Autumn / Winter 2023

Beautiful Burial Grounds

Members' Magazine

In Praise of Fungi

A 40 year old grave in rural Carmarthenshire first got me hooked on fungi in burial grounds.

In front of a modest gravestone there were bright orange, green and yellow waxcaps, alongside erect contorted earthtongues. Wild species of mushroom that have dramatically declined across our countryside over the past century.

These fungi were nowhere else in the graveyard. Why was this? It turned out that this grave had been carefully tended by a grieving widower for 40 years. Unlike the rest of the graveyard, he removed the grass cuttings every year. This reduced the nutrient levels of the soil, allowing these grassland specialist fungi to establish and survive. Lovely.

Once you start to notice fungi, especially during our cool, moist autumns when most of the fruitbodies of fungi appear in Britain, you start to see them everywhere.

(article by Bruce Langridge, Head of Interpretation, National Botanic Garden of Wales, continued on page 4...)

Welcome to our autumn and winter members' magazine, we hope that you will enjoy it.

This edition celebrates the end of Opening the Ark, a pilot project based in the South Shropshire Hills which tested the idea that burial grounds can be thought of as arks or refuges for our beleaguered wildlife.

We threw open the door of those arks and let the creatures out whilst inviting people in to explore.

The wildlife within churches and churchyards also attracted interest and engagement during the groundbreaking Bats in Churches project, where bats changed from being a bother to a blessing, drawing in the wider community and becoming a source of local interest and pride. Bruce Langridge's fascinating article on fungi gives another idea for engaging people with biodiversity. You can sense his enthusiasm shining through the words but then he does describe himself as 'an excitable amateur mycologist'!

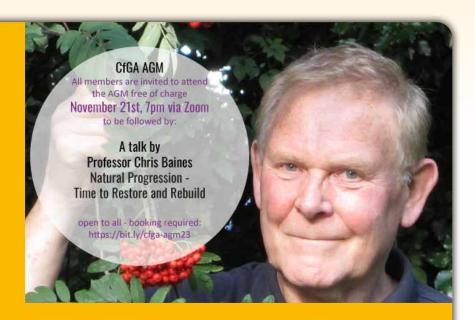


Harriet Carty

AGM

The Caring for God's Acre AGM will be held online at 7pm on Tuesday November 21st 2023. The business of the AGM will take around 20 minutes.

The talk which follows the AGM will be given by environmental campaigner, Chris Baines who has



spent 50 years promoting the idea of working WITH nature, and using our gardens, burial grounds, parks and other small green spaces to begin restoring wildlife habitats. In this illustrated talk Chris will take that message and show how it can how be rolled out across the wider landscape, from remote rural countryside, through urban Britain and on into our coastal waters.

Both the AGM and Talk are free to CfGA members, £5 for non-members Booking essential www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/event/cfga-agm-natural-progression/

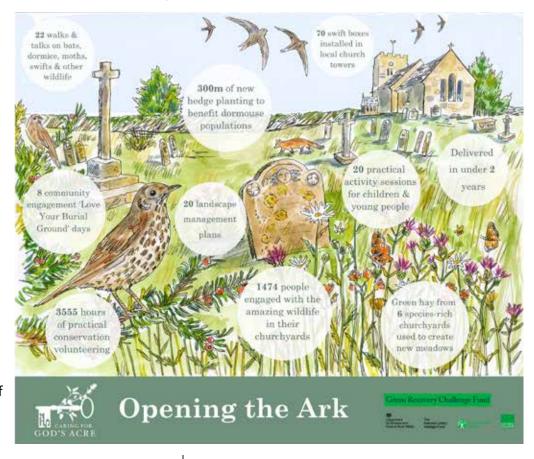
Opening the Ark By Kirsty Stephens

Opening the Ark Project Officer

June 2023 saw the completion of our Opening the Ark project. During the 18 months that the project was live we engaged with over 1,400 people who came along to our walks, talks and Love Your Burial Ground community days, soaking up the peaceful atmosphere of these ancient places and learning more about the wide range of species that make churchyards their home.

Whilst the core of the project was about public engagement Opening the Ark also aimed to deliver tangible benefits to wildlife and habitat throughout the Shropshire Hills AONB area.

The hazel dormouse is rare and declining, but it still has something of a stronghold in South Shropshire and these charismatic mammals are occasionally sighted in local churchyards. Over the winter of 2022-2023 we planted approx. 350m of new, native hedging in and around churchyards, with some of this specifically intended to plug gaps in aerial connectivity for existing dormouse populations.



Swifts are another species in decline, joining the red list of the Birds of Conservation Concern in 2021. In response to a request for volunteers to make swift boxes we were overwhelmed when they made no fewer than 70 new boxes between them! Installing them was no mean feat given the often ancient, rickety and perilously high ladders required to access church towers, but banks of swift boxes, (including call systems to lure the birds to the site) have now been fitted behind the louvres in 5 local church towers.

Many of the churchyards in this area are home to amazing wildflower meadows, swaying seas of flowers

amongst the gravestones. This year we offered green hay from the most species-rich sites to create new meadows by 'strewing' – essentially spreading the green hay on a receptor site and allowing the seeds to colonise. Families and individuals turned up to fill buckets and bags as well as organisations taking hay for larger projects such as 'rewilding' of the edges of a local village green and creating a new, publicly accessible meadow.

These projects chime with a core aim of the project, to *'spread the biodiversity outwards'*, from the haven of the churchyard out into the local communities, enhancing habitat and strengthening wildlife corridors.

In Praise of Fungi

By Bruce Langridge Head of Interpretation, National Botanic Garden of Wales

... continued from front cover

Burial grounds are one of the best places to look for fungi, especially in built up areas. Not only do they offer free access to all of us but they often contain the kind of places that fungi thrive on – unfertilised lawns, old trees, fallen branches and leaf covered ground. Sniff the air for tell-tale smells, and hope for fresh fungal fruitbodies, peachy chanterelles or even disgusting smelling stinkhorns. Look down and scan the ground for sap exuding milkcaps or boletes whose flesh turn from yellow to blue if you break off a piece of its furry brown cap. Look up the tree trunks for enormous dinner plate sized bracket fungi or outpours of chicken of the woods.

As an excitable amateur mycologist, I like to counter the fear and general negative press that make many people perceive fungi as something to avoid, or spray out of existence. The positive relationship between plants and fungi is often overlooked for the more grizzly tales of decay and death that fungi can emote. To begin with, fungi are nature's decomposers without fungi, nature wouldn't be able to recycle its dead leaves, bodies and fallen wood. That's obvious. But less well known is that over 90% of our plant species develop a mutual symbiotic relationship with fungi - the plant provides the fungus with glucose made from photosynthesis, and the fungus provides the plant with nutrients. In burial grounds with mature trees, beneath our feet are a network of fungal mycelial threads, acting like broadband superfibres. Through these, trees look after each other, passing messages of threats or exchanging much need nutrients. This profoundly beautiful and complex type of ecosystem has only been discovered recently and illustrates how much we still need to know about fungi. This underground soil ecosystem is rarely seen except when fruiting bodies of certain fungi burst through the top of the soil. The role of fungi in absorbing atmospheric carbon dioxide into the soil of undisturbed grasslands, as well as woods, is also a growing area of discovery.

The interconnectedness of fungi is a wonderful metaphor for us humans, about how we should be looking after each other, as well as the natural world. If you want to find out the names of the fungi you come across, ploughing through a thick book of hundreds of illustrations can be very off-putting. So talking to other people can be the best place to start. But how do you meet people who can help you? Perhaps the best way is to join a local mycological group – they're all over the UK and the British Mycological Society website has a list of them all. These groups run fungi walks in which beginners are always welcomed – it's how I first started to learn about fungi, and what got me to buy my first fungi identification books. You could also join a community nature walk, perhaps one run in your local burial ground, as these may well have people on them who know a bit about fungi. I've been running fungi walks at the National Botanic Garden of Wales for many years and every time I run one I'm rewarded with the delight on the faces of those who are discovering the joys of fungi for the first time.

To properly identify a fungus you have to look at the top and underside of the cap, the stipe (stem), the flesh, its spores, the habitat it is in and its condition – there are many specialist books that can then help you identify the species. But apps like INaturalist can help to get you started, to maybe help you work out what kind of family of fungi you're looking at – a bolete, waxcap, brittlegill or whatever. There are over 15000 different species of fungi that produce fruiting bodies in the UK, many of which may appear in a burial ground, so go easy on yourself. It's not always easy.

But here are some of the more common fungi you might find in a burial ground.



Beautiful Burial Grounds

Daldinia concentrica - King Alfred's Cakes

This circular, compact fungus lives mainly on the dead wood of ash trees. As ash trees across Britain die off as a result of the ash die back fungus, this distinctive fungus will likely become much more common for a while but will then disappear as the ash trees also disappear.

Auricularia auricula-judae - Jelly Ea

It looks like an ear. It feels like an ear. Have a look for this bizarre fungus on elder trees in your local burial ground. Its historical names of 'Fungi Sambuci' and 'Judas Ear' reflect this link with elder – William Shakespeare recounts in his Loves Labours Lost that 'Judas Iscariot' was hanged on an elder tree.





Sarcoscypha sp. - Scarlet Elf Cup

Look out for this distinctive cup-fungus from January to March on fallen branches in burial grounds, especially those that are covered in feathery moss. On a still dry day, try dropping a grain of sand onto the red surface – you might just see a small cloud of spores rise up.

Coprinus comatus - Lawyer's Wig

This distinctive fungus comes and goes quickly on lawns of burial grounds. If you pick this and leave it overnight, it will turn into a black goo. This explains the origins of its other common name of Shaggy Inkcap – you can actually write with the 'ink' it creates. Boiling will darken the colour, and the addition of phenol will help to preserve it.





Xylaria polymorpha – Dead Man's Fingers

If you were to come across this in a spooky wood at dusk, you might think a zombie was about to pounce on you. These bizarre fungi poke out from decaying wood. If you were to open one of the black fruiting bodies up with a sharp knife, you'd be in for a surprise – it's completely white inside.

Lycoperdon perlatum - Common Puffball

When mature, a hole in the top of this fungus opens up. Thousands of spores shoot out of this hole when the puffball is compressed by a rain-drop, a falling nut or perhaps a human hand. But beware. Some puffball spores have sharp, microscopic spines which can cause severe irritation of the lung.





Russula sp. - Brittleg

Every autumn, burial grounds can erupt with intense splashes of red, yellow and green. These are due to the appearance of brittlegill fungi. There are many varieties of these and they are notoriously hard to tell apart, despite their large size and distinctive colour. Their structure is made up of large cells which tend to make their fruiting body fragile and crumbly, especially their white gills – hence the name brittlegill.

Waxcaps

These beautiful jewels of the fungi world fruit on the moss-rich grassy areas of burial grounds that haven't been fertilised, which are regularly cut and where cuttings are removed. There are over 50 species of waxcap in the UK and all should be greatly valued as burial grounds are often the last refuge for waxcaps which were once common across our countryside.





This image of this most recognisable fungus, with its white dots on the vividly red cap, is used as the emoji image for all mushrooms, in the Super Mario games and in the dancing mushroom sequence of Walt Disney's film Fantasia. If your burial ground has pine or birch, look closely for it as it has a symbiotic relationship with these trees. Beware though – it is toxic and will stimulate hallucinations if eaten.

Bruce has kindly allowed us to use this information and his photos to create a 'Fungi Spotters Guide' to go alongside our Butterfly and Wildflower ones. It is free to download here www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/spotters-guides/

Find a Flowery Burial Ground

We're compiling a list of burial grounds in the UK that people can enjoy visiting if they want to see a site full of flower rich areas in the summer months. To see the flowers in their prime, late May to the middle or end of July is usually the best time to go. However it's a good idea to contact the site managers for specific information before your visit – just in case an early cut has taken place. Contact details and other useful information can be found on the map.

We'll keep updating and adding to this list, and we'd be delighted to hear from you if you've enjoyed visiting any of these burial sites or if you have recommendations for others that could be featured.

www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/find-a-flowery-burialground/

Webinars

Our diverse autumn webinar series is now up and running

Tuesday 17th October, 2pm

Managing Veteran/Ancient Churchyard Yews with Russell Ball

Tuesday 24th October, 2pm

Seeking Sanctuary – Conserving Amphibians and Reptiles in Burial Grounds with Angela Julian

Tuesday 31st October, 2pm

Burial Ground Mapping – More than Just a Map with Tim Viney

Tuesday 14th November, 2pm Fungi and e-DNA by Gareth Griffith

Find a Flowery Burial Ground



Tuesday 21st November, 7pm

AGM - Natural Progression – Time to Restore and Rebuild with Chris Baines

Tuesday 28th November, 2pm

Planning, Publicising and Running Guided Walks with Janine Marriott

Tuesday 5th December, 2pm Finding Folklore in Burial Grounds by Claire Slack

Visit www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk/get-involved/webinars/ to see the full programme. Webinars this autumn will be free to all, donations are welcome. There is always plenty of time for questions at the end. Members have the added benefit of being able to catch up with all the webinars at a convenient time for them by logging into the online Members Area - members.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

in Churches

By Cathy Wallace Communications Officer, Bats in Churches

The ancient church of All Saints in Braunston-in-Rutland is celebrating. More than 60 have gathered at the nearby Blue Ball pub for drinks and snacks, before heading to the church for an evening of talks and activities celebrating the church's resident bat colony. A touring art installation, On a Wing and a Prayer, has pride of place within the church and provides a visual and audio representation of the significance of these winged mammals to the church and its community. Meanwhile copies of an illustrated children's book, The Little Church Bat, which tells the story of All Saints and its bats, are being sold to raise money for the church and its community.

It wasn't always like this. In 2014 All Saints hit headlines nationally due to the overwhelming problems caused by its resident bat population. Bats have lived in All Saints for many years, but the situation became unmanageable when a nearby chimney collapsed and a colony of soprano pipistrelle bats moved into the church. Droppings were scattered throughout the church, causing a huge cleaning burden and dreadful smell. The church community, at its wits end, feared All Saints would have to close.

The church became a pilot church for the Bats in Churches project, a five-year partnership between the Church of England, Natural England, Bat Conservation Trust, The Churches Conservation Trust and Historic England, majority funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund. Following surveys, a specialist ecologist recommended blocking holes that allowed bats to access the church, meaning they could Braunston Beer and Bats Night - Bats in Churches

continue to roost in the roof void but could not get inside. Following monitoring, the temporary blocking was considered successful and made permanent.

As of today, the bat colony at All Saints continues to thrive and the community exists happily alongside them without the excessive burden of cleaning up after them. Furthermore, the church now actively uses its bats to engage with the community and attract a new audience to the church. Children from local schools have visited All Saints to learn more about their local church bats, and the Beer and Bats night is the second such event the church has held. The bats have gone from being a problem, to being a significant and valued part of the church and the wider ecosystem.

It's a similar story at the church of St Lawrence in Radstone, which closed its doors in 2016 when the burden of cleaning up after a roost of Natterer's bats became too much for the congregation and churchwarden. Bats in Churches brought together ecologists, church architects, heritage specialists and the PCC to devise a plan to create a roost and flight space within a false ceiling in the chancel, and enhance roosting options in the bell tower. After the works were carried out, the interior of the church was greatly improved by the false ceiling and the bats were separated from the congregation. The church re-opened for worship and community use, and was re-dedicated in December 2021. Monitoring continues to ensure the bats are thriving and the church's first



bat walk, led by experts from the local bat group, was filmed and broadcast on BBC Songs of Praise, generating a great deal of interest in the church bats. Further bat events are planned for this year.

All Saints and St Lawrence are just two of the 125 churches Bats in Churches has helped and supported over the past five years. As the project draws to a close this October, its successes range from churches saved from closure like All Saints and St Lawrence, to church communities getting specialist help with tailored mitigation solutions, cleaning and heritage workshops and training, and being connected with their local bat groups, wildlife groups and wider communities.

All solutions have been different, because all churches are different, but regardless of the problem faced and solution offered, the project has helped churches find ways to exist harmoniously with its resident wildlife.

In some cases, church communities have been positively reignited by their bats. The church of St Peter in Wintringham, North Yorkshire, had just two volunteers caring for it until the church took part in a roost count for the National Bat Monitoring Programme. The roost count acted as a catalyst for a dedicated Friends of St Peter Group which now numbers more than 30 and both the churchwarden, and the Churches Conservation Trust which cares for St Peter's, are thrilled that 'the bats brought us back together'.

During its lifespan the project also engaged hundreds of volunteers to survey more than 700 churches around England for bats. Findings from the survey will provide up-to-date information on the current status of bats in churches (the only previous study dates back to the 1990s) and help church communities with bats going forwards.

The Bats in Churches project is now drawing to a close, but if you're inspired to find out more about your local church bats, there are plenty of ways to get involved.

Join the National Bat Monitoring Programme www.bats.org.uk/our-work/national-bat-monitoringprogramme

Find your nearest bat group here www.bats.org.uk/support-bats/bat-groups

Take part in the Bats in Churches Challenge Badge www.batsinchurches.org.uk/discover-local-churchbats/bats-in-churches-challenge-badge/

If your local church has bats, the Bats in Churches website has a host of information and advice www. batsinchurches.org.uk/

Contact the National Bat Helpline for specific information and advice regarding bats in places of worship www.bats.org.uk/our-work/national-bat-helpline

Revitalising Roundabouts: Harnessing the Magic of Yellow Rattle

By Andrea Gilpin Caring for God's Acre

Following on from the article in the spring issue, here we describe how seemingly mundane roundabouts were transformed from rank coarse grass to vibrant perennial wildflower meadows, all with the assistance of a small churchyard and a tiny marvel known as yellow rattle.

A Crucial Aspect: Managing Expectations

When it comes to restoring meadow areas, one key element is managing expectations. Often when most people think of wildflower areas they are actually imagining a dazzle of colour that annuals such as poppies and cornflowers give, rather than the subtle tapestry of colour of our native flowers. Although popular (and still of great benefit to our pollinators), annuals are often grown from imported seeds while the latter are usually from local wildflower seeds which supports the restoration of our delicate grassland ecosystems. We are aiming for restoration which is why we prioritise native perennials over annuals in our management.

Taming the Fertile Soil

Similar to many areas such as hedgerows, playing fields and garden lawns, the Presteigne roundabouts posed a challenge with their fertile soil. Regular grass cutting and removal of clippings was necessary to reduce soil nutrients, thereby curbing the rampant growth of coarse grasses such as cocksfoot and false oat-grass. In autumn the grass was trimmed low, accompanied by the removal of unwanted competitors like docks, thistles and hogweed. We planted plug plants and areas were scarified with a rake, exposing bare soil that was then sprinkled with yellow rattle and wildflower seeds harvested from St. Andrews Churchyard.

Unveiling the Wonders of Yellow Rattle

Yellow rattle - a true hero in the quest for restoring wildflower meadows, proved its mettle. This semi-parasitic, meadow annual attached itself to neighbouring grasses through intricate root systems, effectively dampening the vigor of grass growth. This resulted in visibly shorter and less dense grass patches. Sowing the yellow rattle seeds in the summer or autumn was crucial for the viability of the seed as it needs to overwinter in the cold earth. It also needs to be used the same year as it is harvested because old seed won't germinate.

Llanandras Presteigne Tref-y-clawdd Knighton Llanbister

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A Dance of Seasons: From Spring to Autumn

The roundabouts underwent two early cuts during the following March/April, before the yellow rattle began growing. The area was then left to blossom and flourish until late July, when Alex, our Volunteer Co-ordinator, made the cut using a scythe. Autumn saw yet another trim with a mower to remove more grass thereby removing more nutrients. This cut also ensured sure it looked short and neat through the winter.

The largest roundabout has now blossomed into a restored wildflower meadow. Some local people are happy with it, others would prefer a flower bed. That is the way with the management of public spaces!

We would love to hear from you if you would like advice on using seed from your churchyard, chapel yard, or cemetery to restore other areas in your locality. It is incredibly rewarding to see places rejuvenated by the symbiotic dance between nature and human intervention.

A-Z of Burial Ground Conservation is for Knapweed

Knapweed, also known as "hardheads" due to its tough, spherical flower heads, has deep roots in British folklore. Its name is derived from the Old English word "cnaep," meaning "button" or "knob," reflecting the distinctive shape of its flower heads. In medieval times, knapweed was believed to possess magical properties. It was thought that carrying a sprig of knapweed could protect against evil spirits and misfortune.

Knapweed's vibrant purple flowers have also been associated with love and romance in the language of flowers, a Victorian-era tradition where different flowers were used to convey specific emotions and messages. Knapweed's purple blooms were seen as a symbol of deep love and devotion, and it was sometimes included in bouquets exchanged between lovers.

Beyond its folklore, knapweed plays an important role in the UK's ecological landscape. It is a native perennial wildflower that thrives in a variety of habitats, from grasslands and meadows to roadside verges.

It flowers between June and October and is often found in churchyards and cemeteries. It is a valuable resource for pollinators such as bees, butterflies, hoverflies and other wildlife – particularly seed feeding birds. Birds which enjoy knapweed seeds include Goldfinch, Linnet and Chaffinch.

Knapweed's ability to establish in diverse habitats makes it an essential contributor to biodiversity. Its deep taproots aid in preventing soil erosion, while its dense foliage provides shelter for small mammals, amphibians and reptiles. Moreover, knapweed's presence in grasslands helps maintain speciesrich environments, as its growth is thought to prevent the domination of competitive grasses, allowing other wildflowers to flourish.

And the top flowers were...





Love your Burial Ground Week and Churches Count on Nature 2023 was a great success this year with around 400 events and activities held and over 8,000 people taking part. 10,200 records were submitted either via iNaturalist app, by post, iRecord or email.

The most commonly recorded flowers during the week were common daisy, herb Robert and ribwort plantain. The top three bird records were blackbird, wood pigeon and robin. Bumblebees and ladybirds were the top two most frequently recorded invertebrates.

Records submitted via iNaturalist (and linked to the Beautiful Burial Ground Project) show up immediately under the project in the iNaturalist app and therefore recording this way a great way to keep up momentum. Eventually they will also show up on the National Biodiversity Atlas but this is taking a while due to the lack of specialist verifiers across the UK.

Next year this special week will be held from Saturday 8th to Sunday 16th of June. In the meantime you may like to download iNaturalist to help you identify and record the plants and animals you see. We welcome records throughout the seasons as different wildlife will be around at different time of year.

www.uk.inaturalist.org/projects/beautifulburial-grounds



'Bee Creative' event at Bradford Cathedral

Easy Fundraising

Although we all recognise the importance of shopping locally, sometimes we may need to buy online.

Whenever you do buy anything online – from your weekly shop to your annual holiday – you could be raising free donations for Caring for God's Acre with easyfundraising.

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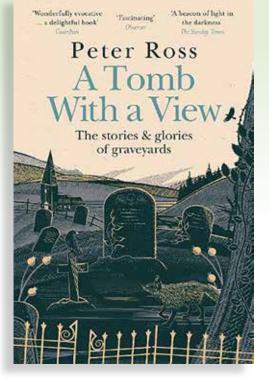
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There are no catches or hidden charges and we would be really grateful for your donations!

Book Review



A Tomb With a View

Peter Ross (2020) - A Tomb With a View: The stories and glories of graveyards. Headline Publishing Group.

Journalist Peter Ross has written a fascinating book on graveyards and cemeteries within the British Isles – from ossuary crypts containing bones of the long dead to unmarked graves where those denied consecrated ground lie. Ross narrates stories on both the macro level – how certain burial grounds came to be built – and the micro - the individual tales of the famous, the infamous and the unknown. He interviews funeral directors and cemetery custodians, Christians, Muslims and pagans, all of whom have a tale to tell; from burying Grenfell Tower victims to commemorating the medieval dead to supporting the upkeep of Highgate Cemetery, estimated at £1,500 per day, these people are passionate believers in their work. Ross is never sensationalist in his reporting and I would recommend this book to anyone who has an interest in the uniquely meaningful histories of burial grounds and their inhabitants.

Anna Wilde

Thank you to all of our members, with your support we can:

- Employ our core staff, Harriet, Prue, Andrea, Liam, Anna, Alex, Kirsty and Mick
- Run our helpline answering your calls and queries via phone or e-mail
- Develop new projects and initiatives to support groups managing burial grounds across the country
- Maintain our resources and information including the website
- Produce this magazine and maintain the charity
- Promote and support conservation activities in burial grounds
- Support our wonderful Conservation Volunteers

Please get in touch:

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