

Church of St Michael the Archangel, West Hill (Ottery St Mary)

Visit by Kevin Boot on 10/05/2024

Introduction

St Michael's is a relatively 'new' village church in comparison to most others in the county, having been built in 1846. The churchyard does not have centuries long management tradition.

The church enjoys a healthy congregation of 80+ individuals and receives around 45 attendees at services every Sunday. The church's aim is to embrace and encourage all sectors of its local community. Facilities within the church reflect this and there is a decent-sized space for many activities, including regular drop in coffee mornings and other events designed to stimulate conversation and friendship. St Michael's is part of the Otter Vale Mission Community, whose website includes details of upcoming events across the Mission, including St Michael's. David Curry was approached by St Michael's with a view to providing help in maintaining or enhancing the wildlife potential of the churchyard; Kelvin Boot visited and met with three members of the congregation including the Churchwarden.

The churchyard

The churchyard benefits from sunny open areas and tree shaded boundaries, with a scrubby area at the northern boundary, leading into a damper area. Some of the trees are quite mature and make a link with surrounding countryside, so useful for birds. There are areas set aside as memorial gardens, surrounded by hedges, where the grass is kept shorter. There are swathes of wildflowers including, English bluebell, primrose, and celandine are common; germander speedwell and cuckoo flower are sporadic; daisies, creeping buttercup, ribbed plantain and dandelion abound. Three-cornered leek has gained a foothold, and whilst an attractive plant it can become dominant so needs careful monitoring and removal if it spreads too much. There are many kerbed graves, which have become grown over and support shorter plants such as wild strawberry and violet that tolerate drier, sunnier conditions.

At the front of the church is a shady area, shafted with sunlight, to provide a dappling effect and hence a variety of habitats. Raised areas here provide low walls festooned with growth, including wild strawberry, herb Robert, primrose, foxglove, cuckoo pint and ivy among other species. The remains of a tree stump to the right of the main door, were abuzz with solitary bees and their brightly striped clepto-parasitic (nest stealing) cousins, demonstrating the value of dead wood to invertebrates. Throughout the churchyard the vegetation is kept at a range of heights, and towards the edges, the least accessible parts of the churchyard, the vegetation is more woodland glade than mown lawn, hence of greater wildlife value. In some of the 'forgotten' corners are log piles and corrugated iron sheeting; both to be encouraged. On lifting one sheet a 'new' nest, probably woodmouse or bank vole, was found; the nest incorporated, artificial foam, possibly from plastic flower displays – while this appears to be useful it can be highly dangerous to wildlife. Other mammals known to visit the churchyard are badger and deer. It is likely that hedgehog, and fox also live in or move through, respectively, the churchyard.

The churchyard was alive with birdsong and recently installed nest boxes have been inhabited by blue tits. There are some patches of lungwort in the shaded areas – these may be garden plantings but are especially useful for insects, garlic mustard and green alkanet are common and iris occur here too.

Gathering wildlife information – where and where flowers spring up, which parts seem most popular with insects etc, will provide strong indicators of what is already working and what may benefit from improvement. Just sitting, listening and watching will allow nature to tell you what is around, at what times of year.

Why change things

A churchyard is like a garden, it has multiple uses and so potential conflicts among visitors. Some people like a shaven churchyard, thinking it more traditional (but the reality is the closely mown churchyard is a modern phenomenon); others prefer more wild areas alive with the humming of insects, the singing of birds and the perfumes of flowering plants. Churchyards are primarily burial grounds, but are also gathering areas for the congregation, locations for photo opportunities after weddings and baptisms, and increasingly areas to bring communities together for events. Above all churchyards can provide peaceful areas for contemplation, reflection and remembrance. They have become (especially during and post-covid) areas essential to well-being, where people can relax and regain peace of mind. Increasingly they are coming into their own as valuable reservoirs of wildlife, oases in time and space as surrounding countryside comes under more and more pressure. Churchyards can be important stepping stones for nature becoming part of a natural mosaic supporting wildlife across a much wider area than their own confines. Any management has to be respectful of all of these calls on a churchyard and balance. To this end it is necessary to provide safe footpaths in addition to the basic layout that exists. Mowing such paths through longer vegetation, will also ensure that you move people around in a hazard-free way to the parts of the churchyard you want them to see. Inevitably if the vegetation is allowed to grow tall there will be someone who wishes to visit a grave that is occluded by long grass, if they ask it is easy for you to cut a path to individual graves (there won't be many of them)

Planning for enhancement

At present the regime appears to be maintaining a diversity of plants within the churchyard, indeed, where obvious blooming plants occur they are left as clumps within an otherwise cut area. Tree pruning and other management can result in log and brash piles, which are left for wildlife. This is a firm foundation for further enhancement but requires collection of more information about what lives where and when it comes into flower, in turn supporting invertebrates such as butterflies and then birds etc.

The benefit of constructing a forward plan (and this does not need to be too complicated), is to concentrate limited human resources to provide the maximum benefit to wildlife. It also keeps you on the straight and narrow so you can achieve what you set out to achieve and show evidence of improvements, as well as learn from experience (and mistakes).

The plan

The first stage is to draw, or trace from a Google aerial image and outline of the churchyard, showing boundaries and what they consist of, areas of wilder growth, or areas that require being kept short, and main features such as existing footpaths, and significant trees and shrubs.

Armed with this outline and as much wildlife information as possible it will be a simple matter to demarcate distinct areas, or management blocks, and indicate what management needs to be carried out – this forms the basis of the plan.

Activities to maintain and enhance wildlife interest should be planned on a realistic timescale, which also takes into account what labour is available. Some activities will take

time to carry out and time to come to fruition, so the plan should be over a five-year timescale, with each year showing targets and the efforts needed to achieve them.

Working parties of interested people, however small, can be assigned tasks – grass cutting, pruning, planting/transplanting, recording species, photography etc, etc, within the overall plan. Churchyard management events have the benefit of bringing people together, almost as social, events (which St Michael's seems very good at). Work events need not be onerous and while some energetic people will gladly give up a day, every now and then, others may only be able to contribute an hour or so. However small the contribution, they all help to move toward the aim of a more wildlife friendly and hence pleasant churchyard environment.

As with any plan that looks into the future you should assess progress each year, report your successes and alter the plan to take in new tasks and complete those that fell behind. Reporting back to the community on progress will show that the project is 'real' and is having an impact, not only on nature but also on community well-being.

Management or neglect

One of the commonest criticisms of 'wilding' a churchyard is that it begins to look unkempt and neglected, full of weeds and an insult to the memories of those buried there. Showing what is being done and talking about it, and listening to criticisms, is essential for community buy-in. So, rather than the wrong idea of just letting the grass grow the aim should be to create a mosaic of habitats that attract and support different plants, insects, birds and other creatures. Going back to knowing what you have is a great help in improving areas even more. So, where a damp area supports cuckoo flower, green alkanet and lungwort, nature is telling you that the shady corners are good for those plants. You may care to encourage more shade to increase the area of this habitat. Conversely, a lesson can be learned from the very dry tree stump area at the front of the church. It is obviously perfect for warmth loving insects that require bare soil of rotting wood, in full sunlight. Other similar patches can be created by judiciously placed log piles, while many beetles and other invertebrates prefer their log piles in shaded areas, where damp prevails.

Remember, a weed is a wild flower growing in the wrong place and to many a sign of neglect. The converse is when a garden plant escapes into the wild and becomes dominant, so becoming a weed in the wild despite its cultivated origin. The best way of turning a weed into a wildflower in people's minds is to find a story to make it something of interest. See attached.

Leaving grass and other plants, such as ox-eye daisy and meadow buttercup to grow taller will benefit many pollinators, but there are numerous plants and their attendant invertebrates that require short turf. Tormentil, cinquefoil, wild strawberry. Birdsfoot trefoil and daisy for example cannot thrive where, long grass is dominant. Patches of primrose and violet are typical woodland edge plants, so for these to spread the habitat needs to be copied from what is already there. The general advice is to make a cut after the spring flowers have bloomed and subsided and then again in the autumn following the summer blossoming. Not only does this give the plants the best opportunity to set seed, it also ensures that any insects have a good crack at feeding, mating and laying eggs. However, every churchyard is different and the best cutting times will be learned through the years as you gain experience, of what grows where and when.

'No-Mow-May' has gained traction over the last few years. The idea is to leave an area that is normally kept short to grow through the critical month of May, to cater for early insects requiring a nectar source. Such has been the success of this initiative that the

suggestion is to also have 'Let it Bloom in June'. Explore these as a possibility, although they may not always be appropriate in those parts of the churchyard where turf is kept short for gatherings such as post-service mingling or wedding photos. As long as there are some areas of flowering wild plants the insects will be catered for. Again this brings us back to the idea of creating a mosaic.

Kerbed graves provide opportunities to become colonised by a variety of low growing plants, including the succulents – house leek and stonecrop. Already some kerbed graves have assemblages of particular species including, primrose, wild strawberry, violet, Ribwort plantain, cat's ear and others. Other kerbed graves might be encouraged to sport a growth of pretty spring flowers. Those that are dry-based might support fragrant herbs such as thymes and sages, both of value to insects but also part of the story of biblical plants.

Grave mounds themselves can be planted in remembrance, with low growing flowers that will festoon the grave in a floral display. Ideally these should be native species, but insect friendly garden species, can be substituted – snowdrop, cyclamen, crocus, for example. The general rule to follow is that natives are always best, with useful garden nectar plants coming a good second.

Whether kerbed or simply mounded these 'wild flower' graves become small islands within the churchyard. The idea of islands can be extended to leave small oases in otherwise mown lawn areas. A circle of logs can be placed around them to delineate the wild island, again demonstrating intent and hence management rather than neglect.

Plastic flowers and other objects intended to decorate graves should be actively discouraged, indeed it is CofE policy not to allow them. But suggest the alternative of relatives planting useful short growing plants: primrose, violet, snowdrop, cyclamen etc.

Communication

Letting people know what you are trying to achieve, what successes you have had and how they can help is key to getting the 'cared for' rather than the 'neglected' messages across.

The network at St Michael's and beyond already seems pretty efficient, through meetings and notes in the virtual newsletter, you can never have too much information going out so other avenues could be sought. A dedicated spot in the porch might show updates, the latest sightings, flower or creature of the month. Here you might also have laminated sheets people can take as they walk around the churchyard looking for highlights.

The last thing you want is a forest of notices throughout the churchyard, but a few judiciously placed, small, unobtrusive poster holders can highlight areas of interest (historical as well as natural), this site has some cheap and sturdy examples - <https://www.sign-holders.co.uk/garden-retail-display/garden-label-stakes/stakeholders.html>.

You can print out on good quality photo paper and laminate before sliding into the frame.

Certainly a good quality panel near the church entrance, always works well by introducing visitors to the natural churchyard concept upon arrival.

As you have excellent facilities for meetings, you might think about open day tours, or at least inviting those that attend coffee mornings to take a stroll around the churchyard. The offer of me coming to give a talk is there if you want it: I have made a similar offer to OSM but it seems sensible to bring your mission's eco-church people together in one place – lots of pretty pics., let me know.

Any other avenues such as village notice boards, WI's, gardening clubs etc are always good opportunities.

Health and Safety

All church authorities have an obligation to those who visit the church and churchyard, to ensure it is safe from hazards. A gentle notice (the one at the front of the church is best) that invites people to enjoy the churchyard but points out that they should take care, is a good idea. Tipped gravestones, tree roots, sunken areas, hidden kerbs are all potential trip hazards. The maintenance of footpaths guiding people safely around the churchyard is an excellent and subtle way of keeping people away from hazards.