

11. Burial Sites Across Britain



This sheet explains the differences in conditions on sites from across Britain – rural and urban, north, south, east and west, coastal, exposed and sheltered.

One of the fantastic things about burial sites is that they are found in all communities across Britain. They also reflect life in every century from prehistoric to modern.

Urban burial sites

Large Victorian cemeteries in particular may be a key refuge for wildlife in a built-up area. With parks, gardens, railway embankments and wasteland, they form a mosaic of interconnecting habitat.

Because urban sites suffer from more air pollution they may lack the range of lichens, mosses or ferns of unpolluted sites.

(They do have several lichens however; see the FSC fold-out charts in Useful reading). Trees planted during the Industrial Revolution reflect a resistance to pollution; London plane, sycamore and large conifers are typical. All urban trees are important in removing pollutants from the air and should be particularly valued.



Sycamore

Rural sites probably have a wider variety of plants and animals, although when surrounded by intensive farmland this may not be the case.

Geology and soil depth will have a strong influence. The deep fertile soils of central and eastern Britain are very different from the thin, rocky soils of the west coast, the chalk downs or the mountains of the Lake District. These fertile areas are likely to have faster growth of grass, trees and other plants and mowing may need to be more frequent to prevent grassland becoming rank and tussocky.

Stonework will reflect the local geology, particularly in older sites, dating from before transport improvements allowed the movement of stone in any quantity.

Altitude affects temperature and windiness; a burial ground high in the Welsh mountains or the uplands of north east England will have slower grass growth and stunted or windswept trees.

Coastal sites contain salt tolerant plants and trees, again with stunted and windswept shapes. Coastal sites



may have a regular application of windblown, salty sand affecting grassland plants.

LOOKING AFTER UPLAND, WINDY OR COASTAL SITES

Plants and trees growing in exposed coastal and high altitude places can suffer from wind and salt burn following storms. This causes leaves or needles to blacken and die and can be mistaken for disease. The plant or tree is unlikely to be permanently damaged and will regrow.

Exposed coastal sites may contain salt tolerant plants and trees; if considering new planting then look at surrounding gardens to see what will cope with the conditions.

When planting new trees in exposed locations start with a small tree which has been grown in a local nursery with some degree of exposure. Do not give the tree a tall stake but stake it low down (30cm from the ground) so that the stem can move in the wind without the roots moving. This encourages the tree to root strongly against prevailing winds. Plastic mesh windbreaks can help new plants to establish and reduce drying out of young plants.

In some coastal or high altitude areas heath plants like heather and bilberry may be part of the grassland whilst trees struggle. Birch, hawthorn, rowan and pine can all grow in more exposed locations than other trees. Try not to shade the heath plants; in upland areas a burial ground may be a refuge for heathland and flowery grassland in an area of widespread sheep grazing.

Rainfall is another variable feature, with higher rainfall

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in the west of Britain. Grass may grow all year round in a mild, wet, south-western site but slow down or stop during both summer and winter months in a colder, drier, north-eastern site.

Take the rainfall into account when planning mowing. If the grass grows all year round then you may well need more cuts than would be necessary in other parts of the country.

Localness

When planning new planting you may want to select plants and trees which reflect your locality such as strawberry tree and evergreen oak in Devon and Cornwall. Wayfaring tree is a lime loving shrub and a feature of southern limestones and chalks, as is old man's beard, the wild clematis. Box is found on the Surrey Downs and juniper is distinctively common in a few areas, both north and south.

It is now possible to buy seeds, bulbs, plants and trees of 'local provenance' which means that the seed was collected locally. These plants and trees are more likely to survive in your area and they may have distinctive shapes or hues found in that locality.

Building styles reflect regional conditions, traditions and history. To give a few examples of a fascinating subject:

- Devon banks and Cornish hedges.
- Flemish influence in East Anglia.
- Differences in dry stone walling and hedgelaying styles.
- Use of brick in old buildings where suitable clay was available.

Try to use local styles and materials when repairing existing built structures and when planning new ones.

If planting bulbs like bluebell or wild daffodil, or seeds such as a wildflower mix, make sure that they are of local provenance. This helps to maintain the rich variety of plants and flowery meadows with small regional differences to be found across Britain. Seek advice from **Flora Locale** or **Plantlife**.

Celebrate local distinctiveness – in the face of increasing globalisation the differences in plants, trees and building styles warrants appreciation.



Centaury



Pyramidal Orchid



Wild Garlic

Useful contacts

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

Common Ground, www.commonground.org.uk

Flora Locale, www.floralocale.org

Plantlife, www.plantlife.org.uk

Wildlife Trusts, www.wildlifetrusts.org

Useful reading

Flora Britannica – Richard Mabey, Chatto & Windus

Urban Lichens 1 (on trees and wood) – Field Studies Council fold-out chart

Urban Lichens 2 (on stone and soil) – Field Studies Council fold-out chart