Management Plan for Parish of the Ascension Burial Ground.

## Introduction

This document is intended to aid all of those involved with the Parish of the Ascension Burial Ground in relation to the horticultural management processes. The burial ground is an important site not just in terms of historical and religious significance but also the significance in terms of flora and fauna. This highly bio-diverse site is located in an area due for major expansion and change brought about by the expansion of Cambridge University, and as such will provide a valuable wildlife corridor in an area of urban expansion. Where the physical elements are clear to be evaluated it is that most elusive and subjective feeling of atmosphere that this burial ground has in abundance. It is of real significance and must be retained. These points should form a statement of significance and the document detailed below is part of the data required for a conservation management plan to be written and funding applied for.

## History

Arkley Nursery (hereafter referred to as Arkley) took over the maintenance of the burial ground in July 2001 having been approached by Diana Tapp the then church warden of Saint Augustine's. Previously to this an elderly gentleman maintained the site.

To our knowledge herbicides, pesticides and fertilisers had not been previously used. This policy remains to the present day. Since 2001 Arkley has removed all grass cuttings, leaves and prunings, these have been composted off site in order to lower the soil fertility and weaken the grass sward thus aiding the colonisation of wild flower species.

The inspection, care and safety of the trees are a collaboration between Martin McGrath, a qualified tree surgeon, Rev. Janet Bunker and Arkley.

## Maintenance Methods

In overview, the whole site is managed and maintained in such a way as to encourage the highest capacity and variety of plants and wildlife possible whilst working with the techniques available to Arkley and the limitations of a once weekly visit.

The close proximity of the graves and general unevenness of the site prohibits the use of large grass cutting machinery, and therefore small pedestrian mowers with grass collectors are used in conjunction with line trimmers and brush cutters (strimmers). With careful use and the advantage of moving at a walking pace, prevention of damage to the monuments is achieved. Damage to selected plant species can also be avoided. This can include desired wild flower species and wildlife friendly seed heads as well as cultivated plants, bulbs, fresh flowers and grave objects deposited by family and friends of the deceased and the general public. Some intricate grass cutting is done using hand tools.



By Rod Ailes and Andrew Birkett

Where possible, wildflower seed heads are left *in-situ* until late winter/early spring as by this time they have dehisced (shed the seed), and overwintering insects such as ladybirds have finished making use of them for shelter over the winter hibernation period. Within the areas where grass is left long to encourage the wildflowers, a series of paths is created each year. They are mown regularly to facilitate pedestrian access to graves. No grave therefore is far out of reach with the hope that foot traffic through the flowers can be discouraged. Paths with the most wear each year are able to be diverted when reinstated each spring. This prevents excess compaction, the erosion of soil and loss of greenery. Wider access paths are mown frequently around the chapel of ease reassuring visitors that the site is properly maintained. The close regular mowing in these areas is also advantageous in the creation of the most diverse range of plant species possible similar to that of constantly grazed meadows. Plants such as Red Clover (*Trifolium pratense*) and Plantain (*Plantago lanceolata*) are well adapted to cope with grazing and foot traffic but would be unable to compete in the areas where grass is left longer. This technique whereby different areas have grass of differing lengths with mown grass paths in-between is known as the mosaic method.

During the winter months, ivy is removed from headstones, monuments and walls to maintain their structural integrity. Occasionally where it is not interfering with inscriptions and is in an adult stage of growth- this is the growth that bears flowers and berries- it is left alone or lightly cut back (where supports are in danger of damage from the weight of the plant material.) This late season flowering plant it is a valuable addition for bees and other insects. Where ivy is invading trees, current advice being taken is to sever it at a height of around 3 metres or where the trees' trunk separates into branches. This technique prevents trees from being damaged due to lack of light but still allows cover for wildlife particularly beetles and nesting sites for birds. It also means tree health can be visually assessed easily (dead wood is easily identified for example.)

Particularly along the beech tree boundary, crown-raising of lower branches is often required when they are causing obstruction or damage to surrounding areas. This is also carried out in winter. It is also notably along the beech tree boundary and the cemetery extension that the majority of leaves accumulate. These leaves are removed to stop the graves and paths being 'buried' under debris and vegetation.

Throughout the site unwanted tree saplings are removed. The majority of brambles, stinging nettles and other invasive species such as Buddleia are also removed to prevent a stifling of biodiversity. A few elderberries are left for their flowers and berries as well as for harvesting by the public for making cordial.

Management plan

The burial ground has been divided into plots bound by physical features such as walls and hedges for the purpose of mapping the individual graves. This map is roughly followed for the maintenance and grass cutting regimes. The three main criteria for the management of the plots are governed by firstly the frequency of public use (e.g. the newer cemetery extension –plot 6- is cut more frequently as it is visited more.) Secondly the exposure and microclimate within the plot which lends itself to certain wildlife and plant species (e.g. plot 1 is shaded by trees giving rise to a dominance of spring flowering plants and bulbs. Thirdly economics, labour and the restrictions of machinery are factors in

certain areas. The boundary and plot numbers and locations are all shown on the attached plan (see appendix 1).

Maintenance regimes- boundaries

- B1. This is heavily shaded particularly by lime and mature Irish yew trees creating a tunnel effect. Here removal of brambles, tree saplings and lower branches keeps access clear and graves visible. Ivy is also removed from the boundary walls.

- B2. Due to newly planted lime trees to screen an adjacent area of domestic development this area requires regular mulching and watering as well as weed control around new plantings and regular tree tie inspections. Ivy is also removed from walls and headstones.

- B3. (as B1)

- B4. The bordering beech trees (*Fagus sylvatica*) and hedges need regular crown lifting of lower branches (for health and safety reasons) as well as the removal of leaves in autumn to prevent the smothering of memorials and wildflowers underneath.

- B5. The pruning and trimming of this informal hedge is carried out infrequently but when necessary.

- B6. This is a privet hedge near the lodge which is cut twice a year avoiding bird nesting periods. Ivy is kept clear of the plaques on the flint wall.

Maintenance regimes- plots

- Plot 1. This is heavily shaded by trees and the chapel. Many woodland and spring flowering plants and bulbs thrive here as well as several mosses and liverworts. Parasitic ivy broomrape (*Orobanche hederae* ) grows here. Grass is cut and removed in June or July after flowers have set seed and every 4-6 weeks thereafter until autumn when leaves drop- these are also removed and composted.

- Plot 2. This narrow plot adjacent to the wall of plaques is cut every 3-4 weeks from spring until June. Patches of stinging nettles (*Urtica dioica*), docks (*Rumex obtusifolius*) and cow parsley (*Anthriscus sylvestris*) are strimmed more frequently to help reduce the spread of these invasive weeds by controlling the seed population. Plaques are kept clear of ivy.

- Plot 3. This sunny and sheltered area is much frequented by butterflies and as such a late summer meadow regime is adopted here. It is left uncut for the flowering season to encourage the spread of wild flowers such as field Scabious (*Knautia arvensis*) and Crane's-bill (*Geranium pyrenaicum*). Once set seed, the meadow is cut in September. During winter overgrown shrubs are renovation pruned and ivy trimmed to expose headstones.

- Plot 4. This area contains the oldest graves and here snowdrops (*Galanthus nivalis*), English bluebells (*Hyacinthoides non- scripta*) and primroses (*Primula vulgaris*) are abundant (especially towards boundary B2.) it is maintained as a spring/summer meadow regime as of that in plot 1.

- Plot 5. This is a highly used area for both relatives and historically interested parties (the philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein's grave lies here.) A summer meadow regime is maintained here whereby it is cut every 3-4 weeks until June and then again once a month after August. Due to heavy use a series of small sub-paths are mown frequently (every 2 weeks). Suckers from the tree of heaven *(Ailanthus altissima)* and Buddleia seedlings are regularly removed.

- Plot 6. This newest working area of the graveyard includes an ashes area so as such is frequently visited and has wide regularly mown paths around the internment area. Mowing selected areas every 4-8 weeks aims to produce a summer flowering meadow. Trimming around selected species and raising cutting height where necessary helps meet this objective. Nettles and cow parsley are a problem in this area and are strimmed continually.

The Future

The maintenance of the burial ground has been roughly similar on a year to year basis for the past 12 years. Significant changes would alter the dynamics of the plant species which has taken decades to create. The overall atmosphere and character of the site with its different plots and boundaries has become well established both naturally and in the minds of its visitors. When compared to other burial and memorial sites such as the highly maintained and manicured local American cemetery the contrast may seem stark, but each respective location is aiming for completely different objectives with associated maintenance practices that demonstrate this. A policy of educating the visitors is necessary to emphasise this management philosophy. Educating the visitor can be addressed by the use of signs as well as signage about specific wildflower species at entry and exit points as well as throughout the relevant plots. A comprehensive list and map of the location of every burial, located at the entrance will aid visitors to find their required monument without having to walk systematically up and down each row of headstones. This will lessen the damage to wildflowers by excessive trampling underfoot. Open days with associated literature and local news articles will explain the conservation techniques. Additional (localised) publicity hopes to increase awareness of one of Cambridge's 'best kept secrets' with the aim of increasing public support and funding (increasing membership of the friends of the ascension burial ground group for example), thus securing its long term future without turning it into an oversubscribed tourist attraction.

Extra funding would also assist in keeping the boundary walls and well used areas such as paths in a high state of maintenance and alleviate the concerns of those visitors that think neglect is predominating.

One of the more immediate tasks needed to be undertaken, is the cataloguing of the tree population. To Arkleys' knowledge a document detailing the names, ages and condition/heath of the

trees does not exist. This would seem vital if public safety is considered. A rolling process of tree maintenance, removal and replacement could then take place.

Other notable concerns include the fact that some of the fastigiate Irish yew trees (*Taxus baccata* 'fastigiata') have died (along boundaries B1 and B3), these and selected others need replacing. It would seem appropriate that a similar line of yews be planted along boundary 2 to screen the new housing development and thus form a link relationship between boundaries 1, 2 and 3. New developments beyond boundary B4 suggest a solid fence is required for security. In front of this however a mixed planting of native and non-native hedging stock could be planted creating a semi-natural appearance. Arkley suggests using plants such as Forsythia, dog roses (*Rosa canina*) and fire thorn (*Pyracantha spp*.) to provide a 'nectar bar' with flowers and berries to entice more species of butterflies and birds.

The remaining trees including the Scots Pines (*Pinus sylvestris*) and Western Red Cedars (*Thuja plicata*) are all of a similar age and over a continual process they should be gradually replaced. Providing trees of differing ages means they can support a more bio-diverse fauna.

Michael Downs (arboriculturist- Garden Works Tree Surgery) and Matthew Rose (Cambridge Tree Officer) have inspected the site on a more thorough basis so the current tree population can be made safe and advice sought for future plantings.

Over the years a number of wildlife surveys have been produced. Ian Webb (Cambridge Wildlife Officer) has a keen interest in the site and has pointed out a number of ways in which to increase the area's biodiversity. These include the provision of shelter and nesting sites for many animals. The addition of bat and bird boxes as well as hedgehog and ladybird shelters for winter hibernation should be seen as essential. He also recommended that the artificial introduction of new plant species by means of wildflower plug plants for example should not be undertaken to avoid unbalancing the current residing populations.

Cooperation and partnerships with other bodies such as Butterfly Conservation, British Ornithological Trust and botanical societies etc. would assist in securing its long term future.