

# Newcastle & North Tyneside Living Churchyards



# Living Churchyards

Churchyards are important places for people but they can also be important areas for wildlife too. Even in our busy cities these habitats remain largely undisturbed and numerous plants and animals have space to thrive. So, what is often a peaceful place for contemplation can also become a haven for wildlife.

## Why are churchyards special for wildlife?

Churchyards provide an important and undisturbed refuge for wildlife as they often contain a range of habitats such as species rich grasslands, ponds, hedgerows, woodland and scrub. They can support a diverse array of wildlife from insects and micro-organisms, small mammals and amphibians to a range of breeding birds. Church buildings can also be important nest sites for species under threat, such as swifts, swallows, barn owls and bats

It's important to remember that a churchyard managed for wildlife does not thrive on neglect. A churchyard managed with sympathy and understanding for wildlife can look well cared for and be attractive to people as well as wildlife. Management for wildlife can have other benefits including the need for less labour, reducing in particular the burden of very frequent grass mowing.



## Grassland habitat



Many species rich wildflower meadows have been lost through development, land intensification and inappropriate management. Churchyards and Cemeteries can often be important areas for grassland habitats as cover and food for a range of wildlife such as butterflies, bees, small mammals and amphibians.

It is important that these grasslands are managed appropriately with an annual end of summer cut and removal of the grass clippings to ensure nutrient levels remain low.

### Woodlands and hedgerows

Trees, shrubs and hedgerows are often associated with churchyards, providing an important source of food, shelter, and nesting sites throughout the year for birds, bats, mammals and insects. They can also support mature and veteran trees, considered to be in the ancient stage of their lives and therefore important biologically, culturally and aesthetically.

The timing of woodland management is extremely important to ensure that any pruning is undertaken outside of the bird nesting season (March-August). Trees can also provide important hibernation sites for protected species such as bats, therefore, before carrying out any work, mature trees or trees with cracks, holes or splits in the bark should be checked for bats.



### Compost heaps & Log Piles

Compost heaps provide habitat for fungi and invertebrates which in turn become food for frogs, toads, slow worms and birds. Grass snakes and hedgehogs may also hibernate in the heap due to its warmth.

Log piles also provide vital habitats for fungi, insects, amphibians and small mammals such as hedgehogs. Create a log pile in a hidden corner of a churchyard by utilising logs and branches from tree pruning work.

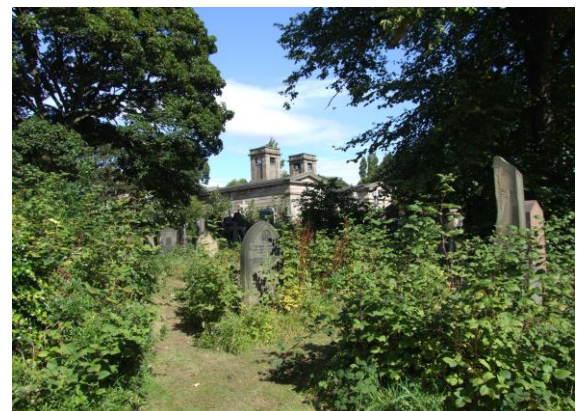
### Ponds

Small ponds or marshy areas can be created within churchyards and cemeteries and provide perfect habitat for frogs, toads and dragonflies. Pond edges can be planted with native aquatic plants to provide food for wildlife and to help oxygenate the pond.

Pond management should be carried out in the winter when amphibians are in hibernation away from the pond.

### Gravestones and stone walls

Gravestones are important for lichens and mosses, which vary according to the type of stone, its age and its exposure to the sun and weather. Lichens are slow growing and long lived, some as old as the gravestone itself. Mosses and lichen should be left untouched if possible, as they do no harm to the stone.



### Church Buildings & Structures

Church buildings are becoming increasingly important roosting and nesting sites for bats and birds as other habitats in our urban environment are lost. A survey by the Bat Conservation Trust estimated that almost 6400 churches and chapels in England may be

occupied by bats. All species of British bat are protected by law and you must seek advice before carrying out any work likely to affect areas where bats occur.

### Wildlife Sites

Some churchyards are designated as Local Wildlife Sites due to their nature conservation interest. They play a vital role in the conservation of the UK's natural heritage. For help with surveys, information on Wildlife Sites and advice on management see contacts below.

### Top tips

- Maintain wildflower areas by cutting once annually and removing grass cuttings
- Pathways to and around the church, and those to tended places should be kept mown, together with access to compost heaps.
- Leave small plants/lichens on walls and monuments.
- Erect bird and bat boxes to increase nesting habitat
- Don't carry out tree or hedge work in the bird nesting season (March-August)
- Inspect trees for bats prior to undertaking pruning work.
- Site compost heaps away from trees and botanically rich areas.
- Ivy should be left on walls and trees as it provides nesting sites and a late source of nectar for insects.
- Don't use chemicals.
- Maintain ponds over winter when amphibians are hibernating.



### Contacts

For further help and assistance contact:

- Newcastle City Council's Ecologist  
Tel: 0191 277 7195
- North Tyneside's Ecologist  
Tel: 0191 643 7279
- Northumberland Wildlife Trust  
Tel: 0191 284 6884