

WOODNEWTON PARISH COUNCIL

MANAGEMENT PLAN FOR WOODNEWTON CHURCHYARD AND CEMETERY

V4 04.11.21

1. Introduction

This is the Woodnewton Parish Council's plan to protect and enhance the biodiversity of the churchyard and cemetery and improve the environmental value of both areas on behalf of the village community.

Our churchyard contains wildlife which is rare in Northamptonshire, notably a small remnant of natural limestone grassland, but at the moment this is not able to flourish. With careful management the churchyard has the potential to be much richer in wildlife and to become a valuable and valued resource for the village community.

2. Our church, churchyard and cemetery

We are very lucky to have an ancient church, with some parts including the tower arch dating back to Norman times (11th C).

The church was built in a time long before intensive management of the countryside and before artificial chemicals were used on the land. It is likely that the area it was built on was unimproved, flower-rich limestone grassland. A little of that limestone grassland still exists there. In contrast, the cemetery was formerly part of an arable field so it no longer has any flower-rich grassland. Nevertheless, if managed sympathetically, it could still support valuable wildlife habitat.

3. Why are churchyards important for biodiversity?

Churchyards and cemeteries can be havens for wildlife: for birds and flowers, insects and trees. They have become havens for wildlife because they have largely escaped the changes that have taken place in the rest of our crowded country – agricultural intensification, development, pollution and the everyday use of chemicals. These have inexorably reduced our biodiversity, particularly in the last 70 years.

The churchyards that have tended to escape these changes offer us a glimpse of the past. Our churchyard would probably have been managed for centuries, after the church was built, by grazing animals. Exclusion of grazing animals and erection of permanent memorials didn't occur until perhaps the 18th century. The grassland would then probably have been managed as a hay crop, allowing the vegetation to grow tall and the plants to flower and set seed, with the hay making up part of the vicar's stipend. Following the summer hay cut, sheep or a pony would have grazed it down and kept it short over winter.

The surviving limestone grassland, which has escaped agricultural improvement by chemicals or cultivation, can be rich in species. You can see what it might have been like at its best if you visit Collyweston National Nature Reserve – flowers, bees and butterflies fill the reserve in summer. In times past this type of natural grassland was common, and much of the area would have been like

this. However, since the Second World War, land management practices encouraged by Government subsidies have led to the loss of most natural grasslands across the country. Cultivation including ploughing, or just the use of artificial fertilisers and herbicides on grassland results in the complete removal of the natural limestone grassland or in a sward with just a few vigorous species (usually grasses) thriving, and the many special and diverse plant species which thrive on limestone soils disappearing. With those flowering plants go the insects and other wildlife that depend on those plants for food or breeding.

Churchyards may be the only fragments of unimproved, wildlife-rich grassland remaining locally and can be an important refuge for these species. By protecting and nurturing these grassland fragments we can do our bit as a community to help reverse the worldwide catastrophic decline in biodiversity.

4. Description

The rock underlying the village is Jurassic oolitic limestone, formed around 165 million years ago – at the time stegosaurus were roaming the earth, and plesiosaurs swam in the seas. The church is constructed of this limestone.

The churchyard, which surrounds the church, is primarily grassland managed by regular cutting to keep it close-mown. Three horse chestnut trees line the eastern boundary and in front of these is an area with a fine display of snowdrops and later cow parsley in the spring and early summer. The current grass cutting contract means this area is not cut until the cow parsley has finished flowering, and is then included in the general cutting regime. A large yew stands beside the path leading to the church porch, with scrub nearby. The churchyard is bounded by a stone wall along Main Street on the southern and western boundaries, and beside St Mary's Hill. For most of its length this is a retaining wall which does not rise about the level of the churchyard turf – hence there is a slope along the edge of the churchyard, which is steep around the road bend.

There are two properties along the north boundary.

5. Current Biodiversity in the churchyard and cemetery

The current wildlife interest of the churchyard and cemetery is limited. There is a fine display of snowdrops (see above). As well as being a glorious visual spectacle, the snowdrops provide nectar for early-emerging insects such as bumblebees. Insects also feed on the cow parsley that then grows in this area, but otherwise there are few insects, birds or flowers in the churchyard. It would be a great community project to survey these groups properly with volunteers from the village led by experts.

Limestone grassland survives in a few areas of our churchyard with typical but now uncommon plants of such grassland including hoary plantain, mouse-ear hawkweed, lady's bedstraw and burnet saxifrage. The best areas are either side of the gate on the road bend, and in a few other areas in the churchyard. They have survived here for hundreds of years, the patches by the gate because of the steep slope, which creates dry conditions and limits any disturbance. However, the regular cutting regime means these plants are rarely given the opportunity to flower or set seed and consequently they support few insects and other wildlife.

The cemetery, which is also included in this management plan, was formerly part of an arable field and no longer has any original limestone grassland. It has a hedge and mixed shrub species planted along its two field boundaries, to the north and west.

The Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust carried out a survey of the churchyard and cemetery in April 2021 (Appendix X). Their findings fully support this plan.

6. Why is there now so little wildlife in the churchyard and cemetery?

The main reason that there is little wildlife in the churchyard is that in recent years the grassland has been managed very intensively. Currently the vegetation in both the churchyard and cemetery is mown and trimmed every two weeks during the growing season.

As a consequence the churchyard and cemetery grassland might be described as 'shorn monotony'. The grass is mown so tightly across almost the whole area, and so regularly and so comprehensively that a) most plants cannot flower or set seed and b) there is no variation in the vegetation structure – no short and longer areas of vegetation. There are no unmanaged corners with lush vegetation. The only, but very valuable, exception is the area of snowdrops followed by cow parsley under the horse chestnut trees along the eastern edge of the churchyard.

Butterflies, bees, hoverflies and many other insects need flowers to feed on the nectar and pollen, and many insects and other invertebrates need longer vegetation for their caterpillars and larvae to feed and shelter. Birds and bats feed on flying insects. Very short turf means we lose all of these. Excessive tidiness is the scourge of biodiversity. A change to a less intensive mowing regime for both churchyard and cemetery would enable more of the native plants to flower and more insects and birds to thrive.

The churchyard grass mowing contract is managed by the Parish Council on behalf of the Parochial Church Council (PCC). The Parish Council has expressed a wish to amend future contracts to reduce the intensity of grass management and hence encourage more wildlife.

7. Current ground maintenance regime

All the grassed areas in both churchyard and cemetery are mown 18 times per season – two cuts per month from March to October. The grass along all edges, in corners, under shrubs, around obstructions and headstones is trimmed on the same days.

8. Current Public Use

Outside the snowdrop flowering season, it is rare to see anyone in the churchyard, other than those walking along the paths to the church or as a cut-through. Yet the churchyard could be a wonderful spot to sit and experience and enjoy the flowers and busy insects all around.

9. What can we do to increase wildlife and the attractiveness of the churchyard and cemetery?

The most important way to increase the wildlife in the churchyard and cemetery is to reduce the intensity of management and to diversify the structure of the vegetation in both churchyard and

cemetery – that is, to have areas of short grass and others with longer grass cut less frequently. We can further improve the conditions for wildlife by measures such as bird boxes and bug hotels. These actions will in turn make the churchyard and cemetery more attractive to villagers, and provide a great opportunity for adults and children alike to experience nature and join in our efforts to enhance biodiversity.

A similar approach to enhancing the biodiversity of churchyards is being adopted elsewhere locally – Stoke Doyle is the best example, and it is being applied in Easton-on-the-Hill, Stanion and St Peter's in Oundle churchyards too.

10. Policy context and support

Biodiversity is under threat worldwide. In the United Kingdom there have been substantial declines in most habitats and in most groups of animals and plants, reported for example in the State of Nature reports.

There has been a loss of 80% of wildlife-rich limestone grasslands in Northamptonshire since the 1950s, so any local action to conserve remaining areas is vitally important.

The importance of churchyards for biodiversity and of taking action to protect and enhance it is recognised by the Church of England:

- The Church of England website states that “Churches and their churchyards are an important part of the diverse natural habitat of England.” And offers advice on how to manage your churchyard to encourage wildlife.
<https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/biodiversity>
- Under the Diocese of Peterborough Environmental Policy, parishes are encouraged to “take positive actions to restore nature in churchyards and other parish land.”
<https://www.peterborough-diocese.org.uk/downloads/210330-diocesan-environmental-policy.pdf>

Caring for God's Acre is a national charity promoting the conservation of burial sites and supporting the volunteers who look after and maintain them <https://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/>.

Excellent local support is provided by the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust and their Churchyard Conservation Scheme. This scheme promotes the management of churchyards in a wildlife-friendly way while being sensitive to the needs of all the users, and in particular to its primary function as a resting place for the dead and a contemplative place for visitors. <https://www.wildlifebcn.org/about-us/advice-landowners/churchyards>

Those involved in the numerous examples elsewhere in Northamptonshire and beyond of churchyards being managed to encourage wildlife are willing to offer advice and support.

THE WAY FORWARD

This is the Parish Council's action plan for the management of the churchyard and cemetery over the five year period 2022-2027. Initially plans are set out for Year 1.

Objective:

To increase the opportunities for wildlife in the Woodnewton churchyard and cemetery to benefit both biodiversity and the village community, through changes in the management regime.

Vision:

A churchyard and cemetery richer in wildlife and more attractive to villagers – a place to visit, to pause and to contemplate. A valued community resource.

Benefits to the local community:

The proposed changes will make the churchyard more of an attraction and a resource for villagers – increase its natural appeal. More wildlife will encourage visitors to pause, observe and enjoy; to recharge their batteries.

Approach:

Small changes will be introduced to the churchyard management to gradually increase biodiversity and the attractiveness of the churchyard to the village. We will take a step-by-step approach and review our achievements and impact, rather than undertaking large scale dramatic change.

We will inform and engage the village community by sharing information and providing opportunities to join in survey and management activities.

Expert advice:

The proposals are based on expert knowledge of grassland and other habitats and their management. We have taken advice from local experts and other churches managing their churchyards in a similar way, in particular Stoke Doyle church. Stoke Doyle churchyard has received awards for its comprehensive yet sympathetic management for biodiversity and people. This management is led by the church warden Liz Doherty, who has offered to share with us her advice and experience and to answer any questions.

The Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust Churchyard Conservation officers Scheme Lisa Rowley and Katharine Banham have surveyed our churchyard and cemetery, and provided recommendations as to how we might adjust the management to benefit wildlife.

Baseline:

A baseline against which to assess the impact of the management changes will be provided primarily by a comprehensive set of photographs, taken regularly from fixed points in the churchyard and cemetery.

Grassland management contracts:

The Parish Council will incorporate the revised management requirements to enhance biodiversity.

Plan of Churchyard showing re-wilding areas in green.

