



## Grasslands in churchyards

The accustomed appearance of the English churchyard and the wildlife it contains result 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 of the yard.

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% 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 6 flowers typical of old meadows, 3 ferns and 40 lichens. Pignut, Meadow Saxifrage, Cowslip, Ox-eye Daisy, Lady's Bedstraw and Burnet Saxifrage all have around 50% of their populations in churchyards over large areas of the county. Sorrel, barren strawberry, bush vetch, bugle, 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 the grassland and its flowers 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 survey that will tell you where the best areas for wild flowers are in the churchyard and what they are. Norfolk Wildlife Trust volunteers are able to help with surveys, which are best carried out in the spring and early summer.
- Designate the best wildflower areas as Conservation Areas. Mark Conservation Areas with posts and/or signs so that visitors to the churchyard understand why the grass has been left uncut.
- Obtain advice on a suitable mowing regime for your Conservation Area. The best policy will depend on what flora is already present and on past management. NWT volunteers may be able to provide advice on mowing when they survey the grassland, or call NWT for advice by telephone.



- The two key elements to managing churchyard grasslands are to cut at an appropriate time 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 hogweed or nettles) does not support an attractive or diverse flora. This means that there is less of a conflict between conservation and tidiness than most people imagine; an attractive flora can be maintained by cutting every 4-6 weeks and raking off after the cuts in June and July.

- 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 yard, otherwise the light dependent meadow-flowers and lichens on the headstones will be shaded out.
- The success of conservation management often depends on having an especially interested parishioner 'on the spot' who can watch events and change the regime over the years as appropriate. In frequently cut yards such a person will also be able to mark off areas with posts and signs where cutting is to be postponed and then remove the long grass with a strong strimmer or scythe, before allowing the rotary cutter to take over again.

### **Practical issues**

- Former management: over the years, a mowing regime will have selected out certain species and a drastic change in management, especially towards more infrequent cutting, will not usually suit these plants. 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, except in butterfly 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 strimmer is practical, but use a 3-bladed nylon disc rather than a cord. This will allow a clean cut down to 2" (5 cm). Rotary mowers, that cut grass into fine mulch, are not ideal and making raking up cuttings hard; they also struggle with cutting grass that has not been cut for more than 4 weeks.
- Rake very thoroughly in October to remove matted, dead grass. This raking is vital for early flowers 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 and hogweed, rather than the more delicate flowers that prefer a nutrient poor environment.
- When cutting with a rotary mower, use an ordinary spring-tined lawn rake for raking. For strimmers and reciprocating mowers, an old-fashioned wooden hay rake is ideal.
- For cuts before July, set the mower blades near to maximum height, but after July, gradually lower the blades to about half height by October
- For meadow saxifrage, which likes a short lawn, cut high in early April and then in late June, then, with the blades set near to the lowest level, cut every four weeks until October

***If at any time tussocky grass and/or coarse plants start to dominate, return to more frequent cutting and raking (except in the butterfly conservation area).***

Taking all these factors into account, the sketch map overleaf sets out a number of different options for the cutting the grass in different areas of the churchyard.

# A churchyard management plan

The different grassland areas within this churchyard include:

- Zone 1: Butterfly Conservation Area an area of old, untended graves where the flora is not particularly rich. This is a great area for butterflies that often rely on longer grass for shelter.
- Zone 2: an area of old, untended graves with a rich flora. This is the best place to put the Churchyard Conservation Area
- Zone 3: the area to the front of the church that will need to be cut frequently for a neat appearance.
- Zone 4: an area of tended graves.

Scrubby corner for bird nesting and wild bird food

Strip 1-2 metres wide around edge. Cut with strimmer at 15 cm high in October to encourage slow worms, frogs, lizards and butterflies.

Shaded area does not need cutting. Lesser celandines primroses and snowdrops may grow here

Cut road bank with strimmer and rake off 3-4 times a year in early April, mid August and mid-October

## 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 the average past management over several years and the 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.

## About each mowing regime

**Regime A – for churchyards cut roughly every 4 weeks from early April through to October, using a rotary mower or strimmer/brush cutter.**

**Zone 1** Butterfly Conservation Area: cut once a year in mid-July, using strimmer or a brush cutter with a nylon blade. Rake cuttings up straight away.

**Zone 2** Conservation Area: cut early April, at the same time as zones 3 & 4, then miss out the early May cut. Cut the long grass with a strimmer or brushcutter in early June, rake off and then use a rotary mower to cut the grass every 4 weeks until October. If possible, rake off cuttings after the October cut. If the grass has not become tussocky after a few years, try missing the early June cut as well, then cut and rake in early July. After this cut, return to the 4 weekly cut until October, as before.

**Zone 3:** cut every 4 weeks to keep the front of the yard tidy

**Zone 4:** cut every 2 weeks to allow access to church and to tended graves.

The early June cut may be postponed until early July, as long as tussocky grass does not build up.

**Regime B – for rural churchyards normally cut once a year with a heavy-duty rotary mower or brush cutter**

Zone 1 Butterfly Conservation area: cut mid-July only and ensure cuttings raked off immediately.  
Zones 2 & 3 cut mid-July and October and ensure cuttings are raked off, especially after the July cut.

Zone 4 cut every 2 weeks if access to the church and tended graves is required.

**Regime C – where the whole churchyard is cut by contractor about 3 or 4 times a year, using a heavy-duty rotary mower.**

Zones 1, 2 & 3 cut mid June, mid August and October. Ensure cuttings are removed from the Conservation Area after the June cut and if possible after the October cut too. Some early flowers (such as cowslip, pignut or meadow saxifrage) like quite a short sward; where these flowers grow, cut grass in the last week of March or first week of April, with the blades set at their maximum height. Cut and rake again in late June and October.

Zone 4 cut every 2 weeks

**For all churchyards – if a reciprocating mower is available then try the following regimes:**

Zone 1 cut and rake mid July only  
Zones 2 & 3 cut and rake mid-July, late August and October  
Zone 4 cut every 2 weeks, with a rotary mower

A reciprocal cutter is also the ideal mower for the June cut in the Conservation Area (regime A, zone 2) and for the single cut in the Butterfly Conservation Area. It is also ideal for the 2 cuts in zones 2 & 3, under regime B. However, reciprocating mowers are expensive and are most suitable where a local conservation group takes over managing several churchyards; in this case, grants may be available to help with the purchase costs.

## 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 once more.

Control patches of nettles spreading by cutting back 5 times a year, or by the careful application of a systemic herbicide, if they are in an inappropriate place.

## Compost heaps

Keep compost separate from plastic rubbish and pile the compost in a quiet, hidden corner. Toads, slow worms and newts will find shelter here in winter, or on a hot summer's day. Avoid clearing the compost in winter, when these creatures are hibernating.

## Butterflies, bats and birds.

Many butterflies can be found in churchyards, including the holly blue, the caterpillars of which feed on holly and ivy. Butterflies such as the large and small skippers, gatekeepers and meadow browns rely on infrequently cut grass. To encourage these species, designate a Butterfly Conservation Area to be cut in mid-July, on warm days, so that the adults can escape. Rake off cuttings immediately to prevent females laying eggs on them. Over-wintering butterflies and other insects will benefit from some long grass over winter while a patch of nettles in a sunny, sheltered corner will be used by breeding peacock, small tortoiseshell and red admiral butterflies. Cut a few nettles in June to encourage new shoots for late summer butterflies.

Bats are one of the most dependent, if problematic, animals associated with churches. English Nature estimates that 60% of churches in England are used by bats. As bats and their roosts are protected by law, advice must be sought where bats are causing a headache for churchwardens

Of the special churchyard birds, Jackdaws, Barn Owls and Kestrels can breed in the tower, Swallows in the porch and Spotted Flycatchers on ivy covered walls. Blocking off towers, roof spaces or porches and removing ivy, can affect these scarce birds

## Further help

For advice on all aspects managing churchyard grasslands contact:

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