Welcome to Issue 1 of Living Churchyards

Welcome to the first issue of ‘Living Churchyards’, care of Gwent’s Living Churchyard Project (GLCP). The newsletter is aimed at everyone involved in caring for the churchyards of Gwent, and interested in learning more about the wildlife they support.

Gwent's churchyards provide important wildlife havens. They support some of our finest displays of wildflowers and ancient trees, and are home to a variety of wildlife including bats, birds and insects. They are also important places for archaeology and history, revealing evidence of the past and documenting the lives of people who have lived and worked in the parish.

The Gwent Living Churchyard Project hosted by Gwent Wildlife Trust, has 3 years of funding from the Heritage Lottery Fund, Gwent's Local Authorities, CCW and the Wye Valley AONB. The project aims to increase awareness of Gwent’s wonderful churchyards for wildlife, heritage and people, and support local people in learning more about this wildlife and how to care for it. It’s is based on the long running success of the Caring for Gods Acre scheme in Herefordshire. Their experience shows churchyards can become a focus for human activity as well as wildlife, yet still remain places of quiet solace and contemplation.

The project can offer support with wildlife surveys, help with setting up ‘friends of groups’ and writing churchyard wildlife management plans, advice on how to encourage wildlife, as well as help to develop interpretation boards and leaflets for visitors. A key way we can support you is through running training days in traditional management, and aspects of wildlife & churchyard heritage.

CONTACT US - with any ideas for articles, or churchyard events, news or groups you’d like included: Rebecca Price (Wildlife Projects Officer), Gwent Wildlife Trust, Seddon House, Dingestow, Monmouth, NP25 4DY. Telephone: 01600 740358 or email: rprice@gwentwildlife.org

Gwent Churchyard Management Day

It was great to see over 70 people attend our first Gwent Churchyards Management Day in Blaenavon back in May.

The day, held in conjunction with Torfaen County Borough Council, introduced Gwent’s Living Churchyard Project and aimed to help everyone to learn more about our churchyards’ wonderful wildlife and heritage, whilst inspiring us all to take a closer look at our own churchyards. There was an opportunity to meet others involved in churchyard management and share experiences and aspirations.

Speakers included local naturalist Colin Titcombe who celebrated the rich diversity of wildlife to which Gwent’s churchyards are home, and Sue Cooper of the successful Caring for God’s Acre project in Herefordshire who demonstrated how experience there shows churchyards can be managed sensitively for both people and wildlife, providing a focus for community action and enjoyment.

Looking at the rich heritage of churchyards, local archaeologist David Howell gave an enjoyable talk about churchyard archaeology and what burials can tell us about how people lived in the past. His local churchyard; Llanvihangel Tor y Mynydd was used as a case example.

Thank you to all who came along & please do keep in touch to see how GLCP can help you learn more about your churchyard.
A number of churchyards in Gwent are already managed with wildlife in mind, and more are starting on the journey. Here’s a little of what’s been happening locally (or is happening!) this year. Please let me know of any local churchyard events you’re planning, or if you’d like to contact one of the groups.

**WILDLIFE RECORDING GROUP, Old Church, Penallt**
Led by Caroline Howard, Penallt Old Church in the Wye Valley is developing a wildlife conservation project for its lovely old churchyard. A group of keen individuals have been recording the wildlife of the churchyard since January, with a view to agreeing upon a suitable plan of management. The churchyard is known to be home to a rich variety of wildflowers. The group recently met to make hay and are planning further volunteer working parties. Recording/teaching sessions take place on a monthly basis. For more info please contact Caroline Howard (bchoward@24e.co.uk).

**ORCHID & COWSLIP SPECTACULAR, St Michaels, Glascoed**
Volunteers at St Michael’s joined forces to open the churchyard on the early May Bank Holiday, inviting visitors to join them for tea & cakes whilst enjoying the fantastic display of spring wildflowers the churchyard supports. (Photo, left; early purple orchid, by Glyn Jones).

**WILDLIFE PHOTO COMPETITION, St Mary’s Church, Penterry**
The friends of Penterry Church organised a photography competition to celebrate the natural beauty of Penterry and its surroundings. Entry to the competition which closed on 31st July was free and open to all ages with BBC Springwatch presenter; Kate Humble helping to judge. Photos will be displayed and the winners will be announced from 2.00-5.00pm on Saturday 13th September at the church.

**HEDGEROW PLANTING, St Peter’s, Pantside**
Volunteers at St Peter’s have been working hard to secure funds to install a hearing loop system and improve the internal doors of the church which provides a focus for a number of community groups. They’ve also been looking at ways to encourage wildlife to the churchyard. Parts of the churchyard support a good variety of wildflowers and is being sensitively managed to encourage their spread. With the support of the new Pantside Communities First Team funding applications for this and to plant a hedgerow around the churchyard have been made. A hedgerow planting event is planned as part of National Tree Week in November, where local people are invited to plant a hedge plant of their own.

**OPEN CHURCH AND CHURCHYARD WEEKEND, St Michael’s, Tintern**
Enthusiastic volunteers held an Open Church & Churchyard event over the late May bank holiday weekend. Despite the inclement (!) weather on Sunday and Monday, a steady stream of visitors were warmly welcomed, with plants on sale by the Tintern Village Produce Association & wonderful home baked cakes care of the WI. The church was specially adorned with flowers & there was the opportunity to learn more about the trial wildflower meadow area. Visitors were also able to view recently computerised burial records for the churchyard, the careful work of a local volunteer. (Photo, right; rough hawkbit in trial meadow area by R Price).

**BAT EVENING, St Bridget’s (St Brides Wentlooge)**
Over 15 people joined in listening to local Bat expert Richard Dodd as he shared his knowledge and enthusiasm of bats on 13th August. Poor weather put a dampener on the number of bats out and about, but with the help of bat detectors the group enjoyed listening to a couple of bats which still made an appearance.

**CHURCHES TOURISM NETWORK WALES’ OPEN CHURCHES DAY, Saturday 6th September**
CTNW’s yearly Open Churches Day. St Cadoc’s (Trevethin) will be open from 10am-4pm with children’s activities, refreshments, music and tours. See: www.friendsoftrevethinandstcadocschurches.co.uk
St Teilo’s (Llantilio Pertholey) will also be open with church records on display. Visitors are welcome to both, to share in the beauty and heritage of the churches (as well as the churchyards!). See www.ctnw.co.uk for more details and other churches taking part across Wales.

**SPRING MEETING OF THE WELSH CHAPELS SOCIETY (CAPEL) - Saturday 16th May 2009**
CAPEL encourage the preservation & study of Welsh chapels. For more information on the spring meeting contact Rosemary Davies (rosemary_hewlett@yahoo.co.uk) or see the Capel website: www.capeli.org.uk.
Churchyards are special places and one of the few places that have avoided intensive agriculture and fertilisers. As a result they are some of the best places for wildlife in the local area. Their undisturbed nature means they often support a rich diversity of plants and animals. In this regular spot we'll look at some of the wildlife to look out for; beginning with MOSSES...

Mosses can be found on nearly all walls, roofs and some gravestones in churchyards as well as on trees, paths and in the grassland. The fact they seem common place does not mean they’re unimportant! Mosses provide habitat for other life such as insects which in turn provide food for birds. Churchyards can provide home to a surprising number of different species, including some that are very rare.

Where possible try and think about mosses when managing a churchyard and try to only strip them away when they cause a safety hazard, for e.g. on slippery paths or where growth is so vigorous that it’s obscuring inscriptions. Aim to find a balance between what’s good for wildlife and the interests of ‘tidiness’ and preservation of inscriptions. It could be worth having a specialist survey before any walls are dismantled or extensively repaired to see if you have any uncommon species.

Most mosses don’t have common English names but you don’t have to be able to identify them to appreciate their beauty! See the British Bryological Society website for more information: rbg-web2.rbge.org.uk/bbs
Developing a Churchyard Management Plan:

Step 1 - Survey: What have you got?
Before changing any management it’s important to identify what wildlife habitats & features of interest you have. It’s helpful to draw up a sketch plan of the churchyard as this provides an overview of the current situation, and enables the management plan to focus on areas of greatest wildlife interest.

Things to add to your plan:
- Boundaries, paths, church outline
- Orientation & estimate of area
- Areas of new burials, regularly visited graves, as well as older burial areas
- Trees & shrubs
- Signs of interesting plants, lichens, on stonework
- Historical features: gravestones, monuments of particular interest. Oldest gravestone? Famous graves?
- Neighbouring land use: fields, houses
- Areas containing grassland/flowers of interest
- Mark flower beads, compost heaps
- Recent/historical sightings of wildlife/past surveys
- Current/past management, e.g. grass cutting times
- Church building – tower/spire?
- Managed by who & what resources are available?
- Any local individuals who might be willing to carry out a survey for birds, bats or other wildlife?

GLCP can help with the survey and management plan. Together with you, management ideas can be discussed to best achieve a regime which is sensitive to the needs of visitors and wildlife. Plans are best kept simple and should be realistic and affordable.

Step 2 - Management Plan
The survey provides a starting point for drawing up a management plan. GLCP can help with the survey and management plan. Together with you, management ideas can be discussed to best achieve a regime which is sensitive to the needs of visitors and wildlife. Plans are best kept simple and should be realistic and affordable.

Step 3 - Putting the plan into practice
The plan should be agreed and discussed with all the groups with an interest in the churchyard. It’s helpful to draw up a management timetable; one for annual tasks and one for long term aims. To avoid confusion it’s useful if one person oversees the management. All those who help care for the churchyard should have a copy of the timetable and be clear about the aims.

Step 4 - Letting visitors know what’s happening
The plan needs to be understood by local people. This can be achieved through a display poster at the entrance to the church or churchyard, e.g. a simple plan, or notice, or an interpretation board or mini-exhibition. Some churches have developed leaflets for visitors. Articles in the church or parish newsletters are also helpful.

Think about ways to let people know what's going on - Churchyard based events are also a useful way of encouraging local people to learn more about the special features of your churchyard and how it is cared for. Is the church part of any local walks, included in any books, guides? If you have a yearly church open day why not think of ways to incorporate the churchyard into it. Think about who you could invite to help to manage the churchyard. Some churchyards have made haymaking a regular sociable village event.

GLCP can help with money for training courses, talks, walks associated with the special features of your churchyard, to help you and the local community to learn more. We can also help support churchyard heritage & wildlife events to encourage local interest and hopefully local help with management. For example ideas include ‘a spring bird song and breakfast’ ‘a hay rake and cake morning’ or ‘a winter scrub bashing & scrumptious grub afternoon’. We also have a website and this newsletter, where you can place news of the work at your churchyard and use as a means of spreading the word of churchyard events.

You don't have to 'sign up' to be a part of the Living Churchyards Approach and the scale of involvement is up to you. Churchyards small and large provide important homes for wildlife & even simple changes can help.

GLCP supported by: