

Communities in Action



CASE STUDY:

St. Mary the Virgin Church, Bransgore: The Old Churchyard

Tell us a bit about your group

We are an enthusiastic and committed group of seven volunteers who meet on Monday mornings (9.30am-12.30pm), weather permitting. We have been working in the churchyard for over ten years, and during that time, were awarded several medals (including Gold!) from the Dorset Wildlife Trust Living Churchyards Project.

Our guiding principles are:

- To maintain the primary function of reverent internment of the deceased.
- To encourage an ecological haven for wildflowers, insects, birds and other wildlife.
- To develop a pleasant and reflective place for the bereaved, parishioners and others.

What sort of things have you done for nature so far? What changes have there been as a result of your actions?

Grass management and promotion of bio-diversity.

We have a programme of dethatching, scything, strimming and mowing and have recently introduced areas of yellow rattle. We have flourishing spring and summer flowering meadows, and have been encouraged to see an increase in diversity. We take particular care to protect the area around the war graves, where there is a colony of green-veined orchids.



Volunteers use traditional scythes as well as modern equipment



Six-spot burnet moth on betony

We now see many different butterfly and moth species, which we record. We have moth evenings in the summer which are led by local experts and these have greatly enhanced our understanding. This has led us to ensure that plants which are a valuable food source are protected and encouraged.

The village Scout Group has kindly made us bat and bird boxes, and most recently a hedgehog box. We have installed these around the site and monitor their usage. We have previously had a bee hotel, and this will be replaced.

Following the very hot summer of 2022, one of the team pointed out that there was no source of water for wildlife within the churchyard. Following detailed discussions, and with the support of the Vicar, a small pond has now been introduced and this has attracted wildlife, including the visiting deer, water snails and many insects.

We also care for the trees in the churchyard and have alerted the Vicar and PCC when remedial work has been needed. We have also worked to remove dead wood, including box, which had been infected with blight. We have used logs and brushwood to create new habitats for wildlife.

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“ I enjoy physical activity out of doors in a lovely setting with a great group of people while doing something useful for the churchyard and wildlife... it makes me feel ‘useful’. ”

Visitors to the old churchyard can find information on what to look for throughout the seasons, which is displayed on the notice board, located on the brick pillar at the entrance.

What resources or support have you used?

We greatly valued the support and encouragement we received from Dorset Wildlife Trust as part of the Living Churchyards Project, especially as, when we took on the churchyard, it was very neglected and overgrown. The advice we received and the interaction with other groups at the Annual Awards meeting helped shape and inspire our plans and approach.

We have received support from the Church, and have also been successful in obtaining grants from the Parish Council, which have enabled us to buy new tools. In addition, we have received support from the village Rotary Club and from MacPennys Nursery, and as previously mentioned, the village Scouts.

Lastly, but very much valued, are the encouraging and supportive interactions we have with visitors to the churchyard. It is always good to know that our efforts are appreciated and make a difference!

What do we plan to do next?

We have been fortunate in the last few years to welcome three new volunteers. This has made a considerable difference to what we can achieve. We plan to continue with our ‘scheme of work’, but we will now be able to consistently maintain the different areas, instead of going round in circles!

St Mary the Virgin is part of the Living Churchyard Project dorsetwildlifetrust.org.uk/Living-Churchyards

HOW DOES IT MAKE YOU FEEL?

Here are responses from individual members of the team.

“As a retired person, it is good to feel that you have something worthwhile to contribute on a regular basis. I have a happy, comfortable life and it’s good to know I’m giving something back.”

“Making a contribution to the local community makes it worthwhile for me!”

“It’s the sense of serenity and joy, of being close to nature, working in the churchyard and being with other like-minded people.”

“Working in the churchyard has taught me so much! I see so much more now and every week brings something new and different. There’s time and space to think and reflect, and happy times sharing a coffee and chat as a team.”

“So many wonderful photos of nature and of us, our wonderful team, doing our thing. How privileged we are!”

WHAT HAVE BEEN YOUR FAVOURITE NATURE MOMENTS OR ENCOUNTERS WITH WILDLIFE WHILE DOING THIS?

“The joy of watching the beautiful marbled white butterflies flitting around the meadow on a warm early summer’s day.”

“I remember seeing the snowdrops appear in my first spring and falling still with their natural beauty. The moth evening was also a memorable moment.”

“Too many over the years to list... but mainly knowing there is always something wonderful to experience each time I’m there. I just have to look for it!”

“Seeing the snowdrops and other flowers in the churchyard coming out.”

“The moth evenings! These introduced me to a world I didn’t know existed and I was captured by the beauty and diversity of the numerous species we saw.”



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Constructing the pond



1

One plasterer's tub.



2

Daphne helps choose a site. Penny and Alan start digging.



3

A large hole is excavated thanks to Alan...



4

... and the pond is set in.



5

It was gradually filled and plants were added, including Joan's Water Forget-me-not.



6

Finally, we camouflaged the plastic rim.

All photos © St. Mary the Virgin Church Group