



CONSERVATION ADVISOR SITE VISIT REPORT - Creeting St Mary, St Mary's Church (CWS)

Advisors: Cathy Smith, Community Wildlife Advisor
Graham Hart, Conservation Advisor

Tel. 01473 890089

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Project leaders: Gylnis Clint

Location of site: Church Lane, Creeting St Mary, IP6 8QA

Grid Reference: TM093567

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Enquiry

Signs requested to explain the management to visitors.
County Wildlife Site citation review.



Summary of the site

Soilscape 9: Lime-rich loamy and clayey soils with impeded drainage

Current management arrangements: Paid help for 4 hours a month. Much of the churchyard is left to grow long over the summer then cut with a ride on mower in September. Arisings are not removed due to volunteer capacity.

Habitat connectivity: the churchyard is a County Wildlife Site designated for its unimproved herb rich grassland and identified on maps by DEFRA as such. 200m north of the church is further good quality semi-improved grassland. This area known as the Fens, centred around a tributary of the river Gipping supports other priority habitat including deciduous woodland. The churchyard benefits from being largely south of the church building creating sunny conditions which tend to favour wildflowers or meadows.

Species

These records can be found on the National Biodiversity Atlas and give an indication of what you might expect to find locally, although some species are likely to be associated with the Fens rather than the churchyard.

Records of protected species nearby (0.5Km) include:

Water vole, otter, badger, bat spp. great crested newt, brown hare

Records of Priority Species nearby (0.5Km) include:

Hedgehog, common toad, slow worm, harvest mouse

Birds of conservation concern (0.5Km)

Red: skylark, swift, green finch, house martin, yellow hammer, linnet, nightingale, spotted flycatcher, house sparrow, tree sparrow, marsh tit, woodcock, turtle dove, starling, song thrush, mistle thrush, fieldfare, lapwing.

Amber: sparrowhawk, sedge warbler, mallard, graylag goose, meadow pipit, black-headed gull, wood pigeon, rook, whitethroat, reed bunting, kestrel, moorhen, lesser black-backed gull, great black-backed gull, pied flycatcher, gadwall, grey partridge, willow warbler, dunnoek, bullfinch, tawny owl, wren

Suffolk rare plants register (0.5Km)

Small scabious *Scabiosa columbaria*

Species noted on the day

A full botanical survey was not carried out, but a few flowers were noted:

Meadow saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga granulata</i>
Bulbous buttercup	<i>Ranunculus bulbosus</i>
Yarrow	<i>Achillea millefolium</i>
Knopweed	<i>Centaurea nigra</i>
Mouse-eared hawkweed	<i>Pilosella officinarum</i>
Field forget-me-not	<i>Myosotis arvensis</i>
Spanish bluebell	<i>Hyacinthoides hispanica</i>
Ground ivy	<i>Glechoma hederacea</i>
Cowslip	<i>Primula veris</i>
Oxeye daisy	<i>Leucanthemum vulgare</i>
Sweet vernal grass	<i>Anthoxanthum odoratum</i>
Meadow foxtail	<i>Alopecurus pratensis</i>



We understand that last year the churchyard had a good display of pyramidal orchids.

Management recommendations

St Mary's churchyard Creeting St Mary is designated a County Wildlife Site in recognition of its wildflower rich grassland, a rare remnant of a habitat which was once common in Suffolk. It is estimated that 90% of our herb-rich meadows have vanished in the last half century so churchyards are often a reservoir of local provenance grassland wildflowers. These flower rich habitats provide a rich pollinator nectar resource which also support many other invertebrate species as well as seed eating and insect eating birds, small mammals and reptiles. Flower rich meadows are also estimated to store up to 500 more carbon than grassland swards so make a vital contribution to ameliorating climate change.

Continue to mow frequently visited graves and either side of the paths on a regular basis. This will help balance the needs of different user groups and demonstrate that the management is purposeful and the churchyard well-kept and cared for and delineate areas which are to be allowed to grow longer. The areas of shorter grass are also valuable basking areas for reptiles and for many invertebrates.

Historically the grass which has been left uncut during the growing season has been cut in September, this is a little later than generally recommended but may reflect the presence of later flowering plants such as small scabious. Provided there is not late summer interest and

if resources permit, you could try cutting earlier, end of July- August, perhaps either side of a central north – south path.

Retain the established mowing in September where there is late summer interest. We are aware that with limited resources it may not be achievable to have two different mowing windows, so if not practicable, retain the September cut throughout.

A reciprocal mower gives the best results but importantly arisings should be raked off, ideally following a couple of days left in situ for the seeds to fall off. The removal of arisings is to prevent nutrients being returned to the soil which favours coarse grasses and nuisance weeds and to prevent a thatch being created which can be detrimental to wildflowers. Some arisings can continue to be used to create a small habitat pile in the far field as currently the case. Hedgehogs and slow worms could benefit from this resource but if the volume gets too great, some may need to be removed off site.



A small group of volunteers with limited paid help have retained the grassland in favourable condition, a testament to their hard work and care for the churchyard. The volunteers have found it difficult to rake up the arisings so assistance from the wider community or re-directing paid help for this task would help to maintain the wildlife interest. Another solution is to explore the possibility of the neighbouring sheep grazing the 'aftermath' as is traditional practice in hay meadows. You could discuss practicalities with other Suffolk churches using sheep to manage their grounds, Blaxhall, Pakefield and Middleton are ones known to us.

Where you have floristically rich grassland, the arisings can be a valuable resource to enhance nearby grasslands. The SWT Green Hay register aims to help link donor and recipient sites. Enhancing meadows through the use of green hay is preferable to seeding as the plants will be of local provenance which increases the chance of colonisation and a greater number of flower species are contained. Contact Graham Hart if you are interested in signing up as a donor site for green hay.



South of the main entrance path, the grass has developed a more tussocky nature. This has promoted the development of yellow ant nests, a feature of old undisturbed meadows and created conditions for some ruderal weeds such as field forget-me-not. A few tree saplings have established, and timely removal is advised. There after this could remain a low intervention area or 2-3 year rotational cutting could be introduced.

As Suffolk is a county with very little habitat containing large areas of stone, the headstones in our churchyards provide a valuable surface for lichens to develop undisturbed. Lichens can take over 100 years to grow only a few centimetres and should not be removed from gravestones unless necessary.

It was great to see the relaxed approach to the hedgerow in the far compartment. Hawthorn is a valuable food source for pollinating insects and berrying supply for winter birds. As it flowers on 2-year-old wood the resource is easily lost, if at a later date you need to constrain the spread of the hedge, implementing a two-three year rotational cut help retain this food supply.

There is some ivy along the flint wall, it is an immensely valuable wildlife plant. A study commissioned by Oxford University on behalf of Historic England in 2017 gives a detailed discussion about when existing defects in buildings can lead to ivy damage and when ivy can be protective towards historic structures, see resources.





Supplementary nesting provision

1. Swifts are known to have been nesting in the village. The village hall could be an alternative location for swift boxes, although the latter may not be high enough as swifts prefer to nest 4-5m up. Contact Suffolk Bird Group can help assess and advise on the best siting of swift boxes. For greatest uptake they need to be installed with a simple sound system to attract the swifts
2. Bird boxes could be placed on some of the mature trees and assembling bird boxes from preprepared kits is a popular family activity. A hole size of 32mm gives access to a greater range of species than those with smaller diameter entrances, there are plans for making bird boxes on our website. It is good practice to clean out bird boxes between 1st September-31st January (outside the breeding season), so choose boxes which can be easily opened for the purpose. To prevent overheating, face the box away from full sun, ideally in a north-east orientation.
3. Whilst bats can take a little longer to take up residence in bat boxes, they are still worthwhile considering. The Bat Conservation Trust gives instructions to make the Kent bat box and guidance on where to place them. The Bats in Churches project as a source of further information. Subject to availability, volunteer run Suffolk Bat Group may be able to assist with surveys or bat walks.

Community Engagement

1. Encourage the church community and residents to record their sightings of wildlife through the Suffolk Biological Records website or through the i-record platform. The i-record platform allows for groups to set up their own space for collective records and has a process for verification. There is also linked iNaturalist and Seek apps. 'Plantnet' is also recommended.
2. There are good records of hedgehogs locally and the churchyard offers favourably habitat with good hedgerow and long grass habitats. Hedgehog Street is a good source of information, and we can provide additional support for a community wide project.
3. The village primary school visits the church for worship, they could also look at the nature in the churchyard. Both Al Rocha and God's Acre both provide resources and SWT have downloadable activity guides.
4. Al Rocha runs an Eco Church Award which encourages church communities to review how they include environmental awareness in different aspects of church life: buildings, worship and teaching, land, community and global engagement, and lifestyle. Both Al Rocha and God's Acre both provide resources to help with public engagement activities.
5. Churches Count on Nature runs from Saturday 4th June – Sunday 12th June 2022. Running an event during this annual event could be a springboard for wider engagement with the local community.

Once our new TeamWilder branding is available we will replace the temporary signs we gave you. Team Wilder is a county-wide movement for nature's recovery, you can find out more or sign up for email updates through our website

Costs and effort required for the raking will have to be taken into consideration when deciding if any change in management is realistic so do modify our proposal as needed and if need prioritise raking where there is greatest wildflower interest.

It was a pleasure to meet you and to discover your beautiful churchyard which provides a fine setting for the Parish church.

We would love to hear how your get on with your project to promote the wildlife in the churchyard to a wider audience, do keep in touch.

Kind regards

Cathy Smith
Community Wildlife Advisor

Graham Hart
Conservation Advisor

Resources

Defra Habitat Maps

[Magic Map Application \(defra.gov.uk\)](http://defra.gov.uk)

Soilscapes

<http://www.landis.org.uk/soilscapes/>

National Biodiversity Network Atlas

<https://records.nbnatlas.org/>

Biological recording

[Suffolk Biological Recording Online | Suffolk Biodiversity Information Service \(suffolkbis.org.uk\)](http://suffolkbis.org.uk)

[iRecord | Manage and share your wildlife records \(brc.ac.uk\)](http://brc.ac.uk)

Rapid grassland assessment

[Microsoft Word - How to design, undertake and analyse rapid assessment FINAL.docx \(magnificentmeadows.org.uk\)](#)

Nest box recording scheme

[Nest Record Scheme | BTO - British Trust for Ornithology](#)

Making bird boxes

[Bird and bat boxes | Suffolk Wildlife Trust](#)

Bat Boxes

[Bat Boxes - Buildings, planning and development - Bat Conservation Trust \(bats.org.uk\)](http://bats.org.uk)

Bats and Tree surgery

[Roosts in trees - Bat roosts - Bat Conservation Trust \(bats.org.uk\)](http://bats.org.uk)

Bats in Churches

[Home - Bats In Churches](#)

Suffolk Bat Group

[Suffolk Bat Group | Suffolk Wildlife Trust](#)

Eco Church Award

[Eco Church - An A Rocha UK Project](#)

God's Acre

[Caring for God's Acre is a charity that specialises in the preservation of wildlife and the heritage of burial grounds, graveyards and cemeteries \(caringforgodsacre.org.uk\)](http://caringforgodsacre.org.uk)

Lichens in churchyards

[Churchyard Lichens | The British Lichen Society](#)

Ivy and historic buildings

[Microsoft Word - Ivy report December verViles.docx \(ox.ac.uk\)](#)

Suffolk Swift Group contact

swifts@suffolkbirdgroup.org

Suffolk Swifts

[Save our Suffolk swifts | Suffolk Wildlife Trust](#)



Hedgehogs

[Home - Hedgehog Street](#)

[Hedgehogs | Suffolk Wildlife Trust](#)

National Churches Trust visitor website

www.explorechurches.org

Suffolk Wildlife Trust TeamWilder

[Team Wilder | Suffolk Wildlife Trust](#)

Factsheets attached

Churchyard Management

A guide to churchyard management

A sanctuary for wildlife

Many of our churchyards have escaped the agricultural development and intensification that has caused the dramatic loss of semi-natural habitat seen elsewhere.

For this reason churchyards can be very important for wildlife, providing a refuge for wide range of wildflowers, birds, animals and invertebrates. With sensitive management this wildlife can be encouraged without detracting from the spiritual and contemplative role of the churchyard.

Grassland

The grassland found in churchyards is unlikely to have been fertilised or reseeded and is therefore often rich in wildflowers which are now so scarce elsewhere. Careful management of all or part of the churchyard to favour these wildflowers, offers a unique opportunity to safeguard this valuable habitat in a place where it can be enjoyed by parishioners and visitors alike.

Flower-rich grassland does not thrive on neglect! If left to its own devices, it will be overtaken by scrub and invasive plants such as nettle and hogweed. To maintain the floral diversity the grassland needs to be cut and the clippings removed. Cutting should be timed to allow the grasses and other species to flower and set seed. In most situations July is the best time for cutting, but this will vary depending on the local conditions and the range of species present. A further cut and rake off in September/October is often beneficial.

Suffolk Wildlife Trust is happy to offer advice on the best timing and frequency of cutting for individual churchyards and other aspects of grassland management.

It is very important to rake off and remove clippings – if left on, they smother delicate plants, and increase fertility which encourages rank growth at the expense of wildflowers. If clippings are left to dry for a few days after cutting, this enables the flowers to shed any ripe seed and

insects to make their escape. Cut vegetation can either be removed off site or piled up in an out of the way corner where it will provide a useful habitat for creatures such as hedgehogs and slow-worms.

The selection of areas to be managed for wildflowers will depend not only on where the most wildflowers are, but also on the layout and use of the churchyard. In order to maintain a 'cared for' appearance, it is important to keep



Bill Stevenson

Cowslip

grass short adjacent to the main paths and to allow access to regularly attended graves. Cutting paths through the longer grass areas, and carefully defining their edges by regularly mown grass, shows that the 'wildlife areas' are part of a plan and allows visitors to appreciate them easily.

If there is space, leaving some areas uncut throughout the year is beneficial. Seed heads are a food source for birds and many invertebrates overwinter in long grass. The precise boundaries of these areas can be varied with cutting every 3 years to prevent the development of coarse grass and scrub.

Other habitats

The variety of stone in boundary walls, gravestones and the church itself provides habitat for a range of mosses, ferns, lichens and drought tolerant plants. Unless such plants are causing serious damage, they should be left intact and simply enjoyed! Ivy should be left on walls to provide nesting sites and a late nectar source for insects whenever possible. If trimming or removal is necessary, care should be taken to avoid the bird nesting season (March – July).

The trees and hedges of churchyards are valuable for wildlife providing food, shelter and nesting sites. Any necessary trimming or cutting back should be done in the winter months to minimise disturbance to wildlife. Some of the pruning's can be used to create dead wood habitat piles. Use native species when planting new trees and avoid planting where they will shade out wildflower areas.

Mature trees and the church itself are often home to bats which come to feed on the wide diversity of insects in the churchyard. Bats are fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act (1981). Care should be taken to avoid taking any action that may disturb or threaten them.

Key principles

- Pathways to and around the church and those to tended graves should be kept mown, together with access to compost heaps.
- All grass cuttings should be raked up and removed from wildflower areas. Removal of grass clippings from other areas is also desirable.
- Boundaries that are clearly defined between closely cut grass and the longer wildflower areas demonstrate that the churchyard is well-managed rather than neglected.

- Lichens, mosses and wall plants should not be removed from gravestones or walls.
- Avoid the use of chemicals.
- Information boards which explain how and why the churchyard is managed are beneficial and encourage interest.

What are the benefits?

The sensitive management of a churchyard will not only help Suffolk's wildlife, but can bring many benefits by:

- encouraging interest in the church and its surroundings by parishioners and visitors
- encouraging local involvement in the management of the churchyard
- providing a unique educational opportunity for people of all ages to learn about our natural and cultural heritage.

A well managed churchyard is a beautiful place, which is not only a vital refuge for wildlife, but is also a focal point of the parish. The churchyard can be both a place for quiet reflection, and a place of interest where a variety of wildflowers and associated wildlife can be enjoyed. The churchyard will be a valued asset at the heart of the community.



For further advice, contact Suffolk Wildlife Trust on:
01473 890089
wildline@suffolkwildlifetrust.org