

Compton churchyard management plan

Compton church and its PCC have a valuable building in its care, the product of a long history of Christianity in the parish. But it has another important asset that is also the product of the 1000+ years of worship on the site. It is the piece of rare and important ancient grassland that constitutes the graveyard.

Like ancient woodlands, ancient grassland takes many centuries to develop and gain their characteristically high diversity of plant species. And, like ancient woodlands, they cannot be created simply by planting a diversity of different species. Since the Second World War, when the country was under pressure to produce food, much of the country's previously unimproved meadow and pasture has been ploughed, spread with artificial fertilisers and doused with weed killers.



This has had the effect of destroying very many diverse and valuable habitats. Consequently, such has been the pressure to increase food production, it is only in the very few places where the plough cannot reach that unspoilt, semi-natural grassland survives.

Some of these important survivals are churchyards and, apart from the occasional disturbance of a grave, many have not been dug or ploughed for many centuries.

Left to its own devices, grassland will revert to woodland in the space of a few decades (as has happened with Compton Common) so churchyards were maintained to prevent this from happening. In times past, the grass was scythed for hay in early summer, whilst at other times of the year animals were allowed to graze the sward because the produce of the churchyard was one of the perquisites of the rector. It is rare now for churchyards to be managed in that way and machines are used to mow them.



Meadow saxifrage

In some places, inappropriate management regimes have caused these ancient sites to be damaged beyond recovery, an act often accompanied by the removal of the grave stones to make it easier to cut the grass. Indeed, a few places have also been treated with weed killers in a misguided attempt to create a smooth featureless lawn that is held up as the ideal by lawnmower and fertiliser manufacturers. This not only destroys a rare habitat but the historical integrity of the churchyard is also lost.

Fortunately, Compton has mostly escaped such vandalism. The church and its graveyard have been in existence since before the Norman Conquest, for at least 1000 years, and over that millennium it has become a place of rare and fragile beauty which has a great many plant species in its sward; not just grasses but flowering plants and mosses.

In early May there are many plants flowering there. Bluebells lurking in the shade and lady's smock growing in the damp areas. The meadow saxifrage and bulbous buttercups are bobbing in the sunlight whilst the luminescent greens of the deep, spongy mosses are showing through the grass in the shady, south west corner of the yard.

But it doesn't stop there because churchyards have a diverse flora also support other wildlife: insects, lizards, slow worms, bats and birds abound.

Compton's churchyard, like so many others, is a haven for wildlife and a delicate, peaceful place.

For more information about the ecological importance of churchyards, visit: www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

A new management plan for the churchyard

In early 2021, the Parochial Church Council resolved to adopt a management plan to conserve the churchyard and Sally has designed a notice to be displayed there. Her poem is a distillation of the most important part of the plan which, it is hoped, will bring forth more spring flowers over the coming years:



The plan

1. To maintain and encourage the spring flowering plants, the grass should be inspected in late June, to see if the flowers have spread their seed. In 2021, the western edge of the yard was mown but the rest left as flowers were continuing to appear, notably lesser stitchwort, lady's bedstraw and self heal. Seasons vary so the time of this first cut may vary from year to year. The churchyard may begin to look a little scruffy at that time so tidy the path edges and place notices explaining that it is a managed conservation area.

An area on the north side of the church was cut in late May 2021 to accommodate outdoor services.

2. Mow the grass every four weeks after the first cut until the end of the season as this will discourage the coarse grasses. Cutting areas to different lengths benefits wildlife by providing variety. Some areas further from the path and church should be cut to 4 inches but other areas can be shorter. Under no circumstances should the cut go down to bare earth.

3. Always remove the cuttings.

4. Leave some areas of tall flowering grasses around the perimeter until they have seeded.

5. Remove unwanted non-native and invasive plants before they flower - certainly before they seed.

6. Nothing from outside the churchyard is to be planted or seeded anywhere within the boundary wall.

7. Clear ivy and brambles from the ground as they creep onto the sward, gradually destroying it. Mowing will prevent them from returning. This is a particular problem under the yew tree on the south west perimeter of the churchyard. Also remove the elder bushes and other shrubs that have seeded in that area and cut the low branches from the yew to let in more light to encourage the sward.

8. Turf will be removed when the new path is built on the north side of the church. This can be used to cover the bare earth by the north boundary wall.

9. Clear the ivy, brambles and shrubs from all memorials as they cause damage to the structure by forcing apart the stones.

10. Leave mosses and lichens in place.

11. Do not use herbicides, fertilisers or pesticides.

12. Survey the churchyard several times each year to identify the plants and monitor changes. This will inform adjustments to the plan and enable us to deal more specifically with different areas.

Compton churchyard flora

Found in the churchyard in the spring/early summer 2021

Alkanet

Black medic

Bluebell

Bulbous buttercup

Common groundsel

Cow parsley

Cow parsnip

Curled dock

Daisy

Dandelion

Dove's foot cranesbill

Feverfew

Field forget-me-not

Field wood rush

Germander speedwell

Goosegrass

Greater celandine

Ground ivy

Harebell

Herb robert

Hoary plantain

Lady's bedstraw

Lady's smock

Meadow saxifrage

Purple archangel

Red clover

Self heal

Smallflower hawksbeard
Sorrell
Sticky chickweed
Stinging nettle
Sun spurge
Teasel
Thyme leaved sandwort
White clover
Wood forget-me-not
Yarrow

Grasses:

Barren Brome
Cock's foot
Common bent
Creeping bent
Perennial rye grass
Sweet vernal grass
Timothy grass
Yorkshire fog