

HISTORY.

I took over the management of the Churchyard sometime around 1985. I leaned over the wall one day and asked my predecessor, Teddy Thorneycroft, if he could do with some help. Ted was fairly elderly and obviously struggling to cope. He showed me how to use the Strimmer, all we had in those days, and 10 minutes later the job was mine for life. He forgot to tell me the job was paid for by the PC, so for three or four years Jenny and I did it for 'nowt.

In those days large parts of the Churchyard were completely overgrown with nettles, brambles and deep grass. There were deep holes where old graves had sunk among the undergrowth and grave diggers spoil was simply thrown on the path. Tree branches had fallen and been left, which added to the difficulties of forcing a way through to some of the graves. A few areas immediately round the church and the area for new burials were strimmed fairly regularly, with the clumps of cut grass left to lie. Other than that there was no maintenance, apart from the removal of shoots from the base of the lime trees every couple of years to make the Vicar's pea-sticks, the Vicar in those days being John Lownds, who was very supportive of our efforts but took the view that the grass in the Churchyard wasn't his top priority.

After a couple of years of strimming long grass and clearing brambles and nettles it became apparent that to keep the place in anything like reasonable condition would require a mowing machine, which, in turn, would require a fairly level surface without the existing holes and mounds. We were finally lent a home-made machine by Geoff Punchard of the PC, who also drew my attention to the fact that the job carried a wage, but most of what we'd cleared was still only maintainable with the strimmer. So work began, one section at a time, of getting the ground level enough to mow, but without levelling any of the mounds which were obviously unmarked graves. Over several years the whole area was thus brought to its present state - not level, but level enough.

The next step was to try to reduce the fertility of the soil, which was obviously very high, and being fed by leaving the grass cuttings lying on it. So the PC finally purchased a proper machine which mowed the grass and collected it - box mowing, as it's called - and I was able to collect the cuttings and dispose of them, which brought its own problems.

I can remember no wild flowers in the Churchyard in those days other than the most vigorous weeds which had taken over. It seems remarkable, but the place was little more than a desert - the wild flowers returned slowly as the undergrowth was cleared.

I should add that in the early days we were very innocent and had no other thought in mind but to tidy the place up a bit and leave it. But nature doesn't work like that, and we soon realised that the grass had to be cut regularly, apart from all the other jobs that kept appearing once we'd gained access to some of the overgrown parts. So the job gradually grew, until after nearly 30 years it seems finally to need some kind of description of what the maintenance of such a wonderful place actually entails.

Now read on.

GRASS CUTTING.

The problem is that a balance has to be struck between letting nature have its way, which is fine for wildlife; keeping the place like a large lawn, which is fine for people visiting the graves; and the middle course of semi-wildness, which is good for the flowers. So :-

Large areas, particularly around the church itself and the current burial site are mown throughout the summer on a regular basis, but this is done with the mower at its highest setting, which cuts the grass to a reasonable length without being too devastating to species other than grass. The cuttings are removed by box-mowing and composted. Some areas are left unmown through the summer and cut by scythe in September, the cuttings being burnt, and one or two areas are simply left alone apart from occasional removal of saplings.

The actual cut areas may vary slightly from year to year, depending on what flowers appear in the spring, and should include all the graves which are still visited. The 'wild' areas have a few graves, but these are very old and, I hope, past remembering, though I occasionally get caught out by people looking into family history.

The small areas round and between the gravestones which the mower will not reach are cut regularly using the Strimmer, unless any wildflowers show themselves, when they are left to seed.

All this generates a vast amount of grass cuttings, which are dealt with in two ways. The majority is taken to a very large compost pit which I have dug out in the south east corner. This is in two sections; each one takes about three years to fill, at which point it is turned over, covered and I move to the other section. After a year of the old compost working I uncover it, bag it up and carry the bags to the lych gate, where I pile them for anybody who wants the (very good) compost. The cuttings which don't go into the compost pit are piled in fairly well-hidden corners to provide habitat for wildlife and disturbed as little as possible, though eventually I have to reduce the piles, usually by putting some of the stuff straight in the green bin through the winter.

All this, over a period of 15 to 20 years has reduced the fertility of the soil quite nicely, and therefore, in theory, the maintenance required. I try to remind myself of this as I cut the grass for the second time in a week in May - or this year, in September.

The areas treated as described above are indicated on the attached map.

TREES.

Can be a bit of a problem. Some people don't believe a Churchyard should have any trees at all, and some think I'm a mad destroyer if I try to trim any back to protect the gravestones.

My own feeling is that trees help to make the Churchyard the beautiful place it is - but a balance has to be maintained. So the only new trees planted are small pines in the remotest corner to grow into Christmas trees for the church, and only dead trees are removed, and then only if they become dangerous.

For the rest, I have to carry out a surprisingly large amount of trimming lower branches over the winter, as the summer's growth brings them below head height, or they shade the grass too much. The basic rule is to take off anything below the top limit of half the church ladder, which is as far as I feel comfortable climbing, and this gives a pleasant, open feel to the place without causing any harm to the tree.

One or two special cases. The huge lime trees by the north wall throw out a lot of growth from their bases, and this requires heavy cutting back in August: I have cut back the two

yew trees near the chancel door and am trimming them into an arch, as this was obviously the original intention in planting them, but they were growing wild and would have menaced the church: ash tree saplings are a major nuisance everywhere, but particularly on old graves, and have to be removed regularly.

Cut branches and fallen twigs are left in discrete corners, again to provide the correct habitat for wildlife. These areas are marked on the attached map.

PATHS.

Require regular treatment with Round-up to keep the weeds under control. I use weedkiller rather than grub out the invasive weeds because it causes no damage to the paths, some of which are in a poor enough state without having the surface disturbed further. Apart from this, a fairly regular clearance with the blower keeps things tidy, although there are sections which are becoming dangerous as the surface erodes and should be renewed.

I try to clear at least some of the snow from the paths in winter if I'm around when it falls. Unfortunately the heavy use by school children and parents means it's usually been well trodden before I have a chance to get at it.

I don't charge the PC for the Round-up. I prefer to buy it myself and use it when I need it and for the Rectory Room path.

WALLS.

The drystone retaining walls in the middle part of the Churchyard - ha-ha walls - and lengths of the boundary walls were fallen down and overgrown when I took over. I have rebuilt them over the years and they should be maintenance free for a good long time, apart from the places where trees push them. At the moment there is a doubt over the retaining wall by the south east gate which has been bulging for years, and will require rebuilding at some time in the future.

The rebuilt walls are indicated on the attached map.

WILDLIFE.

I make a point of trying to maintain areas where animals and insects can flourish. This involves piles of branches, twigs and rotting grass in quieter areas, as well as the unmown and 'wild' parts. There are also four or five nesting boxes high in trees. Unfortunately the grey squirrels, which infest the place can destroy a bird box if there's anything inside, and the numerous hedgehogs which used to live in the Churchyard were destroyed by badgers which moved in about 5 years ago and left the carcasses lying about. It was interesting to have a badger living in the large drain under the north side of the church, but I'd rather have kept the hedgehogs. The badgers seem to have moved out now, so we may get the hedgehogs back, but at the present rate of decline they seem doomed to extinction.

There are numerous slow worms living in grass piles and compost heaps, and lizards under the kerbs of those graves that have them, and in common with most places we get the odd visit from foxes. As to the insects I'm not qualified to comment, though there is a colony of

bumble bees in holes in the ground near the south east corner and covering the nearby borage flowers on sunny days.

MISCELLANEOUS JOBS.

I also maintain the small lawn at the Rectory Room on Church Street. I don't charge the time to the PC, but do use the PC strimmer and lawn mower. Who authorised this in the past I can't recall, but the area is a village facility and fairly small, so I assume it is still OK to do so.

The large area on the west side of the Churchyard passed to the Derbyshire Dales District Council when it was closed for burials a few years ago, and they are now responsible for its maintenance. As such I have nothing to do with maintenance of the area, but am rebuilding the boundary wall at the south end, which was falling down like all the others, but sits at the top of a sheer drop to the path known as Ragcroft and was extremely dangerous. I have stabilised the worst section and continue with the rest at odd intervals.

Gravestones, and particularly those with kerbs round, are apt to become unstable as the ground moves slightly each winter. Mostly it's just a matter of pushing them back to the vertical if they lean a long way, but they all need checking from time to time to ensure they aren't about to topple over if I catch them with the mower. Some gravestones had been removed and leant against the west wall of the church in years gone by - I have 'replanted' these near to where they were left, but we have no way of knowing if they are anywhere near the original site.

I spend a lot of time these days talking to people who are looking for their ancestors' graves. Family history research has taken off in a big way since we got the Internet. Fortunately I have a copy of the Churchyard Record compiled by the Derbyshire Historical Society about 10 years ago, and this is invaluable, especially since some of the inscriptions have become indecipherable in the years since the record was compiled. The furthest travelled visitors this year were from Australia, and I had a family from the Orkneys who were delighted to find the grave of one of their ancestors who died in 1864.

Wild flowers have made a slow comeback since the area was cleared of the more aggressive growth. I have recorded something like 100 species (without going into all the different kinds of thistle or umbellifers) though some of these have appeared only for a short time before departing again.. A very basic list of the flowers that I've noted is attached.. I'm in the process of doing a tree audit , which is much easier, and that will be attached also. I think, in view of the incredible variety of wild flowers that flourish on the hills around Bonsall, that the Churchyard is still rather poor in species, but there is a slow but steady improvement. I've had almost no success in growing from seed but I find that if I provide the environment the wild flowers will arrive, though they may not stay very long at first.

The large open gutter which runs along the west wall of the church attracts weeds and needs to be completely cleaned out at least once a year. Otherwise the church itself gets checked for weeds growing out of the walls, a particular problem area being the porch roof. I also clean out the roof gutters and downspouts fairly regularly. The small garden area round the church is dealt with by volunteers, and my only contribution is to provide compost and to remove waste to the compost heap.

BONSALL CHURCHYARD - WILD FLOWER AUDIT.

Compiled round about the year 2000. A very basic list, not going into all the various types of thistles or umbellifers.

Daisy.	Wild Strawberry.	Birds Foot Trefoil.
Celandine.	Cornflower.	Bluebell.
Snowdrop.	Ox-eye Daisy.	Borage.
Crocus.	Black Medic.	Himalayan Balsam.
Daffodil.	Ivy.	Sanicle.
Shepherds Purse.	Columbine.	Lily of the Valley.
Ground Ivy.	Broad-leaved Willowherb.	Honesty.
Speedwell.	Catsear.	Foxglove.
Dog Rose.	Biting Stonecrop.	Meadow Saxifrage.
Red Clover.	White Clover.	Pignut.
Cowslip.	Hogweed.	Peach-leaved Bellflower.
Oxlip.	Hedge Woundwort.	Solomon's Seal.
Forget-me-not.	Grim The Collier.	Cotoneaster.
Primrose.	Herb Bennett.	Canterbury Bells.
Buttercup.	Feverfew.	Buddleia.
Dandelion.	Bramble.	Hen and chickens.
Red Currant.	Meadow Vetchling.	
Lady's Smock.	Meadow Cranesbill.	
Green Alkanet.	Wild Pansy.	
White Dead Nettle.	Tufted Vetch.	
Yellow Archangel.	Field Bindweed.	
Jack-by-the-hedge.	Ladies Bedstraw.	
Common Sorrel.	Great Mullein.	
Wood Sorrel.	Greater Plantain.	
Cow Parsley.	Teasel.	
Slender Speedwell.	Smooth Sow-thistle.	
Ribwort Plantain.	Beaked Hawksbeard.	
Red Campion.	Rosebay Willowherb.	
Corydalis.	Groundsel.	
Cow Parsley.	Yarrow.	
Herb Robert.	Wall Lettuce.	
Lords and Ladies.	Ragwort.	
Broad-leaved Dock.	Leafy Hawkweed.	
Common Cleavers.	Ground Elder.	
Ivy-leaved Toadflax.	Hoary Plantain.	
Nettle.	Hedge Bindweed.	
Chickweed.	Reflexed Stonecrop.	

Bush Vetch.	Great Willowherb.
Ramsons.	Harebell.
Bugle.	Creeping Thistle.
Shining Cranesbill.	Woolly Thistle.
Dames Violet.	Self-heal.

BONSALL CHURCHYARD - TREE AUDIT.

Compiled 2013, and not including shrubs.

Ash.	Rowan.
Sycamore.	Weeping Ash.
Lime.	Hawthorn.
Cherry.	Yew.
Oak.	Grey Poplar.
Birch.	Beech.
Copper Beech.	Horse Chestnut.
Laburnum.	Elm.
Holly.	Lawson's Cypress.
Blackthorn.	Norway Spruce.