

Habitat Action Plan

Churchyards & Cemeteries



Tree Dressing at Abney Park Cemetery
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“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, whilst sensitively promoting their nature conservation value.
- To secure the involvement of all London’s communities in the conservation of churchyards and cemeteries.

2. Introduction

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.

A wide variety of habitats can be found in London's larger cemeteries, including grassland, woodland, scrub and occasionally wetland. Species associated with London's cemeteries and churchyards 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. Goldcrests often nest in cemeteries with many evergreen trees. Occasionally, uncommon plants such as the green-winged orchids found at Morden Cemetery may survive from the site's pre-cemetery days.

The gravestones, monuments and walls of both cemeteries and churchyards provide an unusual 'masonry habitat' which may host ferns, invertebrates and lichens. Fungi and mosses are also a feature of certain cemeteries and churchyards.

Cemeteries and churchyards 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 it needs to be remembered that 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.

3. Current Status

There are about 168 cemeteries in Greater London, covering nearly 1300ha or 1% of the total land area. In inner London boroughs, cemetery land often forms a significant percentage of the overall area of open space, for example Newham 61%, Kensington and Chelsea 49%.

The distribution of cemeteries and churchyards 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.

London is now close to exhausting its supply of burial space. Consequently, new legislation to allow re-use of graves is likely. A few new cemeteries are proposed and new-style 'woodland burials' are beginning to take place. This situation presents new opportunities but also risks for nature conservation.

4. Specific Factors Affecting the Habitat

4.1 Lack of resources

Evidence given to the recent 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.

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 diversity of choice for the bereaved is increasingly being acknowledged as good practice, for example, the Institute of Burial and Cremation Administration (IBCA) produced a 'Charter for the Bereaved'. 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. Best Value may also offer an opportunity to advocate more sustainable management.

4.2 Shortage of burial space

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.

LPAC's proposed solution was to re-use graves a certain period after the last burial, for example 75 or 100 years. A management plan would be a pre-requisite to safeguard areas of historic and biodiversity interest.

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.

Unchecked growth of vegetation on monuments can also cause severe physical damage therefore management compromise must be sought.

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 are Highgate, Abney Park, Kensal Green, Nunhead, Tower Hamlets and Morden Cemeteries.

No churchyards are at present classified as being of Metropolitan Importance, although the Audit (London Biodiversity Action Plan Volume I) estimated that 57 churchyards were classed as Borough or Local SINC with a total area of 88ha.

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 which 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.

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; guidance from the latter is expected in 2002.

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, for example Southwark Park Rangers at Nunhead, LB Wandsworth at Morden Cemetery, LB Westminster at St John's Churchyard.

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.
Tawny owl	<i>Strix aluco</i>	The mature trees of churchyards and cemeteries continue to provide nest and perch sites for this bird infamous for its silent flight and familiar hoot.
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
Establish a 'Churchyards and Cemeteries Biodiversity Working Group'	2002	GLA	EN, LWT, CCC, LNHS, EN, LA, APCT, FoG, ABA, EH, NCF
Develop and co-ordinate a popular survey for burial grounds	2005	LWT	GLA, Working Group
Ensure that cemetery and churchyard elements are distinguished within the GLA rolling programme of survey	2002	GLA	LHNS, Working Group

Encourage the declaration of suitable sites as Local Nature Reserves	ongoing	EN	LA, Working Group
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
Establish a forum of people who manage churchyards and cemeteries of known wildlife value	2002	Working Group	GLA, EN, LWT, NFCF, LA
Disseminate advice for biodiversity in burial ground management	2003	Working Group	EN, EH
Produce a generic article promoting biodiversity enhancements for publication in professional journals and newsletters	2004	Working Group	ABA, NFCF
Review the biodiversity content of existing cemetery management training	2004	Working Group	ABA Colleges/Universities
Organise a training workshop/course for site managers as required	2005	Working Group	
Encourage the inclusion of ecological criteria within the Memorial Awareness Board's 'Cemetery of the Year' award	2006	Working Group	MAB

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
Establish links and organise joint initiatives with various faith groups	2003	GLA	ARC, Faith groups
Produce a promotional leaflet on sites accessible by public transport	2005	GLA	TfL, EH, LTB, ABA, LA
Review and revise as necessary existing school educational packs	2003	ARC	LEEF, LA, Working Group
Organise a London-wide 'Action Day'	2006	Working Group	GLA, LA

Relevant Action Plans

London Plans

Parks, Squares and Amenity Grasslands; Woodland.

Bats; Stag Beetle.

National Plans

Built Environment and Gardens.

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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
LA – Local Authorities
LEEF London Environmental Education Forum
LWT London Wildlife Trust
NFCF National Federation of Cemetery Friends
TfL Transport for London

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