

Church of St James and St Anne, Alfington, Ottery St Mary. EX11 1PE

Visit by Kelvin Boot on 3/10/2024 at the request of Val Phillips – Churchwarden

Introduction:

St James' & St Anne's at Alfington is part of the Otter Vale Mission Community of 9 parishes comprising 12 church buildings and 12 worshipping communities. It is a small church originally built and maintained as a 'Chapel of Ease' by Sir John Taylor Coleridge in 1849; the churchyard was added and consecrated in 1878, and the parish was established with the building as its church in 1882.

As is the case with many small rural churches the congregation has dwindled over the years and there is a core of around ten stalwarts of perform most of the necessary offices and generate activities to keep the church alive and part of its community. This small group also is desirous of enhancing the wildlife value of the churchyard, not just for those plants and creatures that might benefit but also to increase the overall appeal of the churchyard, broaden its interest and augment the contemplative ambience of the churchyard for those who want to visit, sit and commune with the sights, sounds and scents of the natural world while remembering friends and relatives who now rest in the churchyard.

Encouraging a more natural aspect to the churchyard is a form of gardening, but gardening for wildlife. The greatest diversity will result from a carefully thought out and well-managed churchyard, comprising a mosaic of opportunities for plants and animals to thrive. Basically diversity of ideas will result in diversity of wildlife.

The churchyard – current wildlife status:

The church occupies a more-or-less central position within the churchyard, which is largely laid to grass. A further area to the west of the building at the bottom of the churchyard is an extension burial area somewhat overgrown with nettle and other species and bordered by woodland edge. Similarly, on the northern side nettles have encroached over much of the area. In spring, apparently, both areas have splendid display of snowdrop, primrose, bluebell and other floristically attractive species.

The encroaching nettles were one point of concern raised by the CW, but are also a point of differing opinions with some people asking they be controlled while others want them to thrive for butterflies and other insects. In this location nettles are a perfect illustration that there is never one solution that pleases everyone. It is true that nettle is an extremely important plant for many species most obviously red admiral, small tortoiseshell, comma and peacock butterflies. On the other hand, they are highly invasive and rapidly spread if left unchecked, as is the case at Alfington. Just as the churchyard has to show a balance between the human activities and demands for space, so the flora has to be maintained to maximise diversity without compromising the main reason the churchyard exists, as a burial site and area for remembrance.

Wooden seating is provided at strategic points in the churchyard, mostly to the left of the entrance from the adjacent road. These benches have been constructed, 'in house' from recycled timber and. Innovatively, provide frameworks to contain bug hotels beneath the bench seats`

Log piles have been placed along the southern boundary and are beginning to become absorbed by the surrounding vegetation.

A small pond, bounded by logs has been established to attract dragonflies and provide a site for frogs and toads, which are known to inhabit the churchyard.

Challenges and opportunities:

1. **Nettles** – as mentioned above a concern among some parishioners are the nettles which are encroaching the churchyard grass sward. Nettles are one of the most useful plants for increasing biodiversity providing resting, egg laying and feeding opportunities for a wide range of invertebrates, not least the showier butterflies. However, they can be rapidly invasive and smother other shorter and less vigorous, but equally useful, plants. At Alfington there are two main areas where nettle growth impinges on the wider churchyard and also present a hazard to visitors – the area to the north of the church and the area of ‘new take’ at the western extremity. In any small area of land it becomes a question of balance: maintaining biodiversity opportunities while keeping them under control. I suggest that in both areas that the nettles are grubbed up (you have to remove the roots) to within a metre or so of the boundary fence in the northern sector and similar removal in the western ‘new take’ area. Perhaps a few nettle islands can also be left. This will enable the ground flora of snowdrop, primrose, bluebell etc to spring up and be seen, providing an accessible attractive feature in the churchyard.
2. **Brambles** – the same could be said for bramble, a useful hedgerow species which is a nectar source, a food resource and a very protected tangle in which to hide and/or hibernate. But like nettle, bramble needs to be controlled, so cutting back each year to maintain healthy growth and to prevent it taking over is an essential annual job. Coupled with honeysuckle and hazel in the northern part of the churchyard this mixed sanctuary is ideal for dormouse and other small mammals.
3. **Grass Cutting** – maintaining a managed sward to allow flowers to grow taller and to seed is also going to be more productive for biodiversity than cutting to within an inch of its life. Tall vegetation is the biggest cause of complaint from parishioners almost every churchyard, largely because it can mask tombstones and look unkempt, uncared for and neglected. Some taller vegetation is a boon to nature, but this does not mean the whole churchyard should become a jungle. As always it is about creating a cared-for mosaic, in much the same way as most gardens and divided for different growth regimes. So, having some cut areas, probably where people like to sit or stand after services and events, is to be encouraged, and will also encourage some of the lower growing plants, such as daisy, primrose, violet, wild strawberry, tormentil etc.

A good compromise where cutting is demanded is to leave small patches of taller growth as eco-islands, demarcated by a circle of logs or stones, in much the same way as flower beds in gardens. These are obviously there for a purpose, which can be explained by discrete notices.

The rule-of-thumb for cutting is a cut post-spring flowering and again before the winter, once the summer flowers have set seed. It is always desirable, though not always possible, to remove cuttings after a week or so once the seeds have dropped to reduce the soil fertility, as many grassland species thrive best in poorer soils, where invasive ‘domestic’ grasses cannot survive. However, each churchyard will be different, and climate change is messing up the traditional seasons, so observation over time will dictate when the best times are for cutting.

4. **Pond** - the CW was concerned that the pond did not appear as productive as had been hoped. The bigger the pond the more it is likely to attract, this is a very small pond. BUT even a small pond is better than no pond at all and given that it has only been in place for a few months it still needs time to get going. Small ponds easily fill with fallen leaves and clog and become noxious to aquatic life. An autumnal clean

will be beneficial, carefully retaining and amphibians or invertebrates in a bowl while cleaning takes place ensures a biological continuity.

5. **Pathways** – where areas are being left to grow up it is useful to demarcate pathways, in addition to those hard paths that are present. These should be kept cut to allow a meandering route through the churchyard, demonstrating that both they and the taller vegetation that may be left to grow are intentional, the perception you should always avoid is that of neglect as opposed to thoughtful management.

Paths through taller vegetation have the benefit that you show intent, that you can guide people where you want them to go and that you can avoid obstacles and potential trip hazards etc.

There will always be those who will complain that a particular grave is hidden amongst tall grass. The primary purpose of the churchyard is as a place to bury people and as a place of remembrance, so no one should be prevented from easy access to a particular burial plot. The simple answer is to cut paths to these spots when a request comes in.

6. **Hedges** – cutting is an essential activity to prevent boundary shrubs and trees from encroaching too much, but also to encourage health and vigour of the hedge. There is currently a nice diversity of species in the hedges, which provide, nectar and pollen, fruits and berries for food and shelter for a wide range of organisms. As with most hedges gaps have developed. These can be filled with native shrub species such as hawthorn, blackthorn, crab apple, rowan, guelder rose, spindle and perhaps dwarf varieties of apple and pear. Free hedgerow packs are available from the Woodland Trust. See [Free Trees for Schools and Communities - Woodland Trust](#)

Trimming hedges should, of course, always take place outside of the bird breeding season. However, hedges are also sites for many species of insect and other invertebrates that may feed on leaves and fruits, lay eggs, or hibernate among the branches and twigs. Rather than simply shaving a whole run of hedge a rotation approach may be better. The hedge run is divided into convenient lengths, and alternate sections are cut on a year on-year off basis. So over two years the whole hedge is cut, but in any one year the sectors left provide sanctuary and food for wildlife.

7. **Bug hotels and bird boxes** – The clever idea of combining seating and bug hotels in the sunnier part of the churchyard will pay dividends for wildlife. In addition, there is at least one other stand-alone bug hotel against the south facing wall of the church. Providing nesting and resting sites for solitary bees, solitary wasps and other harmless creatures is a quick win and while you do not want to convert the churchyard into a vast bug hotel complex, there may be room for a few more, especially at the bottom of the churchyard where a typical woodland edge habitat exists.

This area is also a good place to add more log piles in both sunny and shaded places.

Bird and bat boxes are an excellent and easy way of encouraging wildlife into the churchyard. Bird boxes come in a variety of designs, but those suitable for blue and great tits, for example, are simple to build and install (<https://www.rspb.org.uk/helping-nature/what-you-can-do/activities/build-a-birdbox>) In Alfington churchyard a few will rapidly be utilised, too many could cause conflict and competition.

Likewise, bat boxes are simple to build and position and would provide welcome roosting sites for a range of species. (go to Devon Wildlife Trust website – how to build a bat box).

There are plenty of places to install hedgehog nest and hibernation boxes under the denser hedge along the northern boundary. One or two of these, or even simply providing a pile of cut off branches and twigs should attract them to stay, I expect they visit already.

8. **Biblical herbs/sensory garden** – the south facing wall is a suntrap through most of the day and provides an ideal location, alongside the main pathway from the gate to the church porch. There is an opportunity to create an area or series of beds that feature heat and dry loving plants, which will attract many species of insect. Fortunately, there are many species of plants mentioned in the bible which are now commonplace in our gardens as aromatic herbs, which produce pleasant and evocative scents attractive to both wildlife and humans. And, they all have a story to tell. This south facing wall is adjacent to the seating area and shorter turf and so is the ideal place – what better on a warm day than to bask in the sun, inhale the delightful scents of herbs, listen to the buzz of insects visiting for nectar and watching the butterflies as they alight on sages, thymes, oregano, marjoram and other attractive flowers?

9. **Communication** – is essential to explain to naysayers why the churchyard is not trimmed to bowling green standards, and to garner support for the various projects you have in mind to further enhance the churchyard for wildlife. Word of mouth is always best so tell everyone and anyone what you are up to – share the enthusiasm.

Notices can be used to explain the *raison d'être* of your activities but avoid creating a forest of signs. Perhaps a main poster in the porch or close to the gate explaining the overall aim of encouraging nature into the churchyard, and a few scattered smaller signs to describe an eco-island or log pile etc, just helps to embrace more people and again demonstrate that you are managing by intent not neglect. There are many suppliers on-line such as www.sign-holders.co.uk. These are (unfortunately) made of plastic but are re-usable by simply producing a laminated slide-in sign, which can be removed and replaced as often as needed. They may, for example, be used to highlight a 'flower of the month', so the notice you produce can be slotted in, then removed to be replaced by another, the accumulated notices being reused year after year.

Talks to local groups, churchyard tours and notices in local outlets – village magazine, local newspapers etc will also prove beneficial.

10. **Planning** – what you want to achieve with realistic timelines is essential

- The first stage is to gather a group of like-minded individuals to form a work force. The low congregation makes this difficult but asking for help from the local community, even just an hour or so to join in with planting, cutting etc., should result in a regular group of volunteers.
- You will need a plan/map of the churchyard so that you can designate various areas for particular treatments – tall flowers, short turf, eco-islands etc – and stick to them. This need not be sophisticated cartography, a simple outline showing major features, footpaths, standing trees, position of benches, pond etc. You could do worse than tracing the outline from Google maps and using that as a basis.

- It is always ideal to plan the future based on what you already have. Detailed species lists is beyond most churches due to lack of expertise, but you can begin to catalogue what you have in the way of flowers, trees, shrubs, birds and butterflies. Every village has a bird watcher and an amateur botanist, some have butterfly fans, find them and encourage them to list what they see in the churchyard. At least recognising those areas that are obviously a-buzz with insects or ringing with bird song will show the areas you need to look after. These 'zones' can be included on the map of the churchyard.
- Once you have an idea what you want to do and where you want to do it, you can begin to create a forward strategy. Going forward five years sounds ambitious but need not be complicated. The further into the future the looser the plan will be. But you can set yourselves targets which have realistic time scales attached. For example, you may decide on a cutting regime, or hedge pruning that repeat each year, so you will know that in April (say) you want to cut the grass, and you will then be prepared to gather a group of volunteers to do it. Or, you may have to cut your paths through the taller vegetation on a more regular basis, once a month perhaps. It's not rocket science and always best to under promise and over perform. Review the plan on a regular basis to ensure you are on track – it just makes life easier.
- In all ways this is no different to planning what you will do in your own gardens.
- Where **voluntary labour** is used in your churchyards it is important that you record the number of volunteer man-hours worked. There is increasing interest in putting a measurement on the economic value of people giving time to the community. Strategic funding bodies are increasingly comfortable with accepting volunteer time as '**matched funding**' to support funding bids, and voluntary organisations can consider putting economic worth to volunteering that is supporting their work and their beneficiaries. Counting and measuring the worth of volunteering makes sure it is valued and given more priority in policy development. Suggested table:

Date	Task	No. of vols	Total man hours	Financial worth = Total man hours x £13.50/hr
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11. Concluding remarks:

- The churchyard at St James' and St Anne's, Alfington is relatively small but has great potential for enhancing the wildlife that already visits and lives among the trees, shrubs, hedges and tombstones.
- The group driving this initiative is small but enthusiastic and could attract further support through communicating its ideas to the wider community.
- Having a plan and sticking to it (albeit with a review each year) will make the best use of limited resources.
- Alfington is part of the Otter Vale Mission Community. Some of the other member churches are taking a similar approach to managing their churchyards so it makes sense to work together share experiences, and resources. Above all learn from each other.

- Let your wider community know what you are doing, invite them in, take advantage of whatever skills might be hidden away in the village. The second week in June each year is **“Love Your Burial Grounds Week”** which encourages churches to invite the local community to visit their local churchyard and view the diversity of wildlife through trails and guided walks. See: [**LOVE YOUR BURIAL GROUND WEEK - June 9-15, 2025 - National Today**](#)
- Running parallel to that is **“Count on Nature Week”** which is an annual Citizen Science scheme where people visit churchyards and record the plant and animal species they encounter. Find out more from the Exeter Diocese Environment web site during May.
- Please do get back in touch if you need further assistance – I intend to pop back to the Otter Vale churches in the spring so I will be able to add to your own observations.