



[See all News](#)



The rewilding plan turning churchyards into ‘living sanctuaries’

New initiatives by vicars and volunteers are helping God’s Acres in Britain become a haven for our beleaguered wildlife

Joe Shute, SENIOR FEATURE WRITER

21 February 2024 • 1:26pm



Get the latest news anytime

[Open the app](#)



In the churchyard of All Saints Church in Glossop, the Rev Dr David Mundy is witnessing an ever-expanding congregation of creatures, great and small.

Hedgehogs scamper through “dead hedges” constructed by volunteers out of mounds of decaying vegetation, while on warm evenings bats whorl between the centuries-old trees. Blackbirds and great tits tussle around the bird feeders, and a lone robin flutes loudly from an ancient yew.

Hundreds of snowdrops planted by volunteers flower between gravestones which date back to the 1600s, alongside hellebore and dusky pink clumps of lungwort. Foxglove, cyclamen and wild primrose are also beginning to poke through the soil.

Rather than it being merely a place for the dead, the Rev Dr Mundy prefers to think of his churchyard in the Derbyshire town on the edge of the Peak District as a “living sanctuary”.



The Rev Dr David Mundy tends to a hedgerow | CREDIT: Paul Cooper

A few years ago, the churchyard of All Saints, the parish church of Glossop, resembled many others up and down the land. The grass between the gravestones, marking Glossop residents buried from the 17th century until the 1920s, was strimmed short by contractors. Aside from

Get the latest news anytime

Open the app



But in 2020, a member of the congregation called Eric Igo, a 68-year-old garage owner from the nearby town of Hadfield, approached the Rev Dr Mundy with an idea to restore the churchyard back to a wilder vision. Assisted by a doughty band of around half a dozen volunteers, including 76-year-old churchwarden Barbara Fearnley, they have transformed the area of land surrounding the church.

Homemade bird boxes have been installed and wildflowers donated by the local community planted alongside the headstones. As well as the aforementioned dead hedges, there are insect and hedgehog hotels, wigwams supporting heritage sweet peas, water butts and a compost heap teeming with worms. Currently, they are considering adding a pond.

At the most recent count, there were nearly 50 species of wildflowers in their churchyard, with ever more emerging. “It is a lot of work but you can’t think about it like that,” says Fearnley, a retired bank worker who has been a member of the congregation for 38 years and now spends her weekend digging and hoeing. “You just enjoy it.”



Barbara Fearnley spends her weekends helping out at the Derbyshire church | CREDIT: Paul Cooper

All Saints in Glossop is part of a burgeoning national movement which is transforming Britain’s churchyards into a vast patchwork of nature reserves – with new life emerging

Get the latest news anytime

Open the app



The Bishop of Norwich, the Right Rev Graham Usher, recently made a call to the Church of England’s governing body, the General Synod (which runs from February 23-27), for “land action plans” to be developed to encourage and enhance biodiversity across its estate. In his call to action, the Right Rev Mr Usher has stated churchyards should be rewilded to become “places for the living, not just the dead”.

With the Church of England responsible for around 17,500 acres of churchyard alone (notwithstanding a further 70,000 acres of agricultural land owned by dioceses which is known as glebe land and is largely leased to tenant farmers), such a concerted push could have a dramatic impact on enhancing Britain’s biodiversity.

There is another reason that churchyards have the potential to be such an oasis of wildlife across the country. As consecrated ground, they have been largely spared the ravages of industrial farming and development which has decimated Britain’s flora and fauna elsewhere. Ancient trees have been left to grow and the earth left undisturbed for centuries.

The area is now home to plenty of creatures, great and small | CREDIT: Paul Cooper

In his 2014 book *Meadowland*, the author [John Lewis-Stempel](#) documents the wildflowers present in the churchyard of St Michael’s and All Angels in Dulas, Herefordshire. Among the

Get the latest news anytime

Open the app



gravestones each spring emerge flowering orchids, cowslip, bird's-foot trefoil (known as "granny's toenails") and purple lady's smock.

Matt Jackson, the conservation director for the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire, says it is currently working with around 100 churches across the three counties which are interested in better managing their lands for wildlife. At some rewilded churchyards in Northamptonshire, he says, glow-worms and adders have been spotted. Considering the adder is now a threatened species feared to be on the brink, conservationists have been delighted at the presence of a serpent in the Garden of Eden.

"They do remain oases and it can be very surprising where some of these sites are located," he says. "Churchyards exist outside of pesticide use, herbicide use, regular ploughing and collectively it is a sizeable quantity of countryside. The other upside is there is a churchyard in nearly every village and numerous ones in every town."

Several national schemes exist to support the rewilding ambitions of church congregations. A charity called Caring For God's Acre provides an action pack for those considering rewilding consecrated ground, while since 2016 the Christian charity A Rocha UK has offered an "eco church" accreditation.



Polly Eaton, the eco diocese officer for A Rocha UK, says nearly 7,000 churches are now registered with the eco church programme. Of those, 3,236 have been awarded bronze, silver or gold certification. All Saints in Glossop is one of just 43 churches to receive the coveted gold award.

The easiest thing for any church wishing to rewild its land, Eaton insists, is simply to alter its mowing regimen. Cutting the grass less frequently and removing the clippings instantly provides the space for other flowers to establish. Parishioners at one church in the Hertfordshire town of Tring where she lives have even resorted to mowing with a scythe once a year, leading to a profusion of wildflowers including rare orchids.

However, she acknowledges that rewilding is not a movement without its critics, and stresses it is vital for churches to engage the wider community in their plans and the ecological benefits of allowing nature to take over. “For some people, churchyards need to be neat and manicured – spaces just to look nice,” she says. “When you see margins uncut or gravestones with long grass, for some people that means not being cared for. I think communicating to people why places look like that is integral to any churchyard management.”



There is another obvious sensitivity to consider where graveyards are left to grow: those who have been laid to rest there. Back at All Saints in Glossop, the Rev Dr Mundy says there have been no complaints from the wider community and that in fact the work in the churchyard has helped keep the memory of the people buried there alive.

As part of the work, previously neglected gravestones have been scrubbed and cleaned. In 2022, a grave marking local inventor and benefactor Isaac Jackson and his wife, Harriet, was regilded to mark the centenary of his death. The Rev Dr Mundy led an outdoor memorial service attended by the descendants of the couple and says they were delighted to see the transformation of the surrounding churchyard.

“They were so impressed we could do that because so many churchyards are not looked after,” he says.

Prior to the Covid lockdown, the average congregation at All Saints for a Sunday service was around 55 people. Since then, it has declined to around 40; a similar story reflected in churches across the country.

Eric Igo, the Rev Dr David Mundy and Barbara Fearnley have helped give new life to the land around the church | CREDIT: Paul Cooper

Get the latest news anytime

Open the app



However, the gardening work has helped attract people who are not traditionally associated with the church to explore its land and even lend a hand. Eric Igo says its core team of six volunteers is regularly approached by people wishing to help out with the work.

Already they have been assisted by local schoolchildren, conservation groups and even a Community Payback scheme, where offenders spent a day clearing brambles. Residents living in the streets surrounding the church have donated bulbs and plants. Occasionally, those who have enjoyed the nature flourishing outside have even ended up joining the congregation itself.

Igo admits it is a considerable effort staying on top of the gardening jobs, but it is a challenge they relish – and crucially for cash-strapped churches across the country, one that requires very little in the way of expense.

By tending its garden, he hopes for the same impact as those who first built a church on this site following the Norman Conquest. “If you build it,” he grins, clutching his spade, “then people will come.”

Related Topics

Nature, Countryside, Wildlife, Religion, Church of England



The Telegraph values your comments but kindly requests all posts are on topic, constructive and respectful. Please review our [commenting policy](#).

Show comments

More stories

Met Police officer found guilty of multiple rapes and kidnap

Lindsay Hoyle on brink after Labour Gaza vote walkout

Labour’s dark arts blow up in Sir Lindsay’s face

Get the latest news anytime

Open the app



Electric car charger pulled over fears hackers could use it to attack National Grid

I have glimpsed the terrifying future of lazy, defenceless, near-bankrupt Britain

The Office's 'Big Keith', actor Ewen MacIntosh, dies aged 50

More from Environment



The court ruling that could stop eco-protesters escaping punishment



Sunak faces backlash after saying farmers work for love, not money



Biden is realising just how unpopular green EVs are – with help from the unions

“





Britain's historic gas-powered lamps – and the campaign to save them from faux-environmentalism



It makes perfect sense that Putin wants Biden to win the election. It's all about the gas market

“



Mudlarking around: ‘The story of London is locked away in the mud of the Thames’

More from The Telegraph

Who is Sarah Munby? The civil servant embroiled in the Horizon scandal

Dune: Part Two, review – when was the last time a \$190m blockbuster was this stately and sinister?




Liverpool vs Luton result: Hosts survive Anfield anxiety attack with second-half goal blitz

Politics latest news: Labour put Hoyle under ‘intolerable pressure’, says Duncan Smith

Teenager fishes in town’s ‘plague’ of potholes

Eating bananas ‘is more effective at reducing blood pressure’ than cutting down on salt

The Telegraph

[Back to top](#) 

Follow us on:



[Help Centre](#)

[About us](#)

[Telegraph Extra](#)

[Reader Prints](#)

Get the latest news anytime

[Open the app](#)



[Fantasy Sport](#)

[UK Voucher Codes](#)

[Betting Offers](#)

[Tax Strategy](#)

[Broadband and Mobile Deals](#)

[The Chelsea Magazine Company](#)

[Newsletters](#)

[Download the Telegraph App](#)

[Privacy](#)

[Terms & Conditions](#)

[Modern Slavery](#)

[Advertising terms](#)

[Guidelines](#)

[Manage Cookies](#)

© Telegraph Media Group Limited 2024



Get the latest news anytime

[Open the app](#)

