

Churchyards and Cemeteries

Habitat Action Plan

“Cemeteries and various forms of memorial gardens are one of the defining characteristics of cities. For social, psychological and environmental reasons the cemetery provides a unique urban sanctuary and habitat for humans, flora and fauna.” (Ken Worpole, 2001, comments on action plan draft)

1. Aims

- To develop a strategic approach to the protection, management and enhancement of the nature conservation value of cemeteries and churchyards.
- To respect the primary purpose of cemeteries and churchyards, which is that of burial and as a space to accommodate grieving visitors.
- To secure the involvement of all London's faiths and communities in the conservation of churchyards and cemeteries, by raising awareness.

2. Introduction

Churchyards and cemeteries are collectively called burial grounds in this Action Plan. They make a significant contribution to the provision of urban greenspace in London, offering a quiet sanctuary for both people and wildlife. They therefore represent a real opportunity for new kinds of conservation and green space policy. Cemeteries can provide some of the functions of parks and, unlike parks, the reassuring presence of people is generally guaranteed. Some are visited by significant numbers of tourists, and they can be important to family history researchers. But this Action Plan recognises the prime purpose of burial ground is for burial of the dead, their veneration and commemoration, and many people desire memorials to be maintained with readable inscriptions.

Churchyards are burial grounds associated with an identifiable church building. Some churches have also established extensions and detached burial grounds to provide additional space. Many of these 'church gardens' have since been turned into public gardens, and where information exists, will be included in the action plan. On becoming full, maintenance (but not ownership) of many Church of England burial grounds devolves to the Local Authority. Consequently, the Local Authority must defer to the Church in matters of management.

The majority of cemeteries are interdenominational burial grounds in municipal or private ownership found outside the confines of a religious meeting place.

London's larger cemeteries contain a wide variety of habitats, including grassland, woodland, scrub and occasionally wetland. Species associated with London's burial grounds include woodland edge species such as bats, stag beetle, spotted flycatcher, tawny owl and song thrush, as well as holly blue, speckled wood and orange tip butterflies. The gravestones, monuments and walls of burial grounds provide an unusual 'masonry habitat' which may host ferns, invertebrates and lichens. Fungi and mosses are also a feature of certain burial grounds.

3. Current Status

There are about 168 cemeteries in Greater London, covering nearly 1300 ha or 1% of the total land area. In inner London boroughs, cemetery land often forms a significant proportion of the overall area of open space.

The distribution of burial grounds in Greater London relates to the changing burial needs of the city over the last two centuries. Churchyards and burial grounds in central London were adequate for burial needs until the early 19th century. The 'Magnificent Seven' privately funded cemeteries were then authorised by Parliament to overcome the problems of overcrowded city churchyards. Kensal Green Cemetery was opened in 1832. The other six are West Norwood, Highgate, Nunhead, Abney Park, Brompton and Tower Hamlets. The seven were large and well landscaped. Most of these became neglected when burial space was used up, taken over by woodland and subject to vandalism.

The later public cemeteries are less lavish and lie in suburbia. Most of these are regularly maintained by the local authorities. Interspersed with these and right out into the Green Belt are the churchyards of former villages now within London.

It is not yet possible to ascertain Greater London's churchyard resource. From the data available, it is clear that churchyards represent a relatively minor resource in terms of land area. Their importance for biodiversity relates not just to individual site value, but also to their distribution throughout London and their contribution to the green space network.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Habitat

4.1 Lack of resources

Evidence given to a Select Committee on Cemeteries implied that cemeteries are widely believed to be the 'cinderella' service of local government. It also highlighted that cemeteries are not currently a priority category under any National Lottery funding schemes. Thankfully some authorities do place an importance on both the cemeteries and commitment to nature conservation.

The lack of appropriate funding and status could imply that cemetery managers are too hard-pressed with minimising maintenance costs to consider nature conservation improvements. Church councils often face similar resource constraints in managing churchyards. Conversely, the Cemetery Research Group in York suggests that burial

choice for the bereaved is increasingly being acknowledged as good practice, for example, the then Institute of Burial and Cremation Administration (IBCA) produced a 'Charter for the Bereaved'.

However, new, 'wildlife-friendly' practices are appearing such as 'green burial' and, in one cemetery run by a charitable trust, the Scandinavian practice of creating more private 'rooms' within the cemetery bordered by hedges. Some managers may therefore be quite interested in making biodiversity enhancements, particularly if suitable training is provided.

Notably the Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management (ICCM, formerly known as IBCA) as part of the Charter of the Bereaved distribute annually a Best Value Assessment Process to members. The process now has over one hundred burial authority members and includes reference to many initiatives involving nature conservation in cemeteries. Best Value may be the best opportunity to advocate more sustainable management.

4.2 Shortage of burial space

London is now close to exhausting its supply of burial space. A few new cemeteries are proposed and new-style 'woodland burials' are beginning to take place. The Home Office consulted on a review of burial law in 2004 and raised the issue of the re-use of graves. This situation presents new opportunities but also risks for nature conservation. A management plan should be a pre-requisite to safeguard areas of historic and biodiversity interest.

Shortage of burial space has led to practices such as squeezing new graves between old ones or onto road and path verges, and mounding soil on top of old plots to allow new burials to take place. This could have adverse effects on the nature conservation value of the site. The shortage of burial space in inner London also means visitors may have to travel long distances to visit grave plots and the personal link between a community and its local burial site is lost. Ken Worple, author of 'Cemetery in the City', believes that we should plan for new cemeteries in order to maintain this link.

Faiths differ in their customs concerning cremation and burial, and therefore their need for burial space.

4.3 Management

A general preference for neatness and order in the urban landscape, or even restoration of an original cemetery landscape design, can make management for biodiversity unwelcome. For example, research has shown that whilst many regular visitors to cemeteries value the peaceful and private qualities of cemeteries partly supplied by nature, they do not want to wade through long grass to reach graves.

Health and Safety legislation requires burial authorities to maintain cemeteries ensuring they are safe places for the public to visit. This introduces the need to regularly test memorials to ensure that they are structurally safe. Unchecked growth of vegetation on monuments can cause severe physical damage therefore management compromise must be sought.

However, burial authorities can satisfy the above criteria whilst maintaining commitment to nature conservation. Examples include introducing biodiversity schemes on unburied areas of the cemeteries, involving various associated conservation groups, and placing signs around the cemetery explaining such schemes to the public. The latter is vital in helping introduce nature conservation programmes without adverse criticism.

4.4 Development pressure

Existing legislation relating to cemeteries and dating back to 1847 allows private cemeteries to be sold for development. Under the Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977, grave monuments in municipal cemeteries, unless listed by the Secretary of State, may have no legal protection against removal and destruction. This has allowed clearances of older sections of cemeteries, destroying both historic and nature conservation interest.

5. Current Action

5.1 Legal status

Currently, the total area of cemetery protected in Unitary Development Plans as non-statutory Sites of Importance for Nature Conservation (SINC) is 769ha, about 56% of the total area of cemeteries in London. Cemeteries identified as Sites of Metropolitan Importance for Nature Conservation in their own right are Highgate, Abney Park, Kensal Green, Nunhead, Tower Hamlets and Morden Cemeteries. Old Barnes Cemetery and Becontree Cemetery form part of much larger Metropolitan Sites.

No churchyards are at present classified as being of Metropolitan Importance, apart from one small churchyard within the Epping Forest site. In September 2004, Seventy Seven churchyards were classified as Sites of Borough or Local Importance for Nature Conservation, in many cases as part of larger sites. This figure did not include miscellaneous burial grounds

Further protection may be offered to cemeteries and churchyards through Local Nature Reserve declaration; and through policies in Unitary Development Plans (only 4 boroughs currently have policies relating to cemeteries).

A number of churchyards and cemeteries are included in English Heritage's 'Register of parks and gardens of special historic interest' and others are within local authority Conservation Areas. The historical asset of grave monuments and their inscriptions is increasingly being recognised and many are now being listed by the Secretary of State for Culture Media and Sport.

5.2 Mechanisms Targeting the Habitat

These current actions are ongoing. They need to be supported and continued in addition to the new action listed under Section 7.

5.2.1 Voluntary involvement

Several London cemeteries have active Friends groups that, in addition to fund-raising, historical and nature conservation work, run education programmes and training

schemes. The National Federation of Cemetery Friends acts as an information exchange and lobbying body, allowing London groups to benefit from work elsewhere and vice versa. The London Wildlife Trust also works to promote cemeteries and churchyards through publications, walks, talks and managing two churchyards. However, Health & Safety considerations are beginning to limit the involvement of volunteers.

The former Living Churchyard and Cemeteries Project published advisory publications, ran open days and began a project on cemetery management. The Alliance of Religions and Conservation is currently trying to revive the Project.

5.2.2 Government

The House of Commons select committee cemeteries report (2001) made a number of recommendations relating to nature conservation. In brief, these were that cemetery managers should evaluate the biodiversity potential of their cemeteries and manage accordingly, that the Living Churchyard and Cemetery Project should continue, and that English Heritage and English Nature should develop special assessment procedures.

A number of other government initiatives may assist with biodiversity conservation of cemeteries. For example, the Audit Commission is reviewing performance indicators, the Home Office has committed to researching basic statistics on the nation's cemeteries, English Heritage is engaged in a Cemeteries Review project, and a new government advisory group is being formed to disseminate guidelines on training and management plans for cemeteries.

Local authorities often also play an active role, despite a decline in resources.

5.2.3 Professional organisations

Cemetery managers and other cemetery-related professions may belong to a number of organisations, many of which are sympathetic to nature conservation management objectives. These include the Association of Burial Authorities (ABA), the Board of Deputies of British Jews (BDBJ), the Memorial Awareness Board (MAB), the Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC), the Confederation of Burial Authorities (CBA), the Council for the Care of Churches (CCC), the Natural Death Centre (NDC) and the Institute of Burial and Cremation Administration (IBCA).

A diversity of choice for the bereaved is increasingly being acknowledged as good practice by many of the institutions.

6. Flagship Species

These special plants and animals are characteristic of cemeteries and churchyards in London.

Wall ferns	<i>Aspleniaceae</i>	A group of ferns usually associated with the shady permanently damp 'corners' of a churchyard or cemetery.
Holly blue butterfly	<i>Celastrina argiolus</i>	Holly blue caterpillars feed on the flower buds of holly and ivy. The butterflies with pale blue undersides with small black spots can be seen fluttering around trees and ivy-bound hedgerows trees and walls throughout the summer.
Green woodpecker	<i>Picus viridus</i>	The combination of mature trees and open grasslands of churchyards and cemeteries provide ideal habitat for this colourful bird with its distinctive laughing call..
Lichens	<i>for example Caloplaca decipiens</i>	Extremely slow growing plants that are actually formed by a fungus and an alga growing together. Usually highly sensitive to air pollution.
Cuckooflower	<i>Cardamine pratensis</i>	This plant has a pretty pink flower whose blooming coincides with the spring calling of the cuckoo.

7. Objectives, Actions and Targets

Most of these actions are specific to this habitat. However, there are other, broader actions that apply generically to a number of habitats and species. These are located in a separate 'Generic Action' section of the London Biodiversity Action Plan, which should be read in conjunction with this document. There are generic actions for Site Management, Habitat Protection, Species Protection, Ecological Monitoring, Biological Records, Communications and Funding.

Please note that the partners identified in the tables are those that have been involved in the process of forming the plan. It is not an exclusive list and new partners are both welcomed and needed. The leads identified are responsible for co-ordinating the actions – but are not necessarily implementers.

Objective 1 To protect the biodiversity interests of London's churchyards and cemeteries

Target: Create a comprehensive database of sites and their wildlife by 2011

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
1.1 Maintain a 'Churchyards and Cemeteries Biodiversity Working Group' and review membership.	ongoing	GLA	EN, LWT, CCC, LNHS, EN, LA, APCT, FoG, ABA, EH, NCF
1.2 Investigate funding opportunities for a project officer to progress the actions of the HAP,	2006	Working Group	GIGL
1.3 Develop and co-ordinate a popular survey for burial grounds	2007	Working Group	GIGL

1.4 Ensure that cemetery and churchyard elements are distinguished within the GLA rolling programme of survey	Achieved	GLA	LHNS, Working Group
1.5 Encourage the declaration of suitable sites as Local Nature Reserves	ongoing	LA, Working Group	EN
1.6 Monitor re-use and development proposals in relation to new and existing burial sites via the planning process	ongoing	Working Group	GLA, LA

Objective 2 To promote conservation management in cemeteries and churchyards in London

Target: Implement a range of mechanisms for sharing information and expertise by 2006

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
2.1 Establish contact with the LCMF through LA reps	Achieved 2002	Working Group	GLA, EN, LWT, NCF, LA
2.2 Disseminate advice for biodiversity in burial ground management	2003	Working Group	EN, EH
2.3 Review the biodiversity content of existing cemetery management training, and offer training workshops/courses for site managers as required	2006	Working Group	ABA Colleges/Universities
2.4 Encourage the inclusion of ecological criteria in cemetery and churchyard competitions	Ongoing	Working Group	

Objective 3 To promote the biodiversity value of churchyards and cemeteries to the wider public and to express the important role they play in the quality of life for Londoners

Target: Raise public awareness through a combination of publications and events by 2006

Action	Target Date	Lead	Other Partners
3.1 Establish links and organise joint initiatives with various faith groups	2005	GLA	ARC, Faith groups
3.2 Produce a promotional leaflet on sites accessible by public transport	2005	GLA	TfL, EH, LTB, LA
3.3 Review and revise as necessary existing school educational packs	Ongoing	Working Group/Ecocongregations	LEEF, LA, Working Group
3.4 Raise burial ground issues in any London-wide 'Action Day'	2006	LBP /Working Group	GLA, LA

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Parks, Squares and Amenity Grasslands; Woodland.

Bats; Stag Beetle.

National Plans

Built Environment and Gardens.

Key References

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Abbreviations

ABA- Association of Burial Authorities
APCT –Abney Park Cemetery Trust
ARC Alliance of Religions and Conservation
CCC Council for the Care of Churches
EH English Heritage
EN English Nature
FoG – Friends of Groups

GLA Greater London Authority
GIGL Greenspace Information for Greater London
LA – Local Authorities
LEEF London Environmental Education Forum
LWT London Wildlife Trust
NFCF National Federation of Cemetery Friends
TfL Transport for London
LCMF London Cemeteries Managers' Forum

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