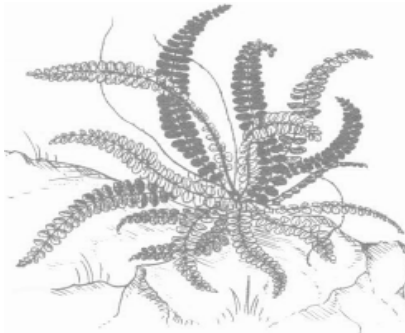


## Ferns in Churchyards and Burial Grounds

The earliest land plants were related to ferns, which are part of the Division Pteridophyta of the plant kingdom. They started life growing on the edge of lakes and rivers 400 million years ago. Today, most ferns still need to grow on moist soil or stone. Ferns have no flowers but they produce spores on the mature plant.

With our moist climate, many churchyards in the western areas of Britain frequently prove ideal habitats for ferns - in the British Isles there are about 64 native species.



*Maidenhair spleenwort*

Look out for ferns on west or north facing walls in particular. The shady areas of churchyards, and under trees, where the grasscutters can't reach, will also be places where ferns can flourish undisturbed.

If a damp area of the churchyard supports ferns, then cutting less frequently in the area immediately around the existing ferns could help them to spread through their natural means of reproduction.

The amazing thing about ferns is that once established they can grow on in quite dry places, such as walls.

Species found on walls include the spleenworts, Wall rue, Rusty back, Polypodys and Shield fern.

Species more likely to be found under the trees include Lady fern, Male fern, Hard fern and Royal fern, as well as the Shield ferns and Polypodys mentioned above. Polypodys can also grow on trees. If your churchyard has calcareous (limey) soil you may find Hart's Tongue fern, or even, more rarely, Adderstongue fern.

### Fern Surveys

With the aid of a Field Guide, you should be able to identify most ferns. For more unusual species, you may need to consult a botanist. Contact your local county wildlife trust for assistance. [www.wildlifetrusts.org](http://www.wildlifetrusts.org)

### Conservation of ferns

The main hazards to ferns in churchyards and burial grounds include the use of pesticides, other invasive plants covering the fern e.g. ivy, or the deterioration of the wall itself and any repair work to the wall. If the stones in the wall are loose, or the whole wall is in the process of collapse, then clearly repairs must be carried out eventually. It is possible to preserve ferns when this happens; either by keeping the stones where the ferns are growing together, or carefully removing the fern prior to the repair being carried out, keeping it alive, and then grafting it back onto the wall. Dry stone wall restorers recommended by the Dry Stone Wall Association are trained to do this work.

If your churchyard wall is to be repaired by a local craftsman then it might be worth while finding out how best to preserve the ferns. It would be advisable to place the fern back in its original position, if possible.



*Polypody*

## Bracken

The most invasive of ferns is Bracken. It's easy to tell bracken from other ferns as it does not grow in clumps with a central point, but on separate stems. However, areas of bracken are important habitats for insects such as moths and butterflies, which use the plant to lay eggs, and also to hide in. A clump of bracken, kept controlled, is therefore not totally undesirable. Many farmers have a problem controlling bracken on open hillsides and may use sprays to check its spread. When such spraying occurs, other ferns can be affected. So if you hear of any bracken spraying, cover up the churchyard ferns whilst the treatment is in progress.



*Hart's Tongue fern*

## Publications

The Field Studies Council fold-out chart –  
A Key to common ferns

<http://www.field-studies-council.org>

Collins guide to Grasses, sedges, rushes and  
ferns of Britain and Northern Europe  
By Fitter, Fitter and Farrer

The website described as [the ferns identifier  
for the British Isles](http://www.ferns.midwales.org.uk) where you can learn about  
ferns and identify your fern specimen.

[www.ferns.midwales.org.uk](http://www.ferns.midwales.org.uk)

## Contacts

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