

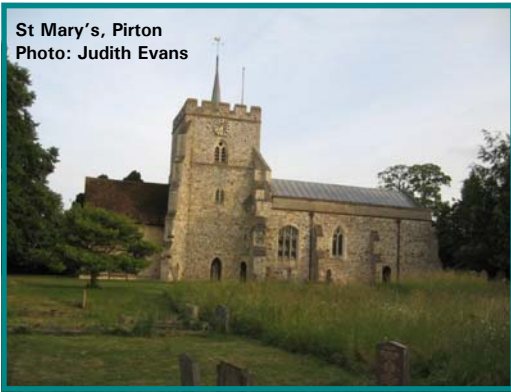
# Living Churchyards

Herts and  
Middlesex



**Churchyards are important places for people but they can be havens for wildlife too. As these habitats remain largely undisturbed, numerous plants and animals have space to thrive. A place for contemplation can become a wildlife haven at the same time. This guide explains how to manage a churchyard with wildlife in mind.**

St Mary's, Pirton  
Photo: Judith Evans



## Why are churchyards special for wildlife?

With good management, wildflower-rich churchyards can support a diverse ecosystem, from prey species like insects and small mammals, to predators such as slow worms, frogs, toads and sparrowhawks.

St. Lawrence, Abbots Langley  
Photo: Judith Evans



Some species which are under threat, such as swifts, swallows, barn owls and bats, may also rely on the church building for nest sites.



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## What's there already?

The first step is to undertake a **botanical survey** to identify what species are present. This should be done during spring and summer and involve identifying and noting as many grasses, flowers, trees and their locations as possible. Once you know what is present, it is possible to develop a management plan for the churchyard. This should include mowing regimes which should be introduced gradually to avoid any damage to the grassland.



## Grassland habitat

Many ancient meadows and pastures rich in wildflowers, butterflies and insects have been lost since the Second World War, due to the widespread application of fertilisers and herbicides. Churchyards can be the last refuge for wildlife in some cases. They can also play an important role in enabling species to move from one place to another.

Your **management plan** should contain **mowing and maintenance policies** that

respect and encourage wildlife in areas of the churchyard that are less frequently visited. Aim to create areas of **grass of different lengths** to provide the maximum diversity for wildlife. Make sure grass cuttings are raked off in order to prevent an increase in soil fertility, which can be detrimental to wild flowers. Preferably add the cuttings to a compost heap in a secluded corner of the churchyard. Do not mow areas containing wild flowers to “bowling-green length” as the plants will eventually be destroyed. Species like grasshoppers also require grass to be at least 10 cm (4 ins) long.



Devil's-bit scabious in Reed Churchyard, Herts.  
Photo: Judith Evans

## Compost heaps

Compost heaps provide habitat for fungi and invertebrates which in turn become food for frogs, toads, slow worms and birds. Grass snakes and hedgehogs may also hibernate in the heap due to its warmth. Compost heaps should be sited away from the base of trees and areas where the nutrients could leach out and enter running or standing water. A quiet corner is best.

## Bonfires

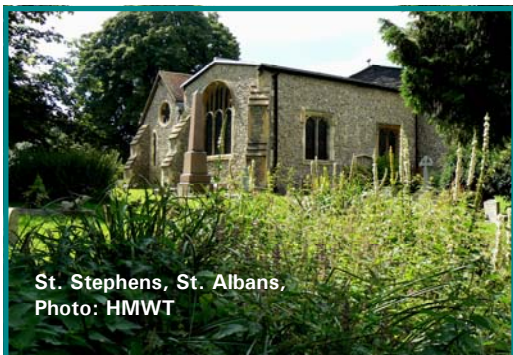
Composting plant material is much better for wildlife than burning. However, if a bonfire is required (and permitted), it should be carefully sited on hard standing or in an area with little botanical interest, away from trees. The same burning site should be used each time and should be kept small, with ash removed to the compost heap. Be aware that thistles, docks and nettles tend to colonise burnt ground.



## Sowing wildflower seeds

The sowing of wildflower seeds is discouraged in churchyards. Sowing seeds can introduce non-native plants or plants that are genetically different from the native species, which can damage the existing flora. If you choose to sow wildflower seeds then please ensure the seeds are

sourced locally and are of native origin ([www.floralocale.org](http://www.floralocale.org) and [www.wildseed.co.uk](http://www.wildseed.co.uk)). Local and native seeds are better adapted to the local climate and are much more likely to thrive. Consult a conservation organisation before introducing wildflowers to old churchyards.



## Trees and boundary hedges



Veteran Yew, All Saints, Little Munden. Photo: Judith Evans

Trees provide food, nesting sites and shelter for birds, mammals and insects. Churchyards also often contain **veteran trees**, considered to be in the ancient stage of their lives and are therefore important biologically, culturally and aesthetically.

Before doing any tree work check with your local planning authority to see whether the tree is subject to a Tree Preservation Order or lies within a conservation area, where special rules apply. Too much pruning can cause permanent damage to trees so try to

keep this to a minimum. Major work like pollarding, coppicing or felling should be done by trained arborists — consult your District Arboricultural Officer. Please note that planting new trees is not always desirable— too many can shade out and eliminate flowering grassland plants.

A thick boundary hedge is a valuable food source and nesting habitat for birds and insects. Trim to roughly an 'A' shape to create a hedge that is thicker at the base and narrower at the top. Trim just one side of the hedge each year (or alternating sections) to leave winter food for wildlife. Carry out this work between September and February, **outside the bird nesting season**.

## Gravestones and stone walls

Gravestones are important for lichens and mosses, which vary according to the type of stone, its age and its exposure to the sun and weather. Lichens are slow growing and long lived, some as old as the gravestone itself. Mosses and lichen should be left untouched if possible, as they do no harm to the stone.



Lichens on gravestones  
Photo: Judith Evans

## Managing grassland

Seasonal mowing regimes help to conserve a diversity of species and are determined by the particular type of grassland (see below). It may not be possible to manage the whole churchyard in this way, as areas around tended graves and paths need to be regularly cut. Try to incorporate this type of management where possible by designating a defined “conservation area.”

**Spring flowering grassland:** Cut once in Feb/March if the vegetation has grown and then leave the area uncut until mid June. Continue to cut every four weeks until the end of the growing period (Sept/Oct time).

**Summer flowering grassland:** Start cutting in March and continue to cut every four weeks until the middle of May. Leave the vegetation uncut until the end of July (8-10 weeks) and then cut every four weeks until the end of the growing period.

**Spring/summer flowering grassland:** Cut the vegetation in Feb/beginning of March and then leave until after the end of June. Start cutting in July and continue to cut every four weeks until the end of the growing period.

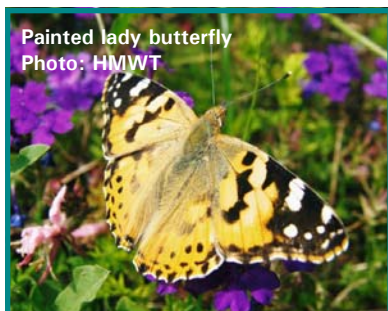
**Late summer flowering grassland:** Some flowers do not set seed until late summer, such as Devil’s Bit Scabious. Try to cut around these plants until they have set seed and then cut as normal.

### Butterfly and insect areas:

Cut once in mid-July and rake cuttings off.

### Amphibian and slow worm areas:

Try to keep these areas around the edge of the churchyard, they need to be cut once in October to a height of 10-12cm (4-5 inches).



Painted lady butterfly  
Photo: HMWT

**NB: Always rake up and remove cuttings!**

## Top tips

- Maintain long-established patterns of management.
- Do not use chemicals.
- Remove grass cuttings.
- Leave small plants/lichens on walls and monuments.
- Site bonfires and compost heaps away from trees and botanically rich areas.
- Erect bird and bat boxes. No Faculty is required if fixed to trees (may be required for buildings).
- Inspect trees annually.

## Church Of England Churchyards

In the first instance, consult the priest, Parochial Church Council (PCC) and or parish council. A Faculty or Archdeacon's permission is needed before making any works (for example planting or pruning trees).

## Living Churchyard Project

The project aims to help churches manage their churchyards in a wildlife-friendly way while being sensitive to the needs of users. Judith Evans promotes the project on behalf of the Diocese of St. Albans. Contact Judith at [environment@stalbans.anglican.org](mailto:environment@stalbans.anglican.org) or on 01727 851748 or visit [www.stalbans.anglican.org/Mission/Environment/Living-Churchyards](http://www.stalbans.anglican.org/Mission/Environment/Living-Churchyards)

## Wildlife Sites

Some churchyards are Wildlife Sites. They play a vital role in the conservation of the UK's natural heritage. For help with surveys, information on Wildlife Sites and advice on management contact:

### Herts & Middlesex Wildlife Trust

Grebe House, St. Michael's Street, St. Albans, Herts, AL3 4SN

