

# NORFOLK BIODIVERSITY ACTION PLAN

## CHURCHYARDS & CEMETERIES

Churchyards are defined as burial grounds associated with an identifiable church building, whereas cemeteries are usually interdenominational burial grounds in municipal or private ownership. They both provide a wide variety of habitats supporting a range of species, and represent a significant proportion of urban green space, offering a peaceful haven for people and wildlife.

Ref L/H2	Local Habitat Action Plan 2
Plan Author:	Norfolk Wildlife Trust (Andrina Walmsley)
Plan Co-ordinator:	Communities and Nature Topic Group
Plan Leader:	Norfolk Wildlife Trust
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### 1. CURRENT STATUS

- Many older churchyards are remnants of ancient meadows that were used for hay or grazing animals long before the church itself was built. Although once common, meadow habitats have declined markedly nation-wide, and churchyards are an important relic of this ancient grassland habitat. The variety of stone used in church walls and gravestones represents an invaluable habitat, often supporting a rich lichen, moss and fern flora. This can be particularly important for the survival of some species in counties such as Norfolk, where stone walls and natural stone outcrops are relatively scarce. Other habitats of value in churchyards and cemeteries include veteran trees, hedges and their associated 'woodland edge' flora.
- Cemeteries, although usually of more recent origin, are generally much larger in size, and can be invaluable havens for wildlife, supporting a wide range of habitat types, from gravestones and church walls to trees, shrubs and unimproved or semi-improved grassland. They frequently occur in urban settings, where their value as refuges for wildlife within a developed environment is of great importance.
- Both churchyards and cemeteries can provide valuable, largely undisturbed habitat for species such as butterflies, slow worms, lizards and bats, provided that they are managed sympathetically.
- The management of churchyards is usually undertaken either by volunteers from the church congregation or local community, or by a contractor employed and paid by the Parochial Church Council (PCC). Cemeteries and burial grounds are usually the responsibility of the local authority.

### National Status

- It is estimated that, since 1945, 98% of the flower-rich grassland once widespread in the countryside has vanished, either as a result of cultivation, by 'improvement' with fertilisers, re-seeding or drainage, or through development. Churchyards are therefore an important relic of this ancient grassland habitat, as they have usually remained free from fertilisers and pesticides, and most are unthreatened by development or cultivation. Many counties now have churchyard conservation schemes in place to try to ensure that churchyards are managed appropriately to ensure the survival of species that are now rare or uncommon.

## Norfolk Status

- There are approximately 800 Church of England (CoE) churches with churchyards in Norfolk, of which over 650 are still in use. The majority are of mediaeval origin. The total number of cemeteries is unknown. No other county has this number of churches, so the churchyard habitat is of especial importance to biodiversity in the county.
- Norfolk's churchyards, belonging to both used and unused churches, provide the chief refuge for the survival of six wildflowers, three ferns and about 100 lichens in the county. Six species of the old meadow flora now have around 50% of their Norfolk populations in churchyards – pignut (*Conopodium majus*), meadow saxifrage (*Saxifraga granulata*), ox-eye daisy (*Leucanthemum vulgare*), burnet-saxifrage (*Pimpinella saxifraga*), cowslip (*Primula veris*) and lady's bedstraw (*Galium verum*). Three scarce ferns, wall-rue (*Asplenium ruta-muraria*), black spleenwort (*Asplenium adiantum-nigrum*) and maidenhair spleenwort (*Asplenium trichomanes*) have about 75% of their Norfolk populations on stonework in churchyards. About a third of Norfolk's 321 lichen species are found mainly in churchyards, and some are entirely confined to them. For example, Churchyard Lecanactis (*Lecanactis hemisphaerica*) is a rare lichen of shaded north- and east-facing church walls, which is now confined to just 15 sites in south-east England, eight of which are found in Norfolk. Like stonework ferns and flowers, saxicolous lichens have few other places to grow in this region as stone walls and natural outcrops are scarce. Old limestone headstones provide the best sites for lichens, but many also occur on mortar of walls, especially those made of flint.
- Approximately half of Norfolk's CoE churches, as well as a small number of non-CoE churches, belong to the Churchyard Conservation Scheme, established in 1981 and run by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust. The aim of the scheme is to monitor the condition of the churchyards through regular survey, and to advise church officials on appropriate management to encourage the survival of the plants of special interest. For practical reasons, it is usually only possible for relatively small, species-rich 'conservation areas' to be managed in the most beneficial way.
- Four churchyards and two cemeteries have been designated as County Wildlife Sites in Norfolk.

## 2. CURRENT FACTORS CAUSING LOSS OR DECLINE IN NORFOLK

Churchyards and churchyard-dependent species in Norfolk are at increasing risk from a number of factors, including:

- A general lack of awareness and understanding of the biodiversity value of churchyards and the rarity of meadowland habitat;
- A lack of understanding of what constitutes suitable churchyard management;
- A shortage of resources (labour and funding) to manage churchyards appropriately;
- Insufficient resources to deliver churchyard conservation advice widely;
- Potential/perceived conflict between a well-kept churchyard and one managed for wildlife, eg, grass may be mown too frequently, gravestones may be 'cleaned', etc;
- Health and safety issues leading to loss of habitat, eg, repositioning of gravestones (which can cause damage to lichens) and felling of veteran trees which are considered 'dangerous';

- Architectural renovations to church fabric leading to loss of habitat, eg, access to bat roosts, damage to wall plant species;
- Inappropriate tree/shrub planting, eg, poor siting causing shading of lichens or meadow flowers, or the use of inappropriate and exotic species;
- Inappropriate use of herbicides especially around footings of church walls and gravestones.

### **3. CURRENT ACTION IN NORFOLK**

- The Churchyard Conservation Scheme, run by the Norfolk Wildlife Trust, involves approximately 350 churches and offers free advice to church managers, site visits on request and a rolling programme of surveys to monitor the condition of key churchyards.
- Periodic workshops are run under the auspices of the scheme for churchyard managers and others involved in managing churchyards.
- The Diocesan Advisory Committee for the Care of Churches (DAC) advises parishes on the care of churches, including churchyards. The ecological advisor to the DAC plays a key role in managing the Churchyard Conservation Scheme.
- The Churchyard Conservation Scheme is affiliated to the national Living Churchyards Project, which aims to encourage the management of churchyards in a wildlife friendly way, as well as share best practice and management advice through email groups and conference activities.
- Four churchyards and two cemeteries in Norfolk have been designated as County Wildlife Sites and are managed under the CWS system, run by a partnership of Norfolk Wildlife Trust, Norfolk County Council, and Natural England (formerly English Nature and Defra/RDS).

## **4. ACTION PLAN OBJECTIVES AND TARGETS**

### **National**

- There are no national BAP objectives and targets for churchyards and cemeteries. However, the unique biodiversity value of churchyards for wildlife and long tradition of churchyard management, together with the particular difficulties of maintaining appropriate management in churchyards today, distinguish them sufficiently from other grassland habitats to merit a separate action plan.

### **Norfolk**

- Increase the number of new churchyards enrolled in CCS by 15% (about 55 churches) by 2010.
- Increase the number of enrolled churchyards actively taking part in CCS by 15% (about 55 churches) by 2010.

## Churchyards and Cemeteries - Norfolk Action Plan

NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
<b>5.1</b>	<b>Policy and Legislation</b>			
<b>5.1.1</b>	No national action.	Identify high-value biodiversity sites in Local Development Frameworks and other plans.	LAs	NWT
<b>5.1.2</b>	No national action.	Ensure local authorities and church authorities include biodiversity in policies for management of churchyards and cemeteries.	DAC, LAs	NWT
<b>5.2</b>	<b>Site Safeguard and Management</b>			
<b>5.2.1</b>	No national action.	Ensure that any churchyard or cemetery meeting the relevant criteria is designated as a CWS.	NWT, NCC, CWSSG	
<b>5.2.2</b>	No national action.	Continue to work with Diocese of Norwich in surveying, managing and advising on sites.	NWT	DAC, volunteers
<b>5.2.3</b>	No national action.	Produce simple laminated management statements for 50% of churchyards in CCS by 2010.	NWT	
<b>5.2.4</b>	No national action.	Identify key gaps in the CCS system and take active measures to encourage new churches to join the scheme.	NWT	
<b>5.2.5</b>	No national action.	Encourage those churches enrolled in CCS to undertake active conservation management of their churchyards.	NWT	
<b>5.2.6</b>	No national action.	Liaise with countryside projects and other groups such as the Probation Service to help deliver management objectives in churchyards where labour shortage is a problem.	NWT	CPs, PS
<b>5.2.7</b>	No national action.	Work with local community groups to encourage involvement in and support for churchyard management.	NWT, PCCs, PCs	

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NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.2.8	No national action	Record and conserve Heritage Trees in churchyards.	NWT	DAC, Volunteers
5.2.9	Devise, implement and provide incentives for maintenance plans for walls on which <i>Lecanactis hemisphaerica</i> occurs (from the UK action plan for <i>L. hemisphaerica</i> .)	Record (on local churchyard database) sites at which <i>Lecanactis hemisphaerica</i> occurs, and liaise with relevant churches, DAC and NE re appropriate management and avoidance of potentially damaging actions.	NWT	NE, DAC
<b>5.3</b>	<b>Advisory</b>			
5.3.1	No national action.	Run at least one annual workshop for churchyard managers and others involved in managing churchyards and cemeteries.	NWT, DAC, CPs	
5.3.2	No national action.	Increase quality and quantity of advice available via NWT website.	NWT	
5.3.3	No national action.	Update and distribute churchyard conservation advice booklet.	NWT, DAC	
<b>5.4</b>	<b>Future Research and Monitoring</b>			
5.4.1	No national action.	Re-survey a minimum of five CCS churchyards each year, to assess the extent to which they are being actively managed for conservation and the status of key habitats and species. Priority will be accorded to those churchyards that have not been surveyed for at least ten years.	NWT	Volunteers
5.4.2	No national action.	Involve specialist groups in survey work where possible to cover invertebrates, bats, herpetofauna etc.	NWT	NNNS
5.4.3	No national action.	Create Access database for CCS to aid management and monitoring work.	NWT	

## Churchyards and Cemeteries - Norfolk Action Plan

NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.4.4	No national action.	Recruit and train additional volunteer surveyors to help with churchyard surveys and provision of management advice.	NWT	NNNS, CPs, PCCs
5.4.5	No national action.	Promote the use of churchyard 'hay' as a seed source for small local meadow creation projects and create database of suitable donor sites.	NWT	LAs, CPs, PCCs
<b>5.5</b>	<b>Communications and Publicity</b>			
5.5.1	No national action.	Source funding for and publish a leaflet explaining the value of churchyards for wildlife, with details of Norfolk's best churchyards.	NWT	
5.5.2	No national action.	Improve awareness and understanding of the increasing importance of churches as roosting sites for bats, by means of talks, advisory leaflets, etc.	NWT	
5.5.3	No national action.	Work with local community groups to encourage involvement in churchyard management.	NWT, CPs, PCCs, PCs	
5.5.4	No national action.	Encourage churchyard/ cemetery managers to erect wildlife interpretation boards to explain value/purpose of conservation areas.	NWT, DAC	
5.5.5	No national action.	Source funding for and produce high-quality, laminated species information sheets for use in church porches.	NWT, LAs	
5.5.6	No national action.	Source funding for and produce high-quality display boards explaining value of churchyards for wildlife, for use in parishes eg at flower festivals, village festivals etc.	NWT, DAC, LAs	

## Churchyards and Cemeteries - Norfolk Action Plan

NATIONAL ACTION		NORFOLK ACTION	ACTION BY:	PARTNERS:
5.5.7	No national action.	Work in partnership with other relevant projects (including Open Churches Project) in raising awareness of Norfolk's church and churchyard heritage.	NWT, OCP	
5.6	<b>Links with Other Action Plans</b>			
5.6.1	No national action.	This plan should be considered in conjunction with the Norfolk action plans for pipistrelle bat, spotted flycatcher, lowland meadows and ancient/species-rich hedgerows, as well as the UK plan for <i>Lecanactis hemisphaerica</i> .	C&N Topic Group, Farmland Topic Group	

### Abbreviations

C&N	Communities and Nature (BAP Topic Group)
CoE	Church of England
CPs	Countryside Projects
CWSSG	County Wildlife Sites Steering Group
DAC	Diocesan Advisory Committee Dioceses of Norwich
LAs	Local Authorities
NCC	Norfolk County Council
NE	Natural England
NNNS	Norfolk and Norwich Naturalists' Society
NWT	Norfolk Wildlife Trust
OCP	Open Churches Project
PC	Parish Council
PCC	Parochial Church Council
PS	Probation Service



## **NORFOLK DISTRIBUTION**

### **MANAGEMENT GUIDANCE**

**(This guidance is a general summary; for more detailed information or advice, please consult the references or contacts below.)**

Churchyards are normally cut and managed during the period March/April – October.

Cutting needs to be frequent enough to maintain a fine and even-textured sward, as most meadow flowers are able to survive in vegetative form under this regime, even though they may be unable to flower. By contrast, infrequent cutting results in rank, tussocky grass and dominance by robust species which rapidly overwhelm the finer species. Grass is therefore best cut frequently (eg monthly), with one or two cuts omitted during the key flowering periods to enable the most prevalent species to flower and set seed.

It is essential that any cut material be raked up and removed, to prevent it from rotting down, enriching the soil and smothering the finer species. This is particularly important when the grass is cut after a relatively long growing period, ie the late summer cut, when the quantity of cut material is at its greatest.

Cutting frequencies should not be changed radically or suddenly. Where a churchyard with infrequent or no management is brought into conservation management, it is best to introduce additional cuts slowly, monitoring changes to the composition of the sward, and building up the frequency of cutting over a prolonged period.

Paths/path-edges and areas with new and tended graves can be cut more frequently (eg fortnightly), to maintain a tidy, well-cared for appearance. Strips of grassland at the edge of the yard can be left and cut only periodically to provide shelter for species such as slow-worms, small mammals, etc.

### **CONTACTS**

Mrs Andrina Walmsley  
Conservation Officer  
Norfolk Wildlife Trust  
Bewick House  
22 Thorpe Rd  
Norwich NR1 1RY

Telephone: 01603-625540

Email: [Andrinaw@norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk](mailto:Andrinaw@norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk)

Dr Bob Leaney  
Ecological Advisor to the Diocesan Advisory Committee  
122 Norwich Rd  
Wroxham  
Norfolk NR12 8SA

Telephone: 01603-782462

## KEY REFERENCES

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Leaney, B. (2005). Mowing grasslands in churchyards: getting conservation advice right. *British Wildlife* 16 (5): 329-331

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## WEBSITES

Diocese of Norwich website: [www.norwich.anglican.org](http://www.norwich.anglican.org)