

# Caring for grasslands

## Grasslands in churchyards

The accustomed appearance of the English churchyard and the wildlife it supports results from the tradition of planting trees around the edge, with only the occasional yew or other small tree within. This results in a shady boundary, often dominated in late winter or spring by snowdrops, aconites, primroses or lesser celandines, and a light dependent ecosystem in the centre.

The importance of churchyards for grassland species in Norfolk needs to be seen in a national context. In Britain, the relative importance of churchyards for wildlife increases as one travels from west to east. In the west, there are still quite large areas of rough grazing and hill pasture for wildflowers. In contrast, our region has lost 98 percent of neutral flower-rich grasslands to development, over-grazing, ploughing or by herbicide and fertiliser usage.

Norfolk churchyards are now the single most important refuge for six wildflowers typical of old meadows, three ferns and 40



lichens. Pignut, meadow saxifrage, cowslip, ox-eye daisy, lady's bedstraw and burnet saxifrage are wildflowers that all have at least 50 percent of their populations in churchyards over large areas of the county. The wildflowers sorrel, barren strawberry, bush vetch, bugle, crosswort and germander speedwell also occur with unusual frequency in churchyards and are, to a lesser extent, dependent upon them.

## Managing grasslands: the basics

Managing grassland and its wildflowers is the starting point for most churchyard conservation work, but it is very difficult to give general advice on cutting grass and a policy that starts out right may need to change in subsequent years. However, some general principles are useful:

- Start with an expert plant survey that will tell you where the best areas for wildflowers are in the churchyard and what they are. Norfolk Wildlife Trust (NWT) volunteers are able to help with surveys, which are best carried out in the spring/early summer.
- Designate the best wildflower areas as Conservation Areas. To help visitors appreciate Conservation Areas, erect an NWT churchyard outdoor plaque, display information in the church porch, plus mow the edges of these areas and paths regularly to maintain a managed appearance. Care must be taken when working near gravestones and stonework.
- Obtain advice on a suitable cutting regime for your Conservation Area from NWT. The best policy will depend on what wildflowers are already present and on past management.

The two key elements to managing churchyard grasslands are to cut at appropriate times and rake off cuttings.

These tasks must be carried out often enough to maintain a fine and even-textured sward. An untidy sward, dominated by tussocky grasses and coarse plants (such as nettles) does not support an attractive diversity of wildflowers. This means that there is less of a conflict between conservation and tidiness than most people imagine.

Cut from July (usually late July), once most wildflowers have set seed and again in autumn (usually October). The October cut will knock back grass growth. Remove any dead matted grass ready for wildflower growth the following spring. Extra cuts between July and October are possible if needed.

All cuttings must be raked off the Conservation Area on both occasions. This is especially important in more nutrient rich churchyards which will generate more grass growth, potentially shading out wildflowers. The purpose of raking is to reduce the nutrient enrichment input from the grass cuttings, as wildflowers like nutrient poor environments. No cutting should take place over winter.

This cutting and raking keeps the wildflower interest of the grassy areas at their best. Without this regular management the interest could be lost, and the area could become unattractive in appearance.

Churchyard management for wildflowers and wildlife is a great activity to get the local community involved in, most calling them 'cutting and raking parties' with a picnic or barbecue to end the session!

## Managing grasslands: continued...

Be flexible; you may need to change the cutting regime if coarse vegetation starts to take over. A re-survey every few years can help to inform this process.

Confine tree planting to replacement planting with native species round the edge of the churchyard, otherwise the light dependent wildflowers and lichens on the headstones will be shaded out.

## Practical issues

- **Former management:** over the years, a mowing regime will have selected out certain plant species and a drastic change in management, especially towards more infrequent cutting, sometimes won't suit these species. Do not change too much or too quickly the cutting policy that has gone before and always cut and rake frequently enough to keep a fine, even textured sward in Conservation Areas.
- **Cutting equipment available:** a reciprocating type of mower is ideal, but not always available or practical where there are tombstones to negotiate. In these situations, a brushcutter or heavy-duty strimmer is practical. This will allow a clean, short cut. Rotary mowers, that cut grass into fine mulch, dropping it, are not ideal and make raking up cuttings hard; they also struggle with cutting grass that has not been cut for more than four weeks. Lightweight scythes are increasingly popular for cutting longer grass.
- **Rake thoroughly:** you will rake off cuttings at the end of July and October time, make sure to rake very thoroughly. In October raking is important to remove matted, dead grass, vital for early wildflowers such as pignut, meadow saxifrage and cowslips, which are easily suppressed by a mat of dead grass. Rotting grass also increases the nutrient levels in soil, eventually encouraging plants such as nettles, rather than the more delicate wildflowers that prefer a nutrient poor environment.

The success of conservation management often depends on having an especially interested parishioner 'on the spot' who can watch events and change the cutting regime over the years if required. In frequently cut churchyards such a person will also be able to mark off areas with posts and signs where cutting is to be postponed.

- **Rakes:** when cutting with a rotary mower, use an ordinary spring-tined lawn rake for raking up the fine cuttings. For strimmers, brushcutters and reciprocating mowers which cut longer blades of grass, an old-fashioned wide toothed wooden hay rake is ideal.
- **Early spring cut:** for cuts in early spring (March time), set the mower blades near to maximum height, this will prevent damage to early flowering species. A spring cut isn't always required, usually only if there has been significant growth over the winter. This cut doesn't suit cowslips and primroses.

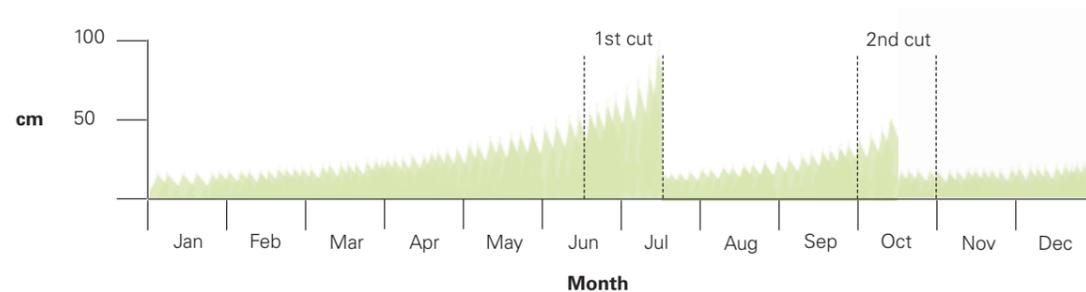
If at any time tussocky grass and/or coarse plants start to dominate, return to more frequent cutting and raking in the Conservation Area.

Taking all these factors into account, the Ideal Churchyard Management Plan (right) sets out a number of different grass cutting options for different areas of the churchyard.

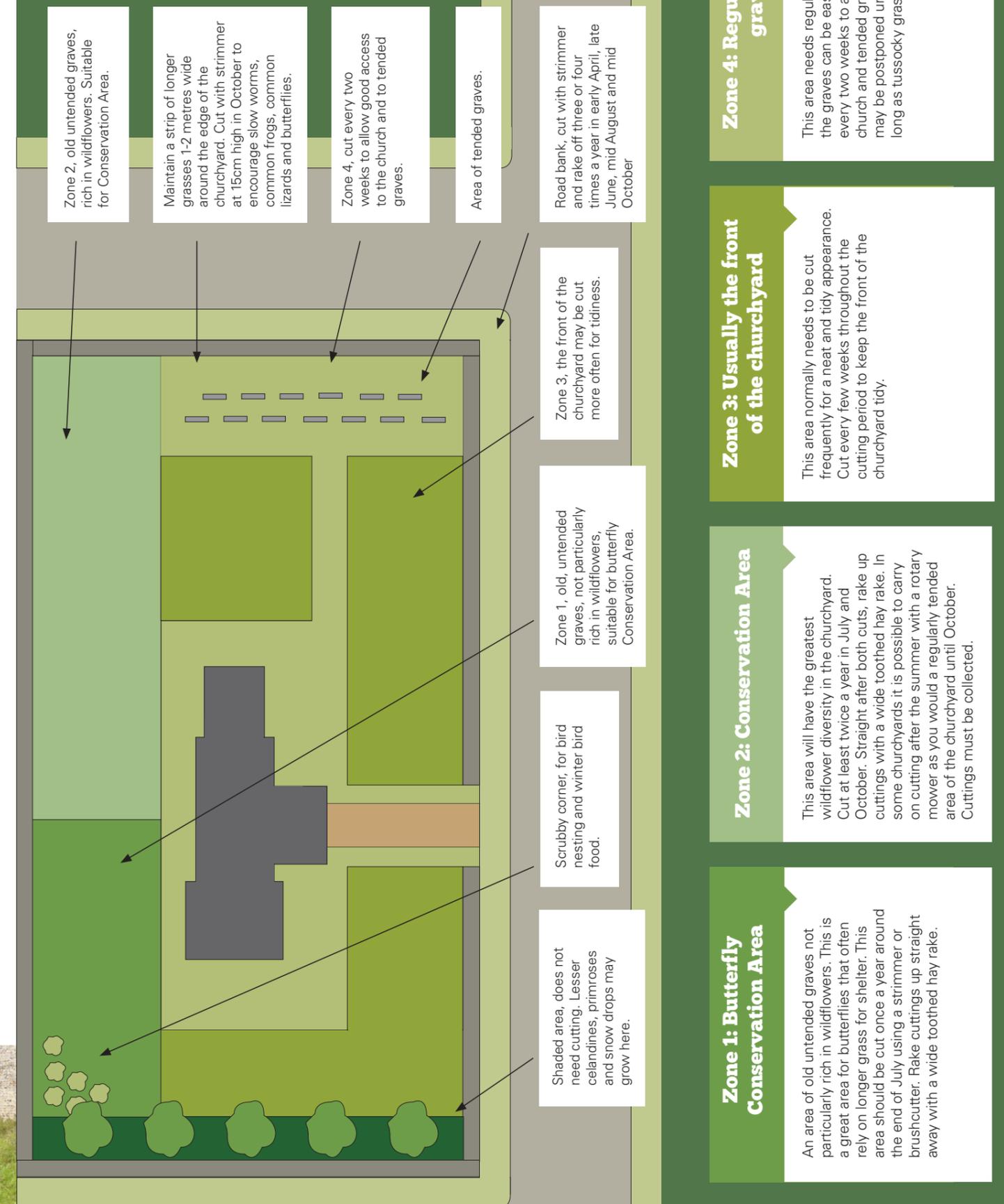
## Choosing a mowing regime for each zone

It may not be possible to have each of the four zones shown in every churchyard and the mowing regimes chosen for the churchyard will depend upon previous management and the resources/tools available. The range of plant species growing in the churchyard will also influence which regime is chosen. Ideally, the frequency of cutting will be different in different parts of the churchyard, depending on where neatness and access are required.

Typical mowing regime - zone 2: conservation area



## Ideal Churchyard Management Plan





## Controlling invasive plants

Species such as cow parsley, hogweed or alexanders do have a value for wildlife, but should not be allowed to dominate areas where more vulnerable species occur. This requires a **flexible approach to management**. If, in any situation, tussocky grass or coarse herbs build up, the frequency of cutting and raking should be increased to lower nutrient levels.

Control patches of nettles spreading by cutting back five times a year, or by the careful application of a systemic herbicide, if they are in an appropriate place.



MEADOW SAXIFRAGE

## Compost heap

Keep the compost heap separate from plastic rubbish and pile the compost in a quiet, hidden corner. Insects abound in the heap, and the warmth generated makes it a cosy place for hibernating slow worms, grass snakes, toads, hedgehogs and mice. To toads the heap is a five star hotel, room and food all provided, plus protection from predators. It is also somewhere to shelter on a hot summer's day. To birds this is a supermarket where food and nest material can be found. Avoid clearing the compost in winter when these creatures are hibernating.

## Further help

For advice on managing grasslands

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