

Caring for lichens and other stonework plants

Stonework plants of the churchyard

Many British plants and lichens rely on outcrops of bare stone or rock for their survival and as Norfolk does not have many such naturally occurring outcrops, the stonework of tombs and old buildings provides one of the few places these plants can survive in the county.

Lichens are the crusty growths, often coloured yellow, grey or white, found on old tombstones and on the walls of the church itself. They are slow growing and feed on minerals in rainwater and on the surface of the stone.

About 250 of Norfolk's 500 or so lichen species are found mainly in churchyards and some are entirely confined to them. Lichens are to be found on the mortar of flintwork (church and churchyard wall), on the hard oolitic limestone of corner stones, window frames, string courses and flush-work, and on the sandstone and limestone of headstones and tabletombs. Different species occur on the shady north walls and on the roofs especially when slate has been used.

Other plants associated with the stonework of Norfolk churchyards include pellitory-of-the-wall, which usually occurs on church walls or around the church footings; some 90 percent of its county population is found in churchyards.



LICHENS ON LIMESTONE TOMB

Greater celandine can occur at the base of walls or around flat graves, often alongside wallflower and wall-lettuce. Two scarce ferns found on stonework, wall rue and black spleenwort, have around 75 percent of their population in churchyards. Maidenhair spleenwort is even more unusual and like most stonework plants, has only short roots that do only superficial damage to the mortar. They are also a habitat for a number of mosses, some uncommon, which rely on old stonework for their habitat.

Threats to stonework plants

The churchyard dependent lichens and ferns do no significant damage to stonework and have co-existed with the church for 600 years or so, so every effort should be made to spare a proportion during renovation work. However, tree saplings should certainly be removed, by cutting them flush with the wall and painting the stumps with herbicide. Do not spray with herbicide as this will affect surrounding lichens.



BLACK SPLEENWORT



The main threat to lichens on the church is wholesale renovation work which removes all lichens from one wall, so that re-colonisation of renovated areas cannot occur. It should be possible to leave some areas of lichen-rich mortar or limestone so that re-colonisation can occur.

Other threats to lichens on headstones include shading from ivy or newly planted trees and repositioning of stones, especially if this involves a change in orientation or placement in shade along the wall. Use of herbicide near headstones will also destroy lichens, which are notoriously sensitive to atmospheric pollutants.

Although many people consider ivy unsightly, it does have a great many benefits for wildlife. Its late flowers provide nectar for many insects, at a time when little other food is available. The dark berries, which ripen in March, are an important food source for many small birds at the end of the winter, when many other berries have already been devoured. Furthermore, ivy covered trunks are wonderful nest sites for birds such as spotted flycatchers and robins and is unlikely to have a significant effect on the tree itself, as it is not parasitic upon the tree.

Ivy can, however, be damaging to stonework and should also be removed from the church wall. Larger, more woody stonework plants, like wall-flower and wall pellitory, might also need controlling, again by cutting off and painting with herbicide. These species are, however, considerably churchyard dependent in this region and can be tolerated on the church footings and on the churchyard wall. Ivy on the churchyard wall can provide winter shelter for large insects like the brimstone butterfly and pale green bush-cricket. It should be kept confined to a certain zone on the wall, however, as it will otherwise shade out lichens.

Help and advice available

The Norwich Diocesan Advisory Committee (DAC) has a policy to encourage conservation of stonework plants during renovation work. All work involving churches where scarce lichens or ferns have been reported are referred to an ecological consultant who liaises with the churchwardens, architect and, if necessary, builders, to try to ensure that some of the lichens and ferns are spared. Renovation work in all churchyards, however, is likely to put some lichens at risk and churchwardens are encouraged to send for the DAC's "Policy for Conserving Stonework Plants" in all cases and discuss the policy with the builders and architect.



VIEW OF CHURCHYARD

For advice on all aspects of churchyard management and copies of the information mentioned, please contact:

NWT Churchyard Team
Norfolk Wildlife Trust
Bewick House
Thorpe Road, Norwich
NR1 1RY
Tel: 01603 625540
churchyards@norfolkwildlifetrust.org.uk

For information on work affecting church walls or tombstones, please contact:

Diocesan Advisory Committee
109 Dereham Road
Easton
Norwich
Tel: 01603 880853
Email: info@dioceseofnorwich.org



Images by: Emily Nobbs, David North, NWT

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