

STONEMWORK AND WALLS IN CHURCHYARDS

A greater variety of stonework can be found in the churchyard than anywhere else in a parish. The stonework includes the walls of the church itself, the monuments and memorials, paths and boundary walls. Some of the stone reflects the geology of the local area, whilst other stone may be imported from the other side of the world.

This diversity of stone creates interest, colour and texture in the churchyard, and also a variety of habitats to support plants and animals, many of which may not be found in the surrounding landscape.

Stonework provides a home for lichens, mosses and liverworts, ferns, wall plants, invertebrates, small mammals and bats, amphibians and reptiles. (See separate fact sheets for more information)

The age, type, aspect, and water holding capacity of the stone determines which plants are going to be found and where they will be. In general the older the stone, the more lichens and mosses. Lime, either from the stone itself, or from lime mortar used in many walls will also increase the diversity of plant life.

Top Wall Fact

Due to our mild, damp climate the British Isles has some of the finest wall vegetation in Europe.

Monuments and Memorials

Churchyard memorials mostly date from the 17th century, with the stone type, design and size reflecting changing fashions in architecture and art. All have potential conservation value, including recent stones. Early medieval crosses and pagan sculpture were the first monuments in churchyards. These are relatively rare and usually Scheduled Ancient Monuments (SAM's) or listed. They have statutory protection and conservation work requires special care and expert advice. Stone War memorials can be

sited in churchyards and many of these are also listed. (look at useful contacts websites for information on SAM's and listing)

Damage to the stones themselves or to their associated wildlife can be caused by:

- Erosion including damage by grass cutting equipment.
- Rearrangement of stones, including levelling (for health and safety reasons) or moving to facilitate mowing.
- Cleaning with hard brushes or chemicals
- Shading
- Woody plants or burrowing animals

Care of Monuments and Memorials (Not Scheduled or listed)

Keep stones in situ, as far as possible. Only move if absolutely necessary and seek advice from the relevant organisation before doing so. Always re- instate them in the same orientation. Beware of leaning gravestones against other walls, which would damage lichens and mosses and may be a H&S hazard.

Cleaning in order to read inscriptions should only be done as necessary with a soft brush and plain water.

Avoid using chemical sprays around the edges of gravestones as this destroys all life around the stone, resulting in a yellow strip of grass, which looks unsightly. Trimming with shears is the best option. The chemicals will also damage the stone.

Inspect the stones regularly and remove brambles and seedlings, which may have self sown in crevices.

Walls

Boundary walls are usually either dry-stone, lime-mortared or brick walls. Church walls may also support lichens, mosses and wall plants. The boundary walls, either revetment or free standing may be the oldest feature in a churchyard, even older than the church building, developing a rich flora and fauna over many years. Rustyback, thick leaved stonecrop and perennial wall rocket may have been recorded

from the same wall hundreds of years ago. Different lichens, mosses, flowering plants will grow in different areas of the wall depending on the conditions. For example, stonecrops and valerian will be at the top where they can establish on ledges and by the capstones; specialised wall plants like wall rue and spleenworts appear in the vertical middle section where conditions are at their most harsh.

Animals such as spiders will be found in the drier, upper sections of the walls, and mammals, amphibians and snails in the damper areas nearer the base.

Plant growth starts when old rocks are weathered and broken down, usually along joints. The softer mortar from mediaeval times of lime, sand, ash, loam, straw and dung is lost and soil establishes in cracks and on ledges. Seeds either from relict species from the churchyard, or dispersed by wind, birds or ants from the surrounding area become established. Sometimes the species in a wall have long been lost from the churchyard or surrounding area.

Damage to wall wildlife can result from:

Rebuilding or repairing walls with modern mortar, which can take up to 80 years to colonise with plants.
Shading by trees, bushes or dense ivy growth.
Over-zealous weeding and cleaning.
Collapse of wall.
Planting of trees or shrubs too close to the wall.

Care of walls

Soft-stemmed plants do no damage to walls and a decision needs to be reached to retain these plants as part of an important habitat of the churchyard.

Before carrying out any weeding, wall repair or restoration, carry out a survey of the wall and its wildlife. Take photographs or map out where particular ferns or plants are growing, take note of which side lichens or mosses are growing on. Be aware that amphibians and reptiles may be hibernating in the wall and avoid major

rebuilding or re-pointing work in the winter months.

Dealing with woody species

Woody stemmed plants do cause damage to stonework and it is often difficult to remove them without damaging the wall or gravestone. Either cut new growth flush with the stonework every year or treat cut surface by carefully painting (not spraying) with approved herbicide following H&S guidelines.

Ivy can be holding a collapsing wall or gravestone together, and unless the wall is going to be rebuilt, it might be best to leave it in situ, trimming back new spreading growth each year.

The flowers and fruits are valuable food for bees and birds in autumn and winter, and birds might nest in dense clumps so careful timing of work is essential.

For moderate sized ivy on a sound wall or gravestone, the stem should be cut off at the base, and the stump treated with herbicide. When the upper stems have died, it can be carefully removed.

When removing new ivy shoots from gravestones having split stone facing take great care not to pull off a layer of stone along with the ivy.

Regular removal of new saplings will prevent problems getting out of hand.

Valerian (*Centranthus ruber*) has a semi-woody rootstock so a slight ability to damage walls made of small bricks or stonework. This tendency should be considered against the conservation value and attractive appearance of the plants where they are very visible and the wall easily accessible for re-pointing.

Dealing with ferns, mosses, lichens and flowering plants

These should be retained wherever possible. Re-mortaring (using lime mortar) can be carried out around flowering plants and ferns, avoiding

disturbance, or if re-building then the plants can be removed, kept safe and replaced in the same place with a small amount of soil after the work is completed.

Avoid spraying herbicides or covering lichens and mosses with mortar.

If rebuilding or repairing free standing stone walls, always dismantle the walls keeping stone from each face on its original side of wall, and avoid replacing lichen or moss covered stone on the opposite face. Keep the face of the stone outwards.

General Guidelines

Phased Repair and restoration

Wherever possible it is recommended that repair of walls is phased rather than restoring a whole wall at one time. Islands of lichen rich stones or mortar can be left to allow re-colonisation.

Do not add mortar to dry-stone walls, this will not help to stabilise them, and filling the crevices can destroy habitat for amphibians, reptiles, invertebrates and plants.

Use lime mortar not modern cement mortar for repair and restoration of old walls. It is breathable, reasonably resistant to frost and allows moisture transfer and some movement, which is good for the conservation of ancient stonework.

Herbicides for treating woody growth in walls or the footings of churches must be avoided where possible, but if needed to be used, applied by a trained operator, by painting freshly cut stumps, not sprayed as it can damage stonework and plants.

Boundary walls are part of the historic churchyard and may be part of the Listing for the church. Advice should be sought from the Diocesan Advisory Committee before work begins, and a skilled waller must carry out repair work with experience in working within a conservation setting, and with the techniques to be used.

Any new stone must be matched to that in the existing wall, from a local source.

Useful Contacts

Dry stone walling Association of Britain for information and lists of recommended wallers. Lane Farm, Crooklands, Milnthorpe, Cumbria, LA7 7NH Telephone: 015395 67953 Website: www.dswa.org.uk

English Heritage www.english-heritage.org.uk for information, Scheduled Ancient Monuments and Listing. General enquiries +44 (0) 870 333 1181

Historic Scotland

Website: www.scottishgraveyards.org.uk has extensive up to date information on gravestones and their conservation.

Cadw, Welsh Assembly Government, Plas Carew, Unit 5/7 Cefn Coed, Parc Nantgarw, Cardiff, CF15 7QQ Tel: 01443 33 6000 E-mail: Cadw@Wales.gsi.gov.uk

War Memorials Trust www.warmemorials.org 42a Buckingham Palace Road, London SW1W 0RE. Tel: 020 7233 7356

Caring for God's Acre

website www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk for links to other helpful organisations

