

MANAGING CLOSED CHURCHYARDS



Credit: Holy Trinity Frome

LAND

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Closed Churchyards

WHAT?

What is a closed churchyard?

A closed churchyard is a Church of England burial ground that no longer has the capacity for further planned burials and, as such, has been termed 'closed'. The closure of a churchyard brings to an end the formal right of burial for parishioners (apart from individual vaults or graves which have been reserved by faculty).¹

When a churchyard is closed, responsibility for the maintenance of the churchyard is then transferred to a local parish or district council.²

There is varying influence churches with closed churchyards may have over how their churchyard is managed. Some churches have built a relationship with their local council over time and found a good system to influence changes in their churchyards. If this has not been pursued, we encourage you to follow this route if your churchyard is closed. This will allow you to have influence where you can in helping your churchyard be managed for the good of nature.

¹ www.aylesburyvaledc.gov.uk/sites/default/files/page_downloads/Closed-Churchyards-Management-Plan2015.pdf

² www.gov.uk/government/publications/apply-to-close-a-churchyard



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WHY?

Why should we seek to influence our closed churchyards?

As one of our Eco Churches (St James' Alveston, who achieved their Bronze Award in 2018) describes on their website:

"Churchyards are usually areas of ground that have remained uncultivated for many years, and as such, they have the potential to be havens for wildlife where plants and animals can thrive among the graves and monuments. Indeed, until the 20th century, they were wild, un-mown places, alive with bees and butterflies, occasionally even grazed by sheep! In the 21st century, properly and sympathetically managed churchyards can again become places of wild beauty and tranquillity, surrounding us with the comforting reminder of the ongoing life and vitality of God's creation, even amidst the sadness we feel at the passing of our loved ones."

As an Eco Church, we encourage you to have influence over any land you have access to, so that it can be managed for the good of nature. We also encourage you to consider including the land section of the survey in your award application – even if you have a closed churchyard. Including the land section can be a helpful way to document what is already being done and explore potential future changes. If you don't already have any influence over your churchyard's management, we encourage you to get in touch with your local council to explore the possibilities. We've included some case studies in a separate document for inspiration.



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Barriers churches may face

One of the main concerns churches have expressed is that councils require churchyards to be neat and tidy. They need to adhere to health and safety measures, not bring in pests, and be suitable places for members of the public to walk through and spend time in.

The government guide for burial ground managers, suggests the following: "Burial grounds which seek to provide a haven for wildlife should be cultivated with [the above] in mind. It is important to emphasise that an environmentally-sensitive burial ground is not an overgrown or unkempt one and that the maintenance efforts required may be just as challenging as for a lawn cemetery. Although a different type of mowing regime will be required (less grass cutting and horticultural maintenance can be expected), the need to maintain hard structures remains, and there will still be a need to provide for proper litter and rubbish disposal."³

It is possible to manage our churchyards in a way that supports wildlife without it being unruly or overgrown. Informing members of the public about what you are doing can also help them to understand why certain areas of the churchyard might appear more 'wild' than others. For instance, St Mary's Church, Wendover put up these helpful signs informing visitors that certain parts of the churchyard are conservation areas (this is just for reference and included as an example – as this church doesn't have a closed churchyard). You could also take inspiration from the Blue Heart campaign for churchyard signage: bluecampaignhub.com/about-us

³ assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/326370/burial-ground-managers.pdf



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HOW?

Churchyard Management

Take a look at the resources Caring for God's acre has created on churchyard management to inform and inspire you. Having basic knowledge of churchyard management may help you feel confident speaking to your local council: www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/resources/

Managing churchyards and burial grounds

These resources include topics like caring for grasslands, practical management of trees and shrubs, caring for stone walls and metal, creating a wildflower meadow, long grass and grass cuttings, and managing plants and animals that can be difficult in churchyards, such as moles and badgers: www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/resources/action-pack/section-a-managing-churchyards-burial-grounds/

Creating havens for wildlife

This section includes advice for various mammals, insects, birds, fungi and more, as well as how to do a wildlife survey: www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/resources/action-pack/havens-for-wildlife/

Involving people

This section of resources includes advice on involving volunteers, health and safety, accessibility, and applying for grants: www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/resources/action-pack/action-pack-section-d-involving-people/

Creating a land management plan

Take a look at our Eco Church resource to support you in creating a land management plan: ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Land13-Management-plan.pdf



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Practical steps to help churches to get started

- Find out the status of your churchyard – has it been designated as a closed churchyard?
- Seek support and input from relevant parties e.g. not just the local council but who else might have an interest? From local green or wildlife groups to dog walkers who use the churchyard to those in the church/local community who might wish to be involved. Consider – what's the bigger picture?
- Assess what is on the site e.g. partaking in a bioblitz, doing a survey such as Churches Count on Nature. See our resource on wildlife and wildflower surveys: ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Land8-Wildlife-and-wildflower-surveys.pdf
- Agree on a plan to manage the site. See our resource on creating a land management plan: ecochurch.arocha.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Land13-Management-plan.pdf
- Find volunteers to help manage the project
- Communicate what is going on e.g. through signage in the churchyard, social media or website posts, local or parish newsletters. See this great example from St Mary's Church, Eaton Socon, who share what they have been doing in their closed churchyard, along with their land management plans: www.eatonsocon.org/churchyard/



*Wildlife Conservation
Area signage by St Mary's
Church, Wendover.*

See our accompanying case studies for inspiration, provided by awarded Eco Churches with closed churchyards.