

Church of St Mary the Virgin, Ottery St Mary, East Devon – Church visit by Kelvin Boot, 29/05/2024.

Contacts: Sue Jeacock (Church Administrator and Secretary to the PCC), Elizabeth Everett (PCC member), Val McIntosh (Churchwarden).

Introduction:

St Mary's is a large church located close to the town centre. It enjoys a large congregation with numbers of 60-100 attending the main service each Sunday morning, rising to 450+ for major events and festivals. The church is busy throughout the week with numerous activities including coffee mornings, and it reaches out to the community in their own homes. It is very family oriented, and has a particular concern for the lonely, vulnerable or housebound.

Until recently (March 2024) the church was administered through a group of Governors but is now the responsibility of the PCC. As part of the Otter Vale Mission Community (group of a dozen churches in the area) it sits on the Mission Eco Group. Since taking responsibility for the church and churchyard the PCC has become minded to encourage greater biodiversity into the churchyard through maintaining and increasing wild areas within the churchyard. Within the town are an eco-group known as 'Blooming Ottery' and a scout group who might provide physical as well as advice.

The churchyard:

The churchyard is closed to new burials, although there is provision for the interment of ashes along with small commemorative plaques. As with other churches that have been under the aegis of Governors the grounds have been kept neat and tidy, with cuts as often as deemed necessary, by a paid groundsman. This has resulted in a short turf across the majority of the space with some areas of wilder vegetation around some edges and in some corners, as well as below some of the larger trees. The groundsman avoids cutting small areas of obvious floristic interest to allow wildflowers to bloom, and some areas have been designated to allow wildlife to flourish. There is, however, no overall plan for the churchyard, hence the request for an advisory visit.

To some extent the churchyard is a blank canvas, but this also means that parishioners will have got used to the mown appearance of the lawned areas, so there might be opposition if areas are dedicated more to nature; to some anything over a few centimetres in height becomes unsightly, unkempt and uncared-for weed-strewn neglect. It is important to understand this from the beginning and to get people on board with ideas for 'wilding' at the earliest possible opportunity. The upside of St Mary's churchyard is that wildlife improvements can be introduced at a steady rate, so introducing the idea gently. If the St Mary's congregation is similar to others the vast majority of people will welcome the idea of bringing nature back to the churchyard. It is interesting to note that up until recent decades churchyards might only have been managed by introducing a few sheep now and again throughout the year, so the 'traditional' image of a neatly mown churchyard is far from 'traditional'. For back-up advice on the importance of churchyards visit: <https://www.churchofengland.org/resources/churchcare/advice-and-guidance-church-buildings/churchyard-wildlife>

What's there already:

Bearing in mind the 'cultivated' appearance of the churchyard and the brevity of this one-off visit the range of species is understandably narrow; it is likely that further visits as the season progresses will reveal others. However, the list does underline that nature hangs on and given half a chance other species will make themselves apparent.

The **flower list** at the times of visit: Daisy, ox-eye daisy, ribwort plantain, dove's foot cranesbill, herb Robert, herb Bennet, germander speedwell, forget-me-not, ivy, pellitory-of-the-wall, ivy-leaved toadflax, violet, primrose, Cat's ear, mouse ear hawkweed, house leek, stonecrop, lesser trefoil, yew, Irish yew, rowan, buddleia. Also, hart's tongue fern, maidenhair spleenwort fern, pleated inkcap fungus.

In addition a number of hoverfly species, two-spot ladybird, ashy mining bee, early bee, white-tailed bumblebee and honey bee were noted. A nursery clump of baby spiders (probably the garden spider – *Araneus diadematus*) was also spotted among the vegetation, while various hunting spiders, carrying egg sacs scurried on the ground. There will be many more species of insect and other invertebrates, which will show themselves on a warmer, sunnier day, with a more concentrated look around (I will return to spend some time in a week or so).

Some areas of the churchyard have been encouraged to veer towards wildness, along the front wall of the church, especially on the corner where the B3177 meets The College. A flourishing growth of wildflowers, such as ox-eye daisy, dove's foot cranesbill and forget-me-not and others attracts many flying insects, including honey bees.

Some of the kerbed graves have been colonised by succulents, such as stonecrop and houseleek, lesser trefoil, germander speedwell and mouse-ear hawkweed, and cat's ear. 'Islands' have been left at the base of some of the trees, allowing an assemblage of wild plants to thrive.

These pockets of wildness demonstrate that there are species ready to recolonise the wider churchyard.

Moving towards greater biodiversity

Currently the churchyard shows it can support some biodiversity with the potential to increase the range of plants, insects and other animals. Simply letting the grass grow taller along with any plants that emerge is not necessarily the best path to follow. There is a recent tradition of short turf throughout so a 'gently, gently' approach is probably best – this is already happening, with the groundsman leaving obvious clumps of wildflowers to grow, along with the growth at the base of trees along the walls and in corners. This can be increased, without people thinking a wild take-over is taking place. Wildness does not mean untidiness, and certainly any activities to enhance the nature of the churchyard should appear to be managed and not a result of neglect. Whilst purists might object to the term 'gardening', this is exactly the approach to follow: decide what you want to grow and where you want to grow it. But for this to look purposeful you will first need a plan.

The Plan

Having a plan will give you a route map which will guide you month by month, year by year towards your ultimate goal of a wildlife enhanced churchyard. It is important to have some idea how you want the churchyard to look in the years to come and any plan should probably look ahead five years and be re-appraised each year. IT NEED NOT BE COMPLICATED. Above all a

plan will help you lay out what work is required to carry out the desired changes, what resources you will need, and how you measure success or failure.

Map - The first thing to do is create a map of the churchyard, highlighting footpaths, location of trees and other obvious features, and a broad layout of areas. These areas, often bounded by footpaths can then be colour-coded so as to identify them as areas for particular management, even if they are to continue as they are. I think it helps to give these areas names if you can so they and their future use become part of the lingua franca of the church. So, Ox-eye corner, primrose walk etc. Equally important is to show those areas which are to be maintained as short turf – normally the front of the church, where people gather post-services, have wedding photos taken or events take place would be kept closely mown, but even these could be considered for reduced or zero mowing to recognise the value of No-Mow-May. But don't fall into the trap that long vegetation is the desired end point across the churchyard, many plants and insects require very short turf, if not bare ground. So a mosaic across the churchyard will provide for a greater diversity of wildlife than a monoculture of all short or all long plants.

Important areas - Identifying areas you want to keep or expand for nature should be based on what already exists, so gaining as much information as to species within the churchyard is essential. I have made a start with the list above but the more data you have the better will be your planning. I am sure that within the town of Ottery St Mary there will be people who are keen gardeners and know wild plants, while others might be bird watchers or butterfly enthusiasts. To catalogue the entire churchyard would be ideal but it is a daunting task. Do not be put off by this and make a start where you can, even if you cannot identify every species that grows, flits by, burrows down, lives in or visits the churchyard. You will easily identify those areas that are colourful with blooms, or humming with bees – make a start with these.

Eco-islands - It may be advantageous to start with small areas within larger plots. Kerbed graves have been mentioned and with little effort these could be tended to encourage 'flower beds' of the species mentioned, other species such as biblical herbs would also grow well in the stony substrate they present. Already at the base of some trees wild islands have established, this idea could also be taken to some more open areas. A circle of logs demarcating and containing wildflowers of various species is a good way of allocating small parcels of the churchyard for wilding, not only does it give protection from over-zealous mowing, it also shows that the wildness is intended to be there, and is not simply a patch missed by the gardener. Such eco-islands provide stepping stones for nature within the churchyard, encouraging wildlife to spread into and across the open spaces constituting the majority of the churchyard.

Giving nature a home

In a town centre setting one of the determining factors for wildlife is having a safe place to rear a family. With invertebrates this might be providing the right food plants as well as places to lay eggs.

Log piles - The addition of log piles, in both full sun and shade will greatly increase the opportunities for a whole host of invertebrates. Log piles can be a simple pile of logs, or something a bit more planned. It is always a good idea to half-bury some logs to allow for those invertebrates that like to live under soil but near wood. Also provide logs of different lengths and diameters, to cater for all tastes in invert housing.

Bug hotel - On a sunny wall a bug hotel will soon become occupied by a wide range of solitary bee and other species. Bug hotels can be any size and are easy to construct, they do not act like a honeybee hive, rather more like a block of flats. With ever changing residents, including a few criminal insects that break in and steal food stores set aside for young insects when they hatch. They are fascinating to watch.

Hedgehog house - Hedgehogs are known to visit the churchyard and judiciously placed hedgehog houses, away from people in a quiet, overgrown corner, will encourage them to stay and forage for food among the 'wild' areas you create. They might also have babies if you let them have some peace and security.

Sheets and slates - In these quieter areas you might also introduce some bits of corrugated iron, or the odd roof tile, under which reptiles, amphibians and small mammals such as shrews, voles and mice can find sanctuary.

Nest boxes – There are a good number of tall trees in the churchyard providing welcome nesting places for birds in a town setting. Even more species can be attracted by providing nest boxes for birds, but also for bats. Don't get carried away and keep the number of nest boxes small so as not to create undue competition for space and food – the birds, particularly should spend their time feeding young, not fighting over territory. The British Trust for Ornithology website has more information about building and locating nest boxes for different species at: <https://www.bto.org/how-you-can-help/providing-birds/putting-nest-boxes-birds/make-nest-box>

Health and Safety

When you welcome people into your churchyard you automatically take responsibility for their safety. Churchyards are inherently dangerous places with low kerbed graves, fallen headstones, tree roots, slippery paving etc. A simple notice, below is an example, at the entrances to the churchyard can help get the message across:

Your Church Name and Logos

Welcome to this cemetery, please be aware of the following:

- Warning - unsafe and uneven ground.
- Caution slippery surfaces.
- Tripping hazards – please watch your step.
- Warning – sudden drop around church (*Ed. where applicable*).
- Please do not enter cemetery/churchyard after dark.

Thank you.
Church Warden

Communications

A key element of a successful 'wilding' project is to ensure that your community is aware of what you are aiming to achieve and how and when you will be doing it. You cannot communicate

this message enough. While you certainly do not want to festoon the churchyard with notices a few to point out work in progress, flower of the month, bug of the week etc go a long way to gaining and maintaining interest. Not only will this help to forestall any criticism it might also generate vocal and physical support, as well as potential donations of time and money towards the project (another reason to have a Plan). Other communication avenues would be the church newsletter, local press/media, talks to local groups, guided walks around the churchyard, notices at the end of services. We are producing a series of information sheets on wildlife in churchyards, these can be laminated and left in the porch for visitors to borrow and identify animals and plants as they wander around the grounds, or they might be mounted on a poster board or similar. You can add to these with your own, mini-beast hunts, tree trail etc.

Concluding remarks

The churchyard at St Mary's is extensive and largely unwelcoming to nature. However, there are some areas that have been set aside for wildlife. IMPORTANTLY there is a desire to increase the biodiversity of the churchyard to enhance it for people's pleasure and contemplation – that is the single most effective step towards a bio-friendly churchyard.

I have outlined the status quo and made some suggestions as to what you might consider as part of your wildlife improvement project. You will have more ideas as the months and years pass, but an essential ingredient will be to have an enthusiastic team who can spread the word, and take some of the strain.

I shall pop back now and again (I'll let you know when in case you want a chat, but not obligatory) to continue compiling a list of what is where, as a help to get you started, but having some local expertise would be a boon – there must be a photographer, bird watcher, insect enthusiast and plant geek somewhere in OSM.

As I mentioned and repeated to Westhill, I would be very happy to come across and give an evening talk to rally the troops, ideally reps from the whole Mission could benefit.

And finally, please do not hesitate to get in touch if you have any questions.

KB 17/06/2024