

A Botanical Survey

by

John Thompson
Consultant Ecologist

Letton Church, Herefordshire

Botanical survey of the churchyard

Date: 10 June 2003

General description

A small, compact, churchyard, with a generally open aspect but shaded by trees in the SE corner. There are stone walls with brick cappings around the northern and eastern boundaries; a high brick wall in the west and a cypress hedge to the south.



Forget-Me-Not

The entrance is through a hand gate on the eastern boundary, from where a straight path runs westwards to the south porch and then on to a second gate in the western boundary.

Although in a rural position there are no fields or woods or hedgerows immediately adjacent.

There is a large and busy farmyard on the north side; a cottage to the west; and the gardens and grounds of a large house wrap around the south and east. This situation will have an effect on the flora.

Colonisation by plants growing in the surrounding countryside will be hampered - but plants and trees growing in the adjacent gardens may spread into the churchyard.

The churchyard is normally maintained by strimming and mowing but at the time of the visit most of it had not been cut at all in 2003.



Ivy Leaved Toadflax

Vegetation and flora

The area lying to the south of the path supports mainly tall species-rich grassland dominated by Sweet vernal-grass and Red Fescue, with Meadow Foxtail and a wide variety of typical meadow flowers. These include Bird's-foot Trefoil, Sorrel, Ribwort Plantain, Pignut, Yarrow, Cat's-ear, Knapweed, Red Clover, Meadow Buttercup and lesser Stitchwort. There are a few Primroses. A single clump of Meadow Cranesbill was noted towards the western margin.

The orange flowers of Fox and Cubs are scattered throughout - this is an introduced plant from northern and central Europe that readily spreads from gardens either by seed or stolons.

Field woodrush is also fairly frequent in this area.

False Oat-grass and Yorkshire Fog are also scattered through the meadow area, becoming more prevalent towards the edges.

These are vigorous grasses and are likely to become more dominant if cutting is reduced and/or the cut grass is left lying.



Feverfew



Pellitory of the Wall

The eastern margin and the south east corner are shaded by trees, both within the burial ground and in the ground to the east.

There is a large Yew tree, some tan hollies, a Hawthorn and several Cypresses.

All of these had recently been pruned and the resulting disturbance and increased light have led to changes including the growth of Cleavers, Nettles and occasional docks.

However an interesting flora survives there, including patches of Dog's Mercury, Wood Anemone, Wild Strawberry and violets.



*Square stemmed
St. John's Wort*

There is a single plant of Tutsan towards the corner. Bluebells and Snowdrops are recorded in that general area but were not found during the survey.

Apart from the trees ' mentioned, several seedlings of Beech, Ash, Oak and a single Horse Chestnut were seen. Also Hazel, Cypress and Elderberry seedlings.

The area to the north of the path and around the church supports an equally wide variety of plants but many of these are not native and some of the others are generally regarded as "weeds".

The former include, for example, Greater Periwinkle, Green Alkanet and Greater celandine. The last-named was formerly cultivated as a dye-plant and is often found close to habitation. The "weeds" include Sterile Brome grass, Common Nettle and Creeping Thistle, all of which will spread aggressively if not controlled.

The path has been colonized by a wide variety of plants including Black Medick, Mallow, White Clover and Shining Cranesbill.

The older burial areas to the south of the path support old grassland with many of the typical meadow plants that are now increasingly scarce or absent in the countryside.

A relict woodland flora survives under trees in the south-east corner.



Common Fumitory



Yarrow

Some management suggestions

As the churchyard has become quite overgrown it is suggested that the following should be done at the earliest opportunity:

- Cut and clear everything to the north of the path including the thistles and grassland behind the church. Weed or cut the path.
- Cut and clear a two or three metre wide margin around the grassland to the south of the path but leaving Meadow Cranesbill and Mullein to flower and seed.
- Strim under the trees but leaving Wood Anemones, Violets, Dogs Mercury and Tutsan.

Thereafter the following annual programme is suggested:

Cut and maintain short grass around recent graves, and to the front of the church (Area A on the plan) and a one metre strip along the southern edge of the path. This will give convenient access to recent graves and a cared-for appearance.

- Cut a two-metre wide path from the existing path to the gap in the Cypress hedge, as shown on the plan. Mow this regularly and remove cuttings.
- Cut a one metre wide margin around the boundaries of the southern section as shown on the plan. Mow regularly and remove cuttings. Cut the remainder of the southern section in late July and again in late September. Remove the cut grass within 3-4 days. Then erect temporary netting and graze with sheep in October /November to leave area short during the winter and early spring.

- Cut the area behind the church (G on plan) monthly during the growing season and remove the cut material. The object is to control thistles, make it tidy and give access for inspection and maintenance.] Strim. as necessary under trees to control any coarse "Weeds".

It cannot be stressed too strongly that the cut grass should always be raked off and removed.

If it is left it will smother the weaker wildflowers and rot down to increase the fertility and that will encourage docks, nettles and coarse grasses. Herbicides should not be used except perhaps on the main path, though the easiest and cheapest way to maintain the path might simply be by regular close mowing.

If herbicides are used elsewhere they will create bare areas that are then susceptible to colonization by nettles and docks. Also they may kill non-target species.

John Thompson 12.6.03