

Churchyard wildflower management for 2016 - "Caring for God's Acre"

St Ethelbert's church Herringswell is now part of a wider project under the auspices of Suffolk Wildlife Trust and rolled out throughout Suffolk and countrywide to encourage wildflowers and grasses that are no longer prolific. After the first year of discovery, under the guidance of the SWT, we are pleased to be able to report that over 48 species of wild flower and grasses were identified by SWT and that does not include the numerous lichens and invertebrates yet to be catalogued.

A small part of 2014 and all of 2015 were devoted to following the guidance of SWT to start to discover what the churchyard would reveal if managed in a way that supported wild flowers and ancient grasses.

There have been triumphs and challenges to cope with, including the exuberance of false oat grasses in the front area, the mat of dense bindweed in the back, encouraging the wildflowers that emerged in the first year, praise from graveyard users and brides, dissent and criticism of the new maintenance management, developing the new cutting regime and the 3 strenuous rake offs which have brought a good number of villagers and church committee members together.

The cutting regime has been followed faithfully by Alan; the final cut of the season in 2015 was expertly done at the very best time. The PC's financial support with the grass cutting is appreciated.

There has been plenty of discussion across the board and the committee have supplied information and posted an update to try and explain the regime, along with a particularly well attended open evening conducted by SWT. More recently, the committee have commissioned a new gate, which is now in place, the vestry roof has been repaired, gutters inspected and a graveyard H&S assessment completed to identify unsafe grave stones – there are several. So it has been a busy year.

So now we present the plan for 2016. It continues to be vitally important to have the paths to graves regularly cut (6 weekly?), as has been the case in 2015, and any requests for areas to be cut will continue to be honoured. The “runway” to the porch bloomed beautifully in time for the weddings in 2015 and has been hand trimmed and cut at appropriate times... However now we know what some of the major issues are to encourage wild flowers - SWT have advised that the whole of the back area of the churchyard which is damp and choked with aggressive and invasive species is best managed by reverting to the regular 6 week cut, in the short term, – if we had the person power to rake off this, it may slowly improve, but for the time being there is enough else to maintain.

In the front churchyard and where most of the wildflowers bloomed, SWT have indicated the false oat grass should weaken year on year by being raked off – the dog daisies especially still managed to put on a great show. The period in August when the false oat grass was at its most prolific was liked and disliked. Thus SWT advise we cut and rake the front twice a year in July and October with the development of the activity as a regular village event. Throughout the year, the graveyard area can be tackled in an ad hoc manner and would benefit from scything and raking, which two volunteers will carry out.

SWT expect that more of the delicate species will begin to show through this year and we will carry out a second audit later this year. The profusion of snowdrops continues and SWT hopes there will also be an increase in bees and butterflies as species increase in diversity. As with all natural “living landscapes” that are supported in Suffolk churches, time and attention to special areas pays off.

Church committee
January 2016