

St Denis' Churchyard County Wildlife Site



Photograph: Nicola Jenkins

Management Plan 2023



**Wildlife Trust for
Beds, Cambs
& Northants**

Prepared by Louisa Carlisle, Wildlife Trust BCN

Intro

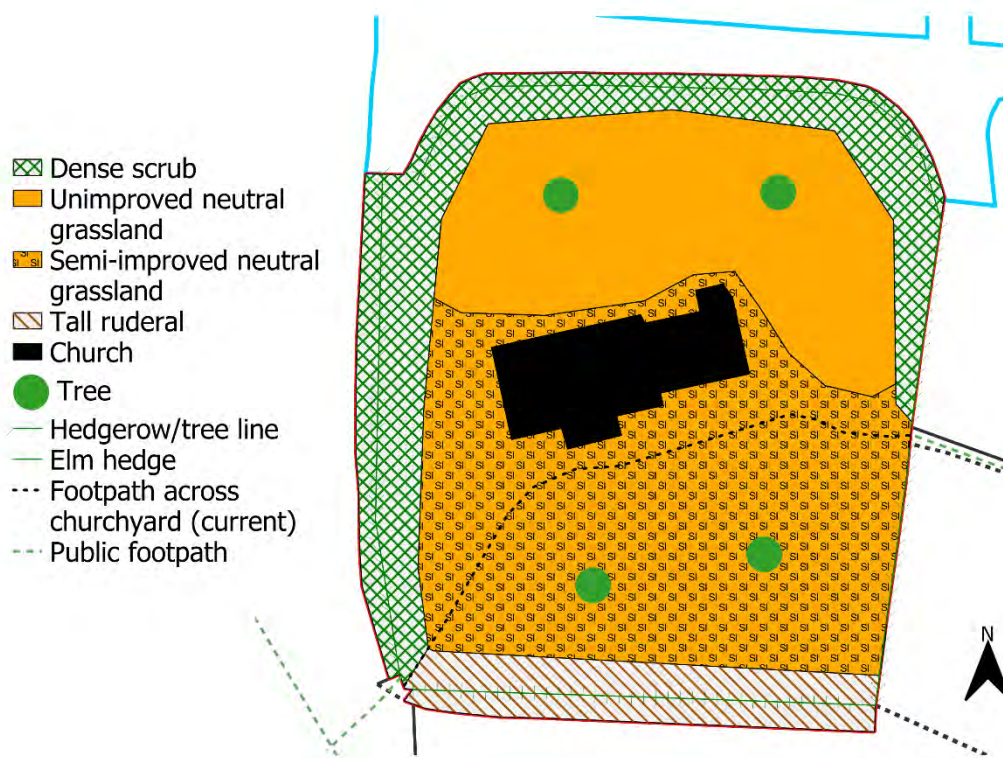
St Denis churchyard is a fantastic example of semi-improved neutral grassland derived from old meadow, a habitat that is declining nationally. The graveyard is still in active use, with occasional burials and graves being visited, whilst the church itself is decommissioned and the building being restored and looked after by the Friends of Friendless Churches group. The church itself is a known bat roost for multiple bat species including Brown Long-eared and Barbastelle. A small group of active local volunteers have managed the churchyard for several years, maintaining it as an area of high biodiversity as well as a place for visitors and walkers.

The site is approximately 0.3 hectare, with the decommissioned church in the centre and a path running from between the two site entrances and the church entrance. The boundaries are lined by hedgerows, and four small trees are additionally situated within the grassland; two Horse-chestnut *Aesculus hippocastanum* in the southern section and two Yew *Taxus baccata* in the northern section.

The northern section of the grassland has historically held the most botanical interest and continues to host a wide diversity of species including Quaking-grass *Briza media*, Creeping Jenny *Lysimachia nummularia*, Bugle *Ajuga reptans*, Meadow Vetchling *Lathyrus pratensis* and Bird's-foot Trefoil *Lotus corniculatus*. Whilst Oxlip *Primula elatior* were previously recorded on the site they appear to have disappeared, but a patch of Cowslip *Primula veris* and Yellow Rattle *Rhinanthus minor* remains to the south eastern area of this section.

The southern section of grassland has, with appropriate management over the previous years, become less rank and species such as Cow Parsley *Anthriscus sylvestris*, which were dominating, have now become less frequent, allowing other species to flourish. It is now a more species-rich grassland with a similar mix of grassland species to the northern section, although not all species have made their way into this area yet. Common Spotted-orchid *Dactylorhiza fuchsii*, Bee Orchid *Ophrys apifera* and Pyramidal Orchid *Anacamptis pyramidalis* are all present across the site.

The hedgerows around the churchyard contain a rich mix of species including elm *Ulmus sp.*, Spindle *Euonymus europaeus*, Common Hawthorn *Crataegus monogyna*, Blackthorn *Prunus spinosa*, Ash *Fraxinus excelsior*, Horse-chestnut and Field Maple *Acer campestre*. The southern boundary is largely dominated by elm, which have recently been cut down to approximately 1.5m, having grown up to a mature tree height before this. The remaining hedgerows around the other sides of the churchyard also consist of relatively mature trees which are starting to overshadow the grassland and should be kept lower. The bank below the treeline at the northern end of the site hosts an array of woodland species including Snowdrop *Galanthus nivalis*, Bluebell *Hyacinthoides non-scripta*, and Dog's Mercury *Mercurialis perennis*.



Phase 1 Habitat Map of the churchyard, 2023

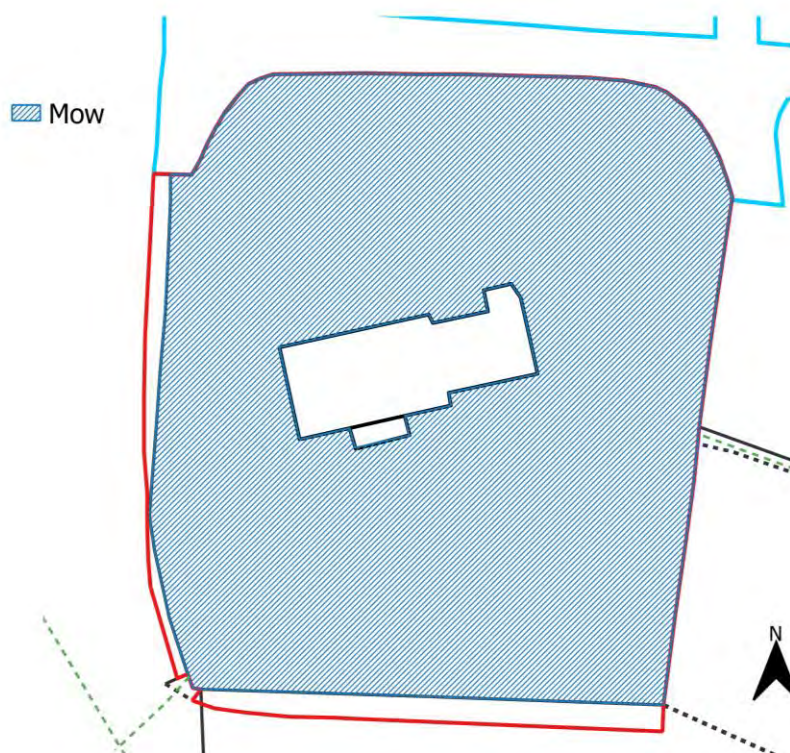
Management recommendations

Mowing regime

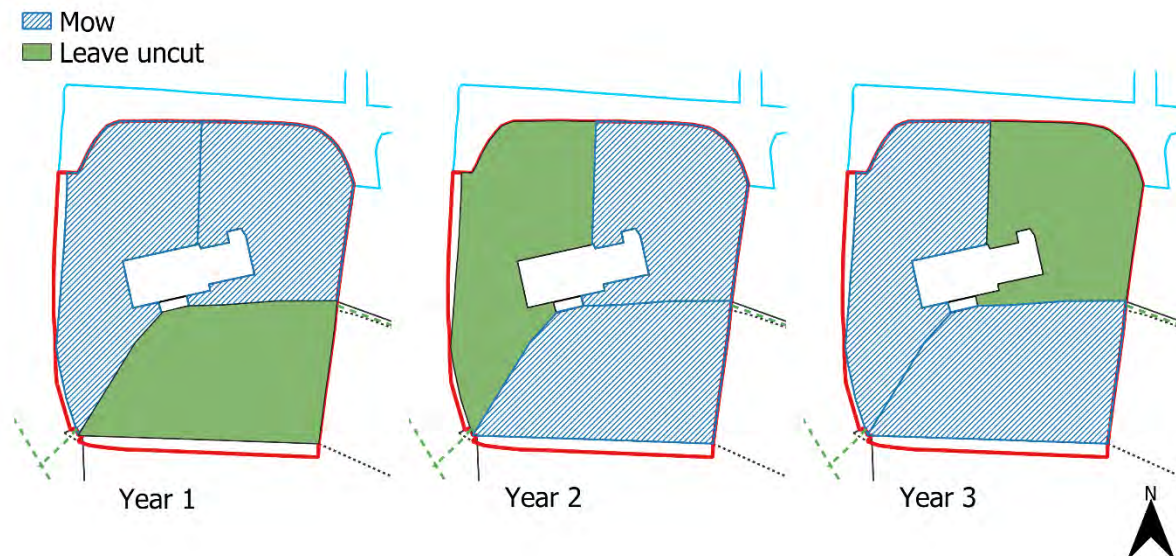
Appropriate mowing of the grassland allows wildflowers to flower and set seed, whilst avoiding a build-up of nutrients and coarse grasses that would lead to a degradation of the site biodiversity otherwise. It also prevents establishment of shrubs and trees that may seed in from the surrounding hedgerows, including keeping the numerous elm suckers under control. The previous mowing regime was aiming to reduce the overall nutrient levels and abundance of undesirable species. As this has been successful at returning the grassland to a favourable state, the regime can now be altered slightly to focus on maintenance.

Mowing can be undertaken with the current scissor mower and/or hand scythes or brushcutter depending on volunteer and tool availability. If cutting by hand, mowing may need to be spread over two or three days due to workload, which may be beneficial to the overall grassland as this will create more habitat diversity across the site throughout the mowing season. Cutting by scythe additionally makes it easier to avoid specific flowering plants and causes less noise disruption to both wildlife and residents/walkers. Cuttings in the species-rich areas should ideally be left for two or three days to allow the seeds to drop, before being raked up and removed from the site or piled under surrounding hedgerows, as has been done previously.

Mid-March (optional): If there has been significant winter growth, the majority of the site can be mown to knock back any vigorous grasses that have taken hold over the winter. Any patches of spring-flowering plants can be mown around, and the mower should be on the longest setting. This will further prevent damage to any early-flowering species and protect any butterflies overwintering on the bases of grass stems. The cuttings should be raked up and removed or piled underneath the hedges.



Mid to late July: Mow a large section of the site, rake up the cuttings (perhaps after a few days to allow for seed-drop) and pile them underneath the hedges. The aim is to remove the nutrient-rich summer growth, late enough that the majority of species have already flowered and set seed. Some species may continue to grow and (re)flower after this cut. One third of the site should be left unmown to provide longer habitat for overwintering invertebrates as well as allowing this section to flower and seed. This area should be rotated each year on a three-year basis.



Mid-September: If a lot of regrowth is seen after the July cut, with the average sward height reaching 15-20cm or above, then repeat the July cutting regime in September.

Throughout year: Paths can be mown and kept short throughout the year, to allow for access across the churchyard and to visited graves. This also provides some variety in sward height which may benefit some species. The route of paths should be changed each year where possible, avoiding any particularly species-rich patches. Note that although a public right of way exists up to both entrances to the churchyard, there is no defined right of way across the churchyard and so the exact section that is mown can be changed year-on-year. Paths should be 2-3 metres wide limit the area being regularly mown.

The Nettle *Urtica dioica* and other weeds around the base of the church can be kept mown throughout the year to keep them under control and prevent them spreading into the grassland. Alternatively, if volunteers are available, they can be pulled up before the Nettle sets seed, though this will take time to eliminate the Nettles, as they can spread via rhizomes as well as seed. However, Nettle and other weeds do support a variety of invertebrates and so can be tolerated as long as they don't spread into the grassland.

Hedge management

The hedgerows surrounding the site provide habitat and a food source for a wide range of birds and invertebrates. However, much of the hedges are becoming overgrown and growing up into full trees, as well as spreading out and starting to encroach upon the grassland. The southern boundary hedgerow largely consists of elm and has recently been cut back down to approximately 1.5m, to the benefit of the southern grassland that it risked overshadowing. The hedges should be monitored to make sure that they are thickening with new side shoots. If they do not thicken, they may need to be cut lower to the ground or laid.

Winter: Cut back sections of the overgrown hedges (west and east side in particular) in rotation over the coming years to prevent them encroaching onto the grassland. The southern elm boundary that was cut back to ~1.5m should now be managed as a hedge, with new growth being partially trimmed back over the winter. Repeated trimming to the same point can place stress on the hedge and lead it to deteriorate. Instead, the hedge should be allowed to grow year on year, with trimming leaving approximately 10cm of regrowth. After about 10 years, the hedge should then be taken right back once again, either by a hard cut back down to the original height, or if time and resources allow, by being laid. The HedgeLink website has lots of information on hedge management. This leaflet showing the cycle of a hedge is particularly informative and highlights how a healthy hedge can be at various states and sizes throughout its life, and what the appropriate management is at each stage.

https://hedgelinek.org.uk/cms/cms_content/files/78_hedgelinek_a5_12pp_leaflet_7.pdf

The four small trees within the churchyard itself should be monitored and not allowed to grow too large, as they risk shading out a large area of the grassland otherwise.