

## Managing Churchyards for Wildlife with Cathy Smith, Suffolk Wildlife Church Diocesan Synod June 2023

Cathy Smith is from Suffolk Wildlife Trust and her role there is to support communities in managing their land for wildlife.

Suffolk Churchyards are some of the richest places in the county for wildlife, and especially meadow flora. Wildflowers found in churchyards are no longer found in the wider countryside, so churches are real custodians of them. A recent visit from a national expert on wildflowers said that Coddensham churchyard was one of the top 10 places in the UK for wildflowers.

Trees are good too! But tend to overshadow and negatively impact the meadow flora. Don't cut them down if you have them – other species of wildflower will use the shadier spaces – but try not to plant too many extra. Churchyards' unimproved grassland has a huge impact itself upon carbon capture and retention too.

Recognise that all churchyards are different, and that we have differing uses that need to be factored in to churchyard management eg War Memorials, active grave areas. Plan for areas that you can rewild and manage it to make sure it looks managed eg mow alongside the paths, mow paths through the wilder areas.

PR:

- Tell people what you are doing in advance, and update them as you go along. Write about the churchyard in the parish magazine, and on village facebook pages. Drip feed the information – celebrating the latest news, reminding people that the land is being managed.
- Put up signs to tell people that the churchyard is managed for wildlife. Consider information boards/signs telling people what wildflowers they might see?
- Be sensitive to the work that people have put into managing the churchyard in the past. Don't disparage that work – say that times have changed and because of the climate crisis we need to do things differently now.
- Have a 'mowing' day – invite people from the community to come and help and serve bacon butties and tea. Make a day of it.
- Involve your community in your churchyard. Invite them to record species with you. Invite local children's groups eg Brownies/Scouts to do an eco-based activity in the churchyard. Have Messy Church sessions outside building a bug hotel for example. If your primary school is very close, run an Eco After School Club in the churchyard.
- Run wildlife events for your community eg moths, bats, perhaps with other local wildlife organisations.
- Join in with Celebrating God's Burial Ground week, Arocha's Eco Church, etc and publicise that locally.

Managing the churchyard:

- Do manage your grassland – it needs it!
- Traditional mowing practices come into their own – cut the churchyard in March, July and September. The 'big' cut will be in July. In the past this would have been by scythe, cutting hay and selling it on behalf of the church. Or have sheep! Scything is a good way to do the long cut – it helps protect hedgehogs in the long grass, as well as gravestones.
- Take the grass cuttings away. Leaving them enriches the soil and will deter wildflowers.
- If your churchyard has very few wildflowers and you would like to build up diversity DO NOT sow wildflower seeds or plant wildflower plugs. By all means sow them in your own garden, but the churchyard is for local flora. Instead, use the seeds in another local churchyard's hay.
- Recognise that some areas in your churchyard will need more frequent mowing to keep them neat eg around War Memorials or Gardens of Remembrance or active grave areas. Try to have the mower on a slightly higher setting to allow shorter species of wildflower to flourish.