

## Article for the Church newsletter July 2024

You may have noticed that the conservation project at the churchyards in Croydon has been making progress. We have applied for the silver award from the Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire Wildlife Trust and the judges will be visiting the site in August or September.

We now have an agreed Management Plan together with a calendar and diagram which have been submitted to the Wildlife Trust by the Parish Church Council as part of the application for the silver award. These are available on request. They are works in progress but enjoy broad agreement and a common sense of direction. The Management Plan seems quite lengthy but has lots of photos! Importantly it also has a lot of detail. We are on a learning curve and there are numerous variables to be taken into account, such as the weather, which mean we have to implement the plan in a flexible and creative way, but always with the key principles in mind:

- The conservation project is within a burial ground and primarily is a place of peace and reflection. Access to the graves and safety take priority.
- Maintenance of the graves and the fabric of the church building has precedence over promoting biodiversity.
- We seek to promote a balanced ecosystem which optimises biodiversity wherever possible across both churchyards. This includes the restriction of invasive species.
- We will undertake to record the diversity of species throughout the year and from one year to another so that the impact of the project can be monitored based on evidence.
- The project is inclusive and welcomes questions and discussion to further its aims. It is part of the church's commitment to responding to the climate crisis, details of which can be found on the Diocese of Ely website.
- The project is co-ordinated by volunteers in collaboration with the PCC.
- We will engage in educational events, including ongoing assessment and discussion with the PCC, so that the aims and principles of the project are widely understood. For example, we plan to have a stall at the Car Show on 8th September.

Mostly, a conservation project requires judicious non-interference with nature but the need for good planning particularly relates to the timing of mowing and strimming, undertaken by volunteers and some contract work (paid for jointly by the PCC and the PC) which can either promote or reduce biodiversity. Sometimes an invasive species needs to be controlled (brambles, bindweed) but premature cutting of flowers in bloom will prevent seeds being set for following years.

Leaving the meadows until the flowers have set seed can mean that the churchyards look a bit messy towards the end of a flowering season but this is all part of the seasonal management of the ecosystems. Insects and butterflies are particularly in need of early and late flowering plants as a continuing food source. There are different areas within the project with different cutting regimes, so that we can encourage Spring flowers (south of the old churchyard), Summer flowers (north of the old churchyard), a mixed flower meadow in the new churchyard - uncut from March to late Summer, areas of lower level flower growth which receive more light (around the notice board in the old

churchyard and the top of the new churchyard around the burials and cremation area), and a wildlife corridor between the mown path and the fence adjacent to the 'car show field' designed to create a specific linear habitat for species which move across the landscape such as hedgehogs. There are also young saplings planted along this corridor which need special care especially in dry conditions. Having these differentiated areas means that we optimise the range of habitats to suit a greater diversity of species.

The precise timing of cuts cannot be according to set dates and depends on observation of the conditions, but within a window such as early Spring (before the end of March) or late Summer (August/September). The 'no mow May' and 'let it bloom June' are a good guide for the height of the growing season for wildflowers, but in this conservation project we want to be more finely tuned than that, stretching the flowering season from March to September with a July cut in the Spring meadow in the South of the old churchyard.

The conservation project is open to everyone, it is on our doorstep in the village and the churchyard is a very special place for many of us. The flower meadow in the new churchyard will be mown in late Summer when we have a dry spell and the cuttings need to be left for a few days so the flower seeds can fall, then the hay collected and removed to the compost heaps. This is to reduce the fertility in the ground so that the grass doesn't dominate and restrict the growth of the wildflowers. Many hands make light work and it is fun if more people are involved so if you can help please look out for messages and come along with a rake or pitchfork and if you have one, a wheelbarrow. We have recorded over 70 species of wildflower and grasses in the churchyards. There are also interesting lichens, numerous insects and butterflies, small mammals, invertebrates and nesting birds. We hope to develop our understanding of how these species are interdependent and how we can support them by creating multiple ecosystems and diverse habitats. We will be counting the butterflies in the churchyard when we have a sunny day in the next week or so, as part of the national butterfly count, and I will send a message out when we are doing this. Butterflies are very much diminished this year, due to the excessive rainfall in recent months, highlighting how important it is to protect the habitats for those that have survived.

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