

Managing Closed Churchyards: Case studies



Credit: Holy Trinity Frome

We spoke to several awarded Eco Churches who have reached bronze, silver, and gold in the land section of the survey with their closed churchyards. Read through their different approaches for advice and inspiration about how you might consider managing your closed churchyard.

CASE STUDY 1:

Getting Started: St. Cuthbert's Church Low Etherley, Durham (Bronze Eco Church Award September 2021, Silver Eco Church Award February 2022)

To begin with one of the churchwardens at St. Cuthbert's rang the Council. Our warden told them that to support our Eco Church aspirations, we wanted to establish a wild area to benefit flora and fauna, encourage community involvement, and provide somewhere for people to relax.

The Council was amenable to the idea and agreed to prepare the chosen area for us. Unfortunately, that was as far as it went for a few months until we rang again. After being reminded of our request, the Council representative sent someone out the next day to prepare the ground for seeding with a wildflower mix. (The actual seeding was to be done by members of the congregation.)

At the moment, apart from planting some sunflowers in the designated area, we have not yet sown the majority of our wildflower seeds, as the Council intends to return shortly to complete its preparations. We intend to add more bird and hedgehog boxes and create a large bug hotel in one of our Summer holiday Messy Church sessions. It will be great to see children involved in respecting and caring for this area, and we hope it will encourage adults to give up some space for nature or even participate in next year's No Mow May!



LAND

I have not included photographs as the area is still very much in its infancy, but others should be encouraged to ask their Councils if they wish to create a wild area, as they may well be pleasantly surprised by the reaction (even if they do have to send a reminder)!

- With thanks to Elizabeth Jude for sharing St Cuthbert's story

CASE STUDY 2:

Holy Trinity Church, Frome, Somerset (Bronze Eco Church Award October 2020, Silver Eco Church Award November 2021) now have an established 'eco patch' and hope to begin influencing the rest of their closed churchyard next

The churchyard project is gradually gathering momentum – the initial plan has been to set it up in an uncomplicated way so all generations can be involved. The project plays a role in our desire 'to refashion the fabric of this world, until it resembles the shape of the Kingdom of God.' It embraces creation and the Creator; the local councils – Town and District; local churches of all denominations; the church family; and the local community.



Holy Trinity Frome's eco-patch



Credit: Holy Trinity Frome

LAND

Churchyard management

The churchyard has been closed for burials for a decade and one part of it was without visible graves. The last vicar (we're now in an interregnum) gave us permission to demarcate this 'unused' patch with posts, creating an 'eco site' about 25 yds x 35 yds. Holy Trinity Church is keen to work with the local councils – both Town and District – at every opportunity and eco matters are high on the Council's agenda; we didn't need to push eco matters. The relationship is a mutually supportive one.

During the pandemic restrictions, progress was only gradual. From the outset, the District Council which handles churchyards freely allowed us to take responsibility for the eco site. The first steps we took were to clear what was previously a very untidy area (rubbish, rambling brambles etc) and to cut the grass. The central area of the patch was scarified to enable local wild seeds to be sown, especially yellow rattle to weaken the grasses so wild flowers can flourish. We have begun to plant some hedgerow plants from the local area – wild rose, blackthorn and hawthorn etc – on a peripheral bank. Small trees (associated with local habitats such as wild cherry, mountain ash and crab apple) have been contributed by fellowship groups. We intend to scythe the long grass around the perimeter in the coming weeks, to build up the compost heaps to attract amphibians and grass snakes. In addition, a bug hotel has been constructed.

The official recording has yet to begin with plants and grasses; insects and amphibians etc. However slow worms and butterflies (Holly Blue, Orange Tip, Small/Large White, Brimstone, Peacock and Meadow Brown) have been seen.

Once we have the eco-patch up and running, we hope to spend more time in the area of the churchyard managed by the Council. It is important that the whole churchyard is seen as one area.

It is hoped that the eco-patch will make a (very small) contribution to the green corridor surrounding Frome and will serve to open people's eyes (of all ages) to the local habitat. Other churches in Frome are also pursuing Eco Church matters. We are in the process of establishing an eco-trail around the town churches. A further goal is to establish a Deanery eco-trail, and a number of local village churches/benefices have incorporated this idea.

– With thanks to Maggie Hancock and John Samways for sharing Holy Trinity's story



Credit: Holy Trinity Frome

LAND

CASE STUDY 3:

St Martin's Church, Liskeard, Cornwall (Bronze Eco Church Award July 2021) share their experience participating in a council scheme, which helped them make changes in their churchyard

Any church contemplating developing its resources in this field should already have actively built up relationship 'capital' with both local authority officials, churchyard workers, and local people who use the churchyard for recreation, such as dog walkers. There are many reasons for this, but in this socially sensitive instance, the acceptance of change by the whole community, and beyond, is vitally important.

Members of St. Martin's had already been working in the churchyard for many years, particularly with animal and bird habitats, but were daunted by the scarcity of volunteers for such a large churchyard. In 2020 the national 'Heritage Open Days' theme was 'Hidden Nature', and Cornwall Council and the University of Exeter were cooperating in an EU-supported scheme 'Making Space for Nature', in which seven Cornish towns were resourced to improve their biodiversity drastically. The church was able to offer its building for a public exhibition of the plans both for the churchyard and a park in the town and to discuss with Council and University representatives the various locations for wildflower planting and animal shelter sites.

Thus all the above-mentioned bodies came together formally, and the necessary channels of cooperation were already in place to be taken advantage of immediately. The church benefitted enormously from the mobilisation of volunteers by the Council and the heavy groundwork by the Council estates organisation Cormac, whose nursery also produces quantities of wildflower plants for planting out. It was interesting that many environmental work enthusiast volunteers from the community turned out to be existing church members!

Contact at county level:

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or your local Town/Parish/District Council for similar projects.

– With thanks to Tony Piper and Mike Sturgess for sharing St Martin's story



LAND

CASE STUDY 4:

St Andrew's Church, Rugby (Gold Eco Church Award May 2019) share about their garden projects

St Andrews is the owner of two areas of land, both closed churchyards. One is around the church building, for which a development project was put together to improve it as an area for prayer, peace and performance; the second is St Andrews Gardens, formerly the churchyard of Holy Trinity Church which contains the graves of many notable citizens of Rugby, including the first editor of the Rugby Advertiser and the Reverend John Moultrie, Rector of Rugby 1825 to 1875.

As part of the development project and in consultation with Rugby Borough Council which maintains the parcels of land and is responsible for their upkeep, we wanted to make the area around the church to be a flagship, bee-friendly, chemical-free, and a pollinator garden. In discussion with the leader of the grounds team, the aims of the project were adopted and implemented with an ongoing commitment to continuing to care for the land in the new chemical-free system.

The communication took place over time to ensure a full understanding of all the changes to be made to the following: plants, planting, ways of work and sufficient monitoring to the systems of operation. This was to enable the successful adoption and implementation of the project objectives, which with preparation, the council were totally involved in to enable them to have ownership from the outset. It is by this open communication with the relevant councillors and officers of the council that much has been achieved, avoiding the need for time-consuming, lengthy, formal meetings. The area has benefited from the public artwork, which has been well received and the area has been used for outside performances with the improved sight lines allowing uninterrupted views creating interest in the event.

The most recent addition was the planting of a tree to mark the Platinum Jubilee of Her Late Majesty Queen Elizabeth II. For some years, the grounds team have helped to build in each Maundy Thursday a Garden of Gethsemane within the Lady Chapel. Bat boxes donated by Warwickshire Bat Group have been placed in each parcel of land.

The ongoing and future plans for St Andrews Gardens are fully discussed, shared and accordingly owned by both council and church. These plans will lead to a further improved resource for the town.

– With thanks to John Daymond for sharing St Andrew's story