The majority of church buildings have some green space attached to them. Sometimes, and most particularly in urban areas, the churchyard may be the only green ‘breathing’ space in a bustling locality. There are so many ways in which the churchyard can serve its community.

Many centuries ago, before gravestones were erected to mark burial plots, the churchyard was a very different place to the one we recognise now. It was most definitely a place where the sacred and secular met. The North side of the churchyard was sometimes unconsecrated and this allowed for sports and markets and informal activity – a place where the community socialised and congregated.

These days many visitors to our churches don’t venture as far as the church door so an encounter with the churchyard may be the only contact they have with the church itself. Many visitors will be tending graves or leaving flowers – for them the churchyard is a particularly personal place to be and they feel connected to the churchyard as burial ground. The space has a particular personal resonance for them as a safe haven and a resting place.

Other visitors will be looking for different things. They may be researching their family history so burials of ancestors may have brought them to your church. They may be interested in wildlife or they may simply be looking for a place to sit and enjoy the surroundings, the stillness and peace that most churchyards can offer.

For the church community the act of sharing the space is a simple way of connecting with strangers or visitors. It is an opportunity to be hospitable, to share information, to be inviting, to engage with the community through projects and to be creative in inviting others to learn more about the church, its history and role in the community over the centuries.

**Recording the Stones**

Graveyards and burial grounds are useful places for those researching their family history and it isn’t always easy to interpret the wording or inscriptions on gravestones and memorials. Neither is it always possible to inspect historic registers at churches – visitors may have to be signposted to the local Records Office – so many congregations are
surveying their churchyard in order to provide visitors with really useful information. Once the results have been mapped and collated the document can be left on the visitor table or put on your church’s website as a downloadable resource.

This exercise will also help you to highlight stories of those who have lived and worked in your community and will put flesh on the bones of any story-telling you undertake when you share the story of how your church and parish have evolved and grown over the centuries.

Carrying out a research project like this can involve the whole community and encourage those who have never visited your church before to come along and take part. Talk to your Local History Society and ask them if they would be willing to help with this.


Do take care when investigating the stones themselves by following the guidelines on the Churchcare site at [www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/guidance-advice/looking-after-your-church/churchyards](http://www.churchcare.co.uk/churches/guidance-advice/looking-after-your-church/churchyards)

If in doubt ask your DAC Secretary for advice and, as a rule, take care not to disturb habitat as this could be destructive to wildlife.

‘The Good Gravestone Recording Pack’ from the Churches Conservation Trust is also recommended but not available to download. You can order it for £5 from [www.visitchurches.org.uk](http://www.visitchurches.org.uk)

Even if your church is closed to visitors during the week you could display a graveyard plan on the noticeboard or in the porch.

**Encouraging Biodiversity in the Churchyard**

Not all parishes have a true picture of the biodiversity hidden away in their churchyards. There are native species of plants and wildlife that thrive specifically in these places and many will have been growing or living undisturbed for many years.

‘Caring for God’s Acre’, a Diocese of Hereford initiative, has been helping parishes to understand and share their churchyards. The wildlife, ecology and seasonal changes in your churchyard will appeal to visitors and communities throughout the year and you’ll find tips on how to manage yours and share it with others on the resources page of their website at [http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/](http://www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/)

Surveying the ground and recording what can be seen at different times of the year will help you to understand the extent of the biodiversity you have in your care as well as highlighting areas where you might improve.
Establishing a wild-life garden

Many congregations have come to realise the value of reserving an area of their churchyard as a wildlife garden. Some are still resistant to this as it can look neglected and ill-cared for. A successful wildlife area needs careful management and a mowing regime has to be established. Committing to a space for wild-life in your churchyard will encourage all kinds of species to make a home.

Many parishes still aspire to and enjoy the sight of a beautifully manicured churchyard— and relatives still need easy access to leave flowers or to tend the plot – but most churchyards can find a dedicated place for encouraging varied species to thrive throughout the year.

Even if your church building is closed to visitors outside of worship times you might consider using the porch as a place to display information about the species that can be found in the churchyard to help with identification. Using a timeline will also help to explain the seasonal nature of the plants and flowers to be found there.

The Birds and the Bees

Over the last 70 years many kinds of bees have become scarce. To help slow this decline you could grow particular species of plants in the churchyard that flower successively throughout the season, like berberis, bluebell, rosemary, lavender and buddleia. A useful book to invest in to help with this would be ‘Wildlife in Church and Churchyard’ by Nigel Cooper ISBN 0-7151-7587-4 £9.95.

To encourage a wider range of birds to the churchyard you might think about introducing bird boxes and planting particular shrubs that provide shelter and food.

Lichens

Good churchyards may have up to 100 different lichens living on the trees and the stonework found in the churchyard. When studied through a powerful magnifying glass they are fascinating and very beautiful.

The British Lichen Society has lots of tools for recording and identifying lichens as do the Natural History Museum.

Community Projects

Your local Wildlife Trust will have a Community Project Officers and they can support you as you develop ideas to share your churchyard with others. They may come along and help you with a Churchyard Discovery Day or plan a diversity survey that your entire community can participate in. Try your local Wildlife Trust website.

Churches we have worked with over the years report a real benefit in holding a ‘Churchyard Discovery Day’ where people of all ages have come together to make and install bird or bat boxes and carry
out surveys. ‘Caring for God’s Acre’ again have excellent resources to help you to plan activities for children and young people. Contact local branches of the RSPB or the Conservation Volunteer network to identify locals with real knowledge who may be able to help you to organise a community project.

**Useful Links and Resources**

**The Conservation Foundation** website includes, among other things, details of the Yew Registration Project. The Foundation aims to encourage us all to be more aware of national initiatives and resources.

**Shrinking the Footprint** The Church of England’s very own website focussing on environmental issues encouraging us to look at ways in which we all – as individuals and as church communities – can measure our carbon footprint and, more importantly, take action.

**Cherishing your Churchyard** is an initiative that takes place every June through the Caring for God’s Acre project.


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**Updated February 2014**

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