

2. Caring for Grassland



This sheet gives guidelines on how to care for grassy areas and explains the different ways of managing grassland.

A churchyard or burial site may be the most ancient enclosed piece of land in a parish, perhaps even older than the church building, having its roots in pre-Christian times.

Apart from grave digging, the grassland will have been relatively undisturbed, re-seeding naturally for hundreds if not thousands of years. It will also have been both mown for hay and grazed by animals during its time as a burial ground.

A benefit of this continuity of management over a very long time is a diversity of beautiful grasses and flowers and associated animals, some of which may now be uncommon or rare in Britain.

Old, relatively undisturbed or 'unimproved' grassland is now rare in the UK. For a conservationist this may be the most important part of your site.

Deciding how to manage grassland is one of the most important decisions to be made and one which needs careful thought and planning.

The management of your grassland is dependent on what would suit the site and on how often you are prepared to mow it. A mosaic of grass at varying heights will help wildlife to flourish.

The variety of grass heights to consider are:

- **short** like a lawn.
- **medium** and cut regularly but to about 10cms each time.
- **long** and **flowery** and cut a few times a year.
- **long** and **tussocky** and cut once a year or every other year.

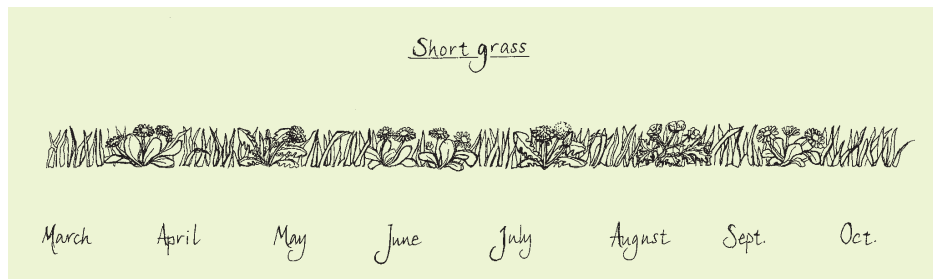
SHORT GRASS

- Looks neat and cared for and allows people to visit the whole site easily.
- Makes it easier to read memorials.
- Helps ground feeding birds such as thrushes and wagtails.

- May contain wild flowers close to the ground (wild thyme or self heal for example).
- Can have rare grassland fungi which are able to push through the short grass.
- Needs regular mowing requiring mowers, fuel and people prepared to do the work i.e. considerable resources.

Managing short grass

Mow regularly and always remove grass cuttings.



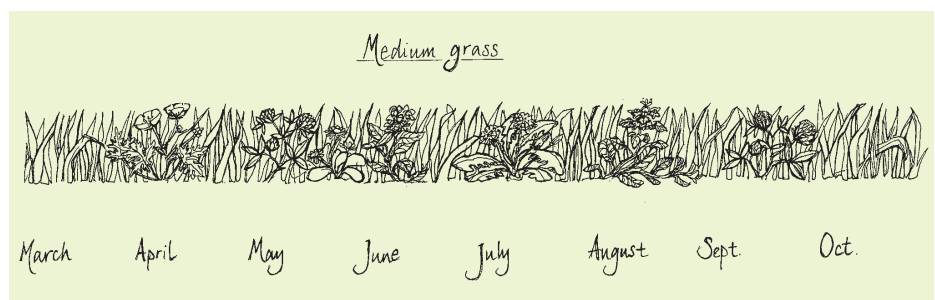
If grassland fungi are present then stop mowing when they are fruiting in any quantity. This is generally in autumn so not a time of year when the grass is growing fast.

MEDIUM GRASS

- Fairly easy to manage as it can be cut with a robust mower.
- Does not need such regular mowing as short grass so fewer resources are required.
- May contain some low-flowering plants such as clover, bird's-foot trefoil, self heal.
- Flowers attract insects (bees in particular if clovers are present), other invertebrates, small mammals and reptiles such as slow worms.

Managing medium grass

Mow occasionally and always remove cuttings.



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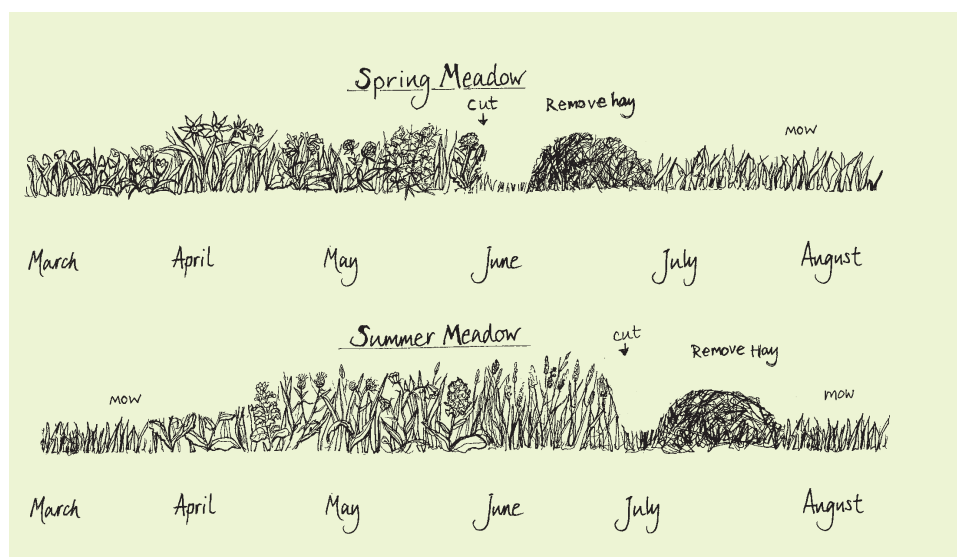
This can be cut with a mower with the blade set at about 4 inches (10cm). It requires less frequent mowing (probably on a monthly basis during the growing season).

LONG GRASS

Long grass is likely to contain more plant and animal life than medium grass and far more than short grass.

- Allows plants to flower and set seed. If the site contains unimproved, old grassland then the range of flowers may be spectacular.
- Contains a wealth of animal life: bees and butterflies are attracted to flowers whilst beetles, grasshoppers and bumblebees use long grass for cover. Amphibians, reptiles and small mammals hunt for food in long grass.
- Requires less management thus saving time and money. However, the management that is needed (cutting and removing long grass) may be more difficult to organise.

Managing long grass



The key guidelines for managing long grass are:

Follow the golden rule and remove all cuttings or leave to make hay (see sheet A3, Cutting Long Grass and Dealing with Grass Cuttings).

Allow flowering plants time to grow, flower and set seed.

Cut the grass while it is still growing, before all the strength of the plant has gone down into the roots.

In practical terms this means:

Plan for about 12 weeks without cutting in the spring or early summer (any time between mid March and the end of July).

Cut areas of long grass before the end of July and definitely before the end of August (late flowers may

not have set seed but this can't be helped).

Perhaps leave late summer flowers such as devil's bit scabious as islands in the cut grass and cut later. Cutting after the end of August leads to the strength of the grasses being stored in the roots. Over time the sward will become rank, tussocky and lose wild flowers. Cutting later occasionally won't matter too much, however.

Use a wheeled or hand-held grass strimmer, or a scythe to cut long grass (see sheet A3, Cutting Long Grass and Dealing with Grass Cuttings). Rake and remove the grass or leave for a few days to make hay using a hand hay baler.

After cutting and removing, the long grass can be left to re-grow. Ideally cut a couple more times over the late summer and autumn. Collect the cuttings. These other cuts can be done once a month or once every 6 weeks using a robust mower with a collecting bag.

More on timing of the cuts for long grass

Spring meadows have a good show of spring flowers: bulbs such as daffodil or spring flowers like primrose or cowslip. They should be left uncut until about the middle of June.

Summer meadows have lots of flowers in May, June and July – plants such as ox-eye daisy, bird's foot trefoil, knapweed, hawkweeds, and buttercup. Try a cut in February then leave uncut from around mid April until mid July or early August (about 12 weeks' cutting gap).

What if there are both spring and summer flowers?

Having both spring and summer flowers in the same area can make it difficult to decide when to cut.

Consider the following options:

• Manage for spring and summer flowers in different areas:

Choose 2 areas (with spring and summer flowers) and apply a spring cutting regime to one and a summer cutting regime to the other.

• Manage for spring and summer flowers in the same area:

To enjoy both groups, leave the cutting until both the spring and summer flowers have set seed. Cut around mid July. If the site becomes too overgrown then

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choose to do an additional cut in February (before the spring flowers are up). Alternatively cut earlier than July – say in mid June. Remember 12 weeks, in the growing season, is about the maximum time to leave grass uncut.

TUSSOCKY GRASS

- Provides year round shelter for many animals which nest and hibernate amongst the tussocks, stems and roots.
- Larger, carnivorous animals in turn feed on smaller animals found in the coarse grass.
- Coarse grass is unlikely to have the range of flowers found in long, finer grass.
- Suitable for areas which are hard to manage: against walls, around compost bins and old gravestones. Repeated cutting or strimming around stonework can be damaging and takes time, (see sheet A10, Caring for Stonework, Metalwork and Woodwork).
- Tussocky grass requires the least management; however it can look rough and revert to scrub if not managed at all.

- Animals lying-up next to memorials could cause damage.
- Discussion is needed before grazing. Let the public know what you are planning and try to canvass views.

Managing by grazing

Sheep nibble off flowers and their grazing encourages grass at the expense of flowers. If the site is grazed throughout spring and summer then the effect is the same as regular mowing.

Take grazing animals off the site for up to 12 weeks of the spring and early summer to allow plants to flower and set seed.

Grazing animals produce droppings and urine. You may choose to pick up droppings for reasons of public access but, providing the site is not overgrazed, do not need to for conservation.

WHERE TO HAVE DIFFERENT LENGTHS OF GRASS

Most burial grounds can be managed in a variety of ways and you will have started to consider this whilst creating your plan (see sheet A1, The Five Steps).



Managing tussocky grassland

Cut areas of tussocky grass once a year or once every other year. This will probably need strimming, scything or cutting with shears and the cuttings raked up and removed. Cutting less often can allow tree seedlings to establish and become a problem.

Tussocky grass should not be cut when species may be nesting or over-wintering.

In practice, cutting in late summer or early autumn works well (from about mid August to mid October). This gives time for re-growth before the winter and, if cutting is on a 2 year rotation, cut half one year and half the next.

GRAZING

- Once a site is set up for grazing (fencing in place) and there is a grazer to manage the animals, this is a sustainable, low cost option. Sheep are suitable for grazing burial sites, other larger animals less so as they may damage monuments.

Caring for God's Acre recommend that grass is kept close mown in the following areas:

- Areas with recent graves and those regularly visited.
- Either side of paths to about a metre width.
- The front of the building, around the entrances and any special monuments such as war memorials.
- Paths through grass which is left to grow longer.
- Where grass has always been close mown and has plentiful fungi such as waxcaps.

Other parts of a burial ground, with older, unvisited graves or no graves at all, could be suitable for medium, long or tussocky grass. In order to decide this you need to think about your resources.

Some scenarios to help you decide

Scenario 1

You struggle to mow a burial ground regularly but can count on volunteers for a communal work party. If this

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is the case then consider allowing suitable areas to grow long. Your volunteers can cut the grass, then rake and remove it another day or make hay using a hand hay baler.

Scenario 2

You have keen volunteers prepared to mow regularly but you would like to vary the grass length and increase the flowers. In this case consider areas of both short and medium grass with a strip of tussocky grass against a boundary or in an area with few gravestones or unvisited graves. This gives cover for wildlife whilst keeping the rest of the site manageable by mower.

Scenario 3

You have a site with areas of spring flowers and bulbs. Consider managing this flowery area as a spring meadow – allow it to go unmown until the flowers have set seed and the leaves are dying back. Consider having a strip of tussocky grass about a metre wide against a boundary.

Decisions about grassland management are not set in stone

Try managing for long grass in a small area (ideally away from a main entrance) and, if this works, extend it gradually. Equally you may manage an area as long grass but need to mow it short for a while (a particular celebration perhaps). This will not cause long-term harm to the plants; they are perennials and will reappear. In fact close mowing on the occasional year can be beneficial as it reduces the vigour of the coarse grasses, allowing finer meadow grass and flowers to flourish.

Golden Rule: Remove all grass cuttings; compost them, make hay or take them off site.

Removing cuttings reduces the fertility of the soil which will gradually reduce the speed of grass growth. This means less mowing and fewer cuttings to remove (see sheet A3, Cutting Long Grass and Dealing with Grass Cuttings).

The key thing is to find a cutting system that suits your site and suits your workforce. This will be more likely to be supported and successful.

BRINGING A NEGLECTED SITE BACK INTO MANAGEMENT

Churchyards and burial sites that have been unmanaged for several years tend to have areas of coarse grass and scrub.

This is a particular problem and a different cutting system may be needed for a few years until a more

even grass sward develops.

Cut and remove cuttings regularly throughout the first year as you would with medium grass; cut on a monthly or 6 weekly cycle throughout the spring and summer. This will reduce the strength of coarse, tussocky grass and start to create the right conditions for finer grasses and flowers. If you do not have the work power for this then do 3 cuts – early June, early July and then early September.

You may need to do this for a couple of years and then follow on with the cutting regimes for long, medium or short grass depending on the plans.

If a site has been neglected then it is relatively easy to set aside an area for tussocky grass. This should be managed with a yearly or two yearly cut from the start.



New sites

Many cemeteries or extensions to churchyards have been taken from farmers' fields more recently. In general burial sites dating from post 1945 are less likely to have a rich variety of plants.

- Let a small area of grass grow long and see what comes up.
- Seek advice on grassland management if you want to improve it for wild flowers, (see sheet A8, Creating a Wildflower Meadow and Helping Wildlife).
- Medium height grass may be more appropriate than long grass.

Useful contacts

Caring for God's Acre, www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

Flora Locale, www.floralocale.org

Plantlife, www.plantlife.org.uk

Wildlife Trusts, www.wildlifetrusts.org

Association of British Fungus Groups, www.abfg.org

Useful reading

Guide to Grassland Plants – Field Studies Council fold-out chart