

Living Churchyards

Churchyard ecology

Churchyards provide a sanctuary for wildlife, with little disturbance from people and a range of different mini-habitats. Mature trees along churchyard boundaries have a 'woodland fringe' feel, providing nesting and shelter for birds such as Long-tailed Tits, Goldcrests and Chiff-chaffs. Most churchyards have veteran Yew trees, often many centuries old, cherished originally as a source of timber for making bows (fig.1). Their berries provide important winter food for Blackbirds and Thrushes, with the poisonous seed passing through the bird to no ill effect! Yew seeds are hard to germinate unless partially digested by a bird first. In severe winters flocks of Redwings and Mistle Thrushes congregate in the Yews, feeding on berries and sheltering in the dense canopy.



Fig.1

Untidy corners may be the nesting sites for some of our shy woodland species, such as Blackcaps which nest in tangles of bramble



Fig.2

scrub. Brambles are the food plant for the caterpillars of Peacock and Tortoiseshell butterflies, whilst Speckled Wood and other butterflies will feed on over-ripe blackberries (fig. 2).

Grassy areas in churchyards are often particularly species-rich, the grassland being a remnant of the original fields before the churchyard was set up. These grassy areas have remained unfertilised and little disturbed which results in a good diversity of plant species. Many churchyards in East Devon support populations of Pyramidal and Bee orchids-species which are becoming rarer in the surrounding countryside. The grassland habitats may show characteristics of chalk grassland due in part to the alkaline stone used for headstones, and ornamental stone chippings surfacing the graves. Ox-eye daisies and Knapweed brighten the churchyard during the summer months, attracting moths and butterflies. Where the grass is allowed to grow longer the seed heads attract Goldfinches and other seed feeders (fig.3).



Fig.3

Headstones form mini-vertical cliffs, providing habitat for lichens and mosses. About 700 species of lichens are found in churchyards, one third of the UK list. Some rare lichens are now only found in churchyards: Churchyard Lecanographa, a form of *Lecanographa grumulosa*, is confined to plaster walls on ancient churches in southern England. Species of lichen vary according to the pH of the stone, but all are slow growing and can't easily move from site to site. Lichens can be used as indicators of air quality, with some species being susceptible to changes in chemicals in the air (such as ammonia from farming or sulphur dioxide from industry).

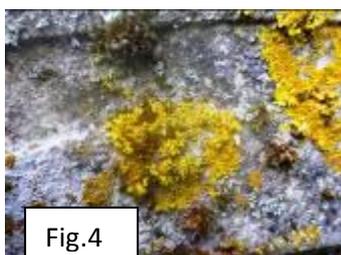


Fig.4

Bright orange lichen, *Caloplaca* (fig.4,) often grow where birds have been roosting as this species thrives where there is a high level of guano (bird faeces). Lichens result from a symbiotic relationship between a fungus and an alga.

Old stone walls often mark the boundary of churchyards, and have their own distinctive flora. Ferns flourish on the shady aspect, one of the most beautiful being Maidenhair Spleenwort (fig.5). This delicate little fern thrusts fine roots between the stones. Velvety brown patches on the back of the fronds release fine spores into the air.



Dainty Ivy-leaved Toadflax drapes walls with miniature ivy-like leaves (fig.6) and produces purple 'snap dragon' flowers throughout most of the year.



Cracks and crevices within the walls provide shelter for toads and harmless slow-worms. Female Glow-worms (the larvae of the beetle *Lampyrus noctiluca*) hide between fallen stones and gravel, emerging once darkness has fallen to emit a greenish light from their abdomen, in the hope of detecting a mate.



Ornamental marble chippings on graves provide a niche for English Stonecrop (fig.7), a plant which is found on dry, rocky slopes. This plant is not found in alkaline (limestone) habitats-marble is often slightly acidic.

Churchyards provide excellent hunting grounds for bats, old chapels and churches provide undisturbed, summer roosting sites. Of 17 native species of bats, 8 species are known to use churches for roosting, including less common species such as Greater and Lesser Horseshoe and Natterer's bat. Churchyards are dark, quiet, places to hunt; with a lack of chemical spraying encouraging good insect populations.

Churchyards provide an oasis for wildlife within an intensively managed landscape. They provide a corridor between patches of habitat and a last refuge for some of our rarest species. We should cherish our 'Living Churchyards'.

Pat Farrell, East Devon AONB

Further reading:

<http://www.thebls.org.uk/content/churchyard.html>

<http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/uploads/Fact%20Sheet%2014%20-%20Bats.pdf>

http://www.cornwallwildlifetrust.org.uk/conservation/Living_landscapes/Cornwall_Living_churchyards_wildlife_lichens