be noted how the original plan could be improved, and a review of the impact of the plan on the wildlife. Nature is unpredictable and will fluctuate widely from year to year.

2.6 Rules of thumb to protect and enhance wildlife in churchyards, which should help PCC's to avoid common problems.

- Maintain long established patterns of management
- Avoid the use of chemicals (fertilizers, pesticides or herbicides)
- Remove grass cuttings, preferably after they have lain a few days.
- Leave small plants and lichens on walls and monuments.
- Remove woody plants and ivy from walls and monuments.
- Keep bonfires and compost heaps well sited, away from buildings and monuments, trees and good grass
- Care to be exercised when planting trees since future growth affects the appearance of the churchyard.
- Inspect trees annually
- Do not dig graves close to trees

- Maintain established pollarding regimes
- Seek advice on surveying and caring for the churchyard
- Maintain an inventory of the churchyard's wild and cultivated species.

3 AREAS OF CONSERVATION INTEREST

3.1 **The Church** - Ferns, lichens and mosses are often found on the north and east walls and buttresses, at their bases and in deep channels or stairwells. Porches provide nesting sites for many species of birds, and gaps between underboarding and roofing material provide roosts for bats. Spires and towers provide the main roosting sites for the barn owl; occasionally also for tawny owls and kestrels.

3.2 **Grassland** - These are particularly important as they are the relics of old pasture, now so rare on farms. There are a number of grassland management regimes to cover short grass, spring meadows, summer meadows and long grass. The cutting regime is important and although popularly called 'conservation areas' long grass can damage important plants, and is not very good for some insects. Grass cuttings should always be removed; if left the area beneath becomes rank and infertile.

3.3 **Walls, Gravestones and Tombs** - Old walls and tombs support ferns and flowering plants. Lichen and moss species accumulate over the year. Parishes should be vigilant in not allowing tombstones and walls to become damaged by ivy or tree saplings. Gravestones can acquire a patchwork of up to 30 lichen species. Gravestones and tombs provide basking places for reptiles during the mornings from April to September, if it is not too cold or wet, and cracks and crevices provide hibernation areas for both reptiles and insects.

- 3.4 **Gravel and Earth Paths** - These can be rich in plants providing they are not sprayed with herbicides. Gravel paths are particularly important for winter annuals, especially various members of the crucifer family, and some paths are rich in mosses. They should be well maintained by topping up with gravel as necessary.
- 3.5 **Trees** - Essex churchyards often contain fine trees. As they mature they may need specialised surgery to keep them safe, and an annual tree inspection should be undertaken in September or early October to assess their progress. Care is also needed in the choice of young replacement trees which ideally should be native and of local stock (see appendix for Recommended Species). Reference should be made to the Chancellor's Guidance on Trees in Churchyards.
- 3.6 **Hedgerow** - Churchyard hedges are very important places for wildlife. The hedge itself is a refuge for birds and insects. The vegetation at the foot of a hedgerow allows a wildlife corridor for mammals to move around to different parts of the churchyard and neighbouring sites without exposing themselves. Flowers at the foot of the hedge can also add variety. While preserving a suitable appearance, e.g. country or urban, the precise timing and frequency of cutting can enhance the value of a hedge for wildlife; avoiding cutting in the nesting season is particularly worthwhile. A tall hedge can provide nest sites for more species of birds than those at shoulder height. A thick hedge scalloped in plan, is good for insects. A hedge that is 'A' shaped in profile is also recommended.
- 3.7 **Bonfires, Compost and Spoil Heaps** – Bonfires should not be sited close to trees because heat from the fire permanently damages them. Once the site is chosen it should not be changed, or allowed to increase in area. If possible the ash should be taken away and perhaps offered to local gardeners. Compost heaps should be sited away

from tree trunks to avoid fatal bark damage, and could be screened by shrubs or a hedge. The spoil exposed by a freshly dug grave is usually subsoil and tends to attract arable weeds before being colonised by more typical plants. It is important to indicate a suitable place for the dumping of spoil, which should be carefully selected to avoid damage to existing structures and water courses.

- 3.8 **Fungi** - Nothing is straightforward in conservation and different species and groups often require conflicting management. A number of rare species of fungi have been found in Essex churchyards. Unlike flowering plants fungi benefit from the grass not being cut in September or October when they are sending up their fruiting bodies.
- 3.9 **Wildlife Areas** - A churchyard managed with conservation in mind will, in itself, encourage wildlife from the surrounding countryside to seek sanctuary within its confines. Additional habitats may be created, for example log piles which will encourage insects, and give hibernation places for hedgehogs, small mammals and amphibians. The creation of a small wildlife pond will encourage dragonflies and damselflies, and possibly newts, frogs and toads. Amphibians will also seek shelter in damp, dark areas of the churchyard, migrating to a nearby pond during the breeding season. Bird boxes and feeders may also be introduced, but it is important to remember that feeders need to be filled at regular intervals in order to maintain the continuity of attracting the birds.
- 3.10 **Cremated Remains Areas** – Special consideration should be given to areas for cremated remains, bearing in mind the need for nature conservation. (Refer to DAC guidance booklet on “Cremated Remains Areas”).

4 MANAGEMENT REGIMES FOR POSSIBLE GRASSLAND SCHEMES

- 4.1 Permanently Close-Mown Grass (up to 5cm)** - This helps to give the well-tended appearance needed in a churchyard immediately in front of the church, along the edges of paths and around frequently visited graves. Close mowing may also be needed to provide paths through meadow areas for access to tended graves. To maintain this length, a weekly cut in the growing season may be necessary.
- 4.2 Permanent Short Grass (up to 10cm)** - This is valuable if interesting low-growing species are present. The grass should be cut every 2 to 3 weeks to maintain an appropriate height. Adjustment may be needed to this timing to ensure that the important species are able to flower and set seed.
- 4.3 Permanent Long Grass** - It is desirable to leave some areas of the churchyard under long grass throughout the year. This provides shelter, food and over-wintering sites for invertebrates and other small animals such as frogs, lizards, voles etc. Areas just inside boundary walls and hedges or less visited parts of the churchyard are suitable to be managed in this way. These areas should be divided into three to five sections and a different section cut in autumn each year in rotation, with the rest left uncut. This will prevent scrub invasion and maintain the grass species. It is important that grass cuttings should be removed.
- 4.4 Spring Meadow** - A spring meadow should be cut in late June/early July. Cuttings may be allowed to lie on the ground for a few days only, this will allow any seeds remaining to fall out. The grass should then be removed and the ground trampled to push the seeds into the ground. The area should then be mown once a month until the autumn with the removal of all grass cuttings. It should

then be left unmown until the following June/July. This regime will gradually reduce the soil fertility allowing a greater diversity of wildflowers to develop whilst discouraging the coarser grass.

4.5 **Summer Meadow** - A summer meadow should be cut to a height of 8cm every 3 weeks throughout the spring until the end of May and then left unmown until August/September after which it should be cut and the mowings left on the ground for a few days for the seed to fall out. The grass should then be removed and the ground trampled to push the seeds into the ground. Thereafter it should be cut every three weeks with the removal of cuttings until the end of October. This regime, as with the spring meadow will encourage a greater diversity of wildflowers.

4.6 The grass should not be cut too close to the headstones and trees. An area of longer growth prevents damage to tree trunks; it also maintains the stability of headstones as well as giving shelter to small animals such as frogs, lizards and voles.

5 INDIGENOUS SPECIES.

5.1 These are species which are native to the local area and are known to favour the soil conditions of a locality. It is important that any wildflower seed sown in a churchyard should originate from a native supply, and is indigenous to the area. The Natural History Museum (www.nhm.ac.uk) produces a Postcode database which enables species to be checked, and Essex Wildlife Trust Centres (www.essexwt.org.uk) sell packets of seeds from native sources. It is important that non-indigenous species are not introduced into a churchyard as they may seed into the surrounding countryside.

6 USEFUL RESOURCES

- 6.1 **Essex Churchyards Conservation Group** – This sub-committee of the Essex Wildlife Trust can offer advice, will undertake surveys, and put together management plans and reports.

Contact Address: Essex Wildlife Trust
Abbotts Hall Farm
Great Wigborough
Colchester
CO5 7RZ

Tel No: 01621 862960

Website: www.essexwt.org.uk

- 6.2 **Chancellor's Guidance on Trees in Churchyards** – At least one copy should be retained in the parochial records.

- 6.3 **Local Authority Landscape Officer**

- 6.4 **Helpful Books and Leaflets Include:**

Wildlife in Church and Churchyard - 2nd edition by Nigel Cooper pub.2001. Church House Publishing.

The Churchyards Handbook - Ed Thomas Cocke, Church House Publishing 4th ex 2001.

How to Make a Wildlife Garden - by Chris Baines, 2nd edition. Elm Tree Books, 2001.

Green Guide - Garden Wildlife by Bob Gibbons pub. 1994 New Holland.

Wildlife in the Churchyard: The Plants and Animals of God's Acre - Francesca Greenoak - Little, Brown 1993.

Responsible Care for Churchyards, Church House Publishing 1993, Leaflet on the legal aspects of churchyard maintenance.

Bats in Churches, English Heritage.

Care of Churches and Ecclesiastical Jurisdiction Measure. Code of Practice, Church House Publishing 1993.

POLICY

- 1.** A Management Plan should be prepared and implemented in order to ensure the sympathetic maintenance of the land.
- 2.** When the DAC considers an application for a Faculty for work in a churchyard, it would expect PCC's to have sought competent advice from experienced organisations with a balanced understanding of the historical and ecological importance of the land.
- 3.** Relatives of loved ones should be consulted on the maintenance standards of burials within living memory.

This is one of a series of DAC Guidance Notes obtainable from the Diocesan Resources Centre (Tel: 01245 294405).

This is one of a series of guidelines published by the
Diocesan Advisory Committee.
Copies can be downloaded from the Diocesan website: -
(www.chelmsford.anglican.org)
or can be obtained from the
DAC Secretary at the address below.

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