

London Borough of Croydon

Habitat Action Plan

## **Cemeteries & Churchyards**



“Leave this world a better place”

(Slogan to advertise a woodland burial site on the Isle of Wright)

### **1. Aims**

- To respect the primary purpose of cemeteries and churchyards, which is that of burial and as a space to accommodate grieving visitors, whilst sensitively promoting their nature conservation value.
- To protect, manage and enhance the nature conservation value of cemeteries and churchyards
- To involve all of Croydon’s faiths groups and communities in the conservation of cemeteries and churchyards

## **2. Introduction**

Cemeteries and churchyards are collectively called burial grounds in this Action Plan. They make a significant contribution to the provision of urban green space in Croydon, offering a quiet sanctuary for both people and wildlife. They therefore represent a real opportunity for new kinds of conservation and green space policy. Cemeteries can provide some of the functions of parks and, unlike parks, the reassuring presence of people is generally guaranteed. Some are visited by significant numbers of tourists, and they can be important to family history researchers. But this Action Plan recognises the prime purpose of burial ground is for burial of the dead, their veneration and commemoration, and many people desire memorials to be maintained with readable inscriptions.

Churchyards are burial grounds associated with an identifiable church building. Some churches have also established extensions and detached burial grounds to provide additional space. Many of these 'church gardens' have since been turned into public gardens. Once a Church of England burial ground has reached capacity and is closed for any future burials, the space remains 'consecrated' i.e. holy ground lying within the jurisdiction of the church. The maintenance of Church of England churchyard can be transferred to the local authority through an "Order in Council".

The majority of cemeteries are interdenominational burial grounds in municipal or private ownership found outside the confines of a religious meeting place. Within these parts can be consecrated for use by adherents to the Church of England, and other parts reserved for the exclusive use of other religious groups.

Croydon's burial grounds contain a wide variety of habitats, including grassland, woodland, scrub and occasionally wetland. Species associated with Croydon's burial grounds include woodland edge species such as bats, stag beetle, spotted flycatcher, tawny owl and song thrush, as well as holly blue, speckled wood and orange tip butterflies. The gravestones, monuments and walls of burial grounds provide an unusual 'masonry habitat' which may host ferns, invertebrates and lichens. Fungi and mosses are also a feature of certain burial grounds.

Croydon Councils Bereavement Services have adopted the Charter for the Bereaved and within this are assessed against a wide range of environmental initiatives.

## **3. Current Status**

Burial grounds represent a relatively minor resource in terms of land area. But their importance for biodiversity relates not just to individual site value, but also to their distribution throughout Croydon and their contribution to the green space network.

The distribution of burial grounds in Croydon relates to the changing burial needs of the borough over the last two centuries.

Croydon, like so many outer London boroughs grew out of a number of former villages. Croydon today comprises the parishes of Croydon, Coulsdon,

Addington and Sanderstead all of which had a parish church. The oldest of them is St Mary's in Addington Village, dating back to 1080.

The list below shows all existing burial grounds in Croydon. 8 are associated to a church. 3 are currently open for burials, managed by Croydon Council. Queen's Road cemetery is the original public burial site for Croydon. There are no new graves available, apart from burials in existing family graves. Mitcham Road Cemetery is Croydon's largest burial site, which also used up all its virgin space in 2005. At both Queens Road and Mitcham Road cemeteries old graves are "re-claimed" and any remaining space in the grave resold for further burials. Green Lawn Memorial Park lies outside the borough boundary in Warlingham. It is an American style lawn cemetery with bronze tablets marking the graves.

All burial grounds together cover nearly 40 ha or 0.4% of the total land area in Croydon.

The grounds of the three principal cemeteries are maintained by Bereavement Services. The remaining sites, apart from St John Memorial Garden in Shirley, are maintained by Croydon Council Park Services.

### 3.1 Cemeteries in Croydon

| Site Name                        | Site Address               | Area, ha     | Maintenance |
|----------------------------------|----------------------------|--------------|-------------|
| All Saints Vicarage              | Beulah Hill, Upper Norwood | 0.64         | LBC         |
| All Saints (Parish)              | Sanderstead                | 1.43         | Privat      |
| St John (Parish)                 | Coulsdon                   | 0.89         | Privat      |
| St John (Parish) Memorial Garden | Croydon                    | 0.81         | LBC         |
| St John Memorial Gardens         | Shirley                    | 1.46         | Privat      |
| <i>St James, Rest Garden*</i>    | <i>Purley</i>              | <i>0.81</i>  | <i>LBC</i>  |
| St Mary (Parish)                 | Addington Village          | 0.4          | LBC         |
| St Peter                         | South Croydon              | 0.67         | LBC         |
| Mitcham Road Cemetery            | Thornton Heath             | 20.6         | LBC         |
| Queen's Road Cemetery            | Thornton Heath             | 9.8          | LBC         |
| Green Lawn** Cemetery            | Chelsham Road Warlingham   | 3.6          | LBC         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>                     |                            | <b>41.09</b> |             |

\* Gravestones have been removed

\*\* Lawn cemetery (bronze tablets instead of gravestones)

## 4. Specific Factors Affecting the Habitat

### 4.1 Lack of Resources

Cemeteries Services suffer from both a lack of funding and a lack of importance and commitment being placed on nature conservation as part of site management. This lack of status implies that cemetery managers currently are too hard-pressed with minimising maintenance costs to consider nature conservation improvements.

The Institute of Cemetery and Crematorium Management, as part of the Charter of the Bereaved distribute annually a Best Value Assessment Process to members. The process now has over one hundred burial authority members, including Croydon, and includes reference to many initiatives involving nature conservation in cemeteries. Best Value may be the best opportunity to advocate more sustainable management.

However, new, 'wildlife-friendly' practices are appearing such as 'green burial'. Some managers may therefore be quite interested in making biodiversity enhancements, particularly if suitable training is provided.

#### **4.2 Shortage of burial space**

Croydon as with much of London is now close to exhausting its supply of burial space and four boroughs now fail to offer a burial option. Only a few new cemeteries are proposed in London and new-style 'natural burials' are available in a few locations. These are mostly small plots within an urban setting and large scale natural burial sites are only available some distance out of London. All London authorities can use powers in the London Government Act to "reclaim" old graves (usually over 75 years) and resell any remaining burial space. The Home Office consulted on a review of burial law in 2004 and raised the issue of the re-use of graves (often referred to as 'lift and deepen'). Unlike the reclaimed grave option this allows for the remains to be exhumed and buried deeper in the grave, allowing new burials on top. This could occur every 75 years and create genuinely sustainable cemeteries. This situation presents new opportunities but also risks for nature conservation. A management plan should be a pre-requisite to safeguard areas of historic and biodiversity interest.

Shortage of burial space has led to practices such as squeezing new graves between old ones or onto road and path verges, and mounding soil on top of old plots to allow new burials to take place. This could have adverse effects on the nature conservation value of the site. Most cemetery authorities have prohibited this practice in that it destroys the Victorian design and infrastructure of cemeteries. The shortage of burial space in inner London also means visitors may have to travel long distances to visit grave plots and the personal link between a community and its local burial site is lost.

Faiths differ in their customs concerning cremation and burial, and therefore their need for burial space.

#### **4.3 Management**

A general preference for neatness and order in the urban landscape, or even restoration of an original cemetery landscape design, can make management for biodiversity unwelcome. For example, research has shown that whilst many regular visitors to cemeteries value the peaceful and private qualities of cemeteries partly supplied by nature, they do not want to wade through long grass to reach graves. In view of this most conservation areas are set out on old graves where few bereaved people ever visit. This can then suggest that these graves are neglected by the council in that they have no public voice to

fight for continued maintenance. There is also a high degree of ignorance about the benefits to biodiversity of uncut grass during the summertime.

Health and Safety legislation requires burial authorities to maintain cemeteries ensuring they are safe places for the public to visit. This introduces the need to regularly test memorials to ensure that they are structurally safe. As memorials age many are removed and with the easier access this allows between memorials, a more intensive maintenance regime may be introduced thereby damaging bio-diversity. Unchecked growth of vegetation on monuments can cause severe physical damage therefore management compromise must be sought.

However, burial authorities can satisfy the above criteria whilst maintaining commitment to nature conservation. Examples include introducing biodiversity schemes on unburied areas, or boundary features of the cemeteries, involving various associated conservation groups, and placing signs around the cemetery explaining such schemes to the public. The latter is vital in helping introduce nature conservation programmes without adverse criticism.

#### **4.4 Multiple Uses of Cemeteries and Churchyards**

Many of Croydon's churchyards are no longer used for burials and now have a number of other roles. Some are used more as traditional parks, others attract family history researchers. Some sites contain valuable heritage features and monuments.

Churchyards by their secluded nature provide cover for anti-social behaviour that possibly restricts the use of the site by some other groups and may impact onto the management of the churchyard through the increased demand for clearance work. The needs and demands of all these users need to be taken into account whilst trying to improve the site for biodiversity.

#### **4.5 Development Pressure**

Existing legislation relating to cemeteries and dating back to 1847 allows private cemeteries to be sold for development. Under the Local Authorities' Cemeteries Order 1977, grave monuments in municipal cemeteries, unless listed by the Secretary of State, may have no legal protection against removal and destruction. No such proposals have been made for any Croydon site.

## **5. Current Action**

### **5.1 Legal Status**

Generally, Church of England churchyards & churches together are the subject of jurisdiction of the Bishop, exercised by the Chancellor in the Consistory Court. No alterations may be undertaken without a faculty from the court. London Borough of Croydon is within the diocese of Southwark, permission to undertake works must be sought from the diocese, who can issue a faculty authorising works.

The responsibility for maintaining churchyards in good condition rests on the Parochial Church Council for the parish, except where the burial ground has

been closed by Order in Council and the obligation passed to the local authority to maintain the area as public open space. Parochial Church Councils require a faculty from the court before carrying out works.

Churches in use are also affected by secular planning control and subject to planning control in the same way as other buildings. Churches, monuments or other structures may be protected using planning legislation; buildings or other structures can be 'listed', trees and hedges covered by Preservation Orders, sites included in Conservation Areas, scheduled as an ancient monument, or designated as an archaeological area. Further protection may be offered through Local Nature Reserve Declaration; and through policies in the boroughs UDP.

## **5.2 National Action**

The House of Commons select committee cemeteries report (2001) made a number of recommendations relating to nature conservation. In brief, these were that cemetery managers should evaluate the biodiversity potential of their cemeteries and manage accordingly, that the Living Churchyard and Cemetery Project should continue, and that English Heritage and English Nature should develop special assessment procedures; guidance from the latter is expected.

A number of other government initiatives may assist with biodiversity conservation of cemeteries. For example, the Audit Commission is reviewing performance indicators, the Home Office has committed to researching basic statistics on the nation's cemeteries, English Heritage is engaged in a Cemeteries Review project, and a new government advisory group is being formed to disseminate guidelines on training and management plans for cemeteries.

A number of leading nature conservation charities have run awareness campaigns to promote churchyards and cemeteries for biodiversity.

## **5.3 Local action/ Voluntary involvement**

There are currently no known Friends of Groups associated with any burial ground in Croydon. The National Federation of Cemetery Friends is an umbrella group for UK groups, providing advice on a number of burial ground issues.

Burial grounds were part of the second half of the Open Spaces Survey, carried out in autumn 2005, which looked at the quality of all the sites, to establish what improvements are needed.

## **5.4 Professional organisations**

Cemetery managers and other cemetery-related professions might belong to a number of organisations, many of which are sympathetic to nature conservation management objectives. A diversity of choice for the bereaved is increasingly being acknowledged as good practice by many of the institutions.

## 6. Flag ship Species

These plants and animals are characteristic of cemeteries and churchyards in Croydon. They have been chosen because they are easy to identify and monitor by the general public.

| <b>Common Name</b>                        | <b>Latin</b>  | <b>Brief Description</b>  |
|---|---|---|
| <b>Holly blue butterfly</b>               | <i>Celastrina argiolus</i>  | Holly blue caterpillars feed on the flower buds of holly and ivy. The butterflies with pale blue undersides with small black spots can be seen fluttering around trees and ivy-bound hedgerows trees and walls throughout the summer. |
| <b>Green Woodpecker</b>                   | <i>Picus viridis</i>  | The combination of mature trees and open grasslands of churchyards and cemeteries provide ideal habitat for this colourful bird with its distinctive laughing call.   |
| <b>Lichens</b>                            | <i>For example<br/>Caloplaca decipiens,<br/>Xanthoria parietina<br/>Hypogymnia<br/>physodes</i> | Extremely slow growing plants that are actually formed by a fungus and an alga growing together. Usually highly sensitive to air pollution. Can be found on stone memorials, trees and soil.  |
| <b>Ants (Yellow Meadow, Black Garden)</b> | <i>For example<br/>Lasius flavus, Lasius<br/>niger</i>  | Ants nests can be found under flat stones or rockery plants in sunny positions, some species cause mounds in meadows. They are also a major food source for Green woodpecker.   |
| <b>Slow worm</b>                          | <i>Anguis fragilis</i>  | This legless lizard likes to bask in the sun. It prefers open areas plus good cover such as grass, scrub or stone. Old churchyards provide an ideal habitat.  |
| <b>Ivy</b>                                | <i>Hedra helix</i>  | A familiar evergreen woody climber which can either carpet a woodland floor or entwine itself around trees. The dense foliage provides nesting and hibernation sites for wildlife and it is an important nectar source.               |
| <b>Fox</b>                                | <i>Vulpes vulpes</i>  | Foxes are very adaptable. Their breeding dens may be in a rock crevice, sunken graves or under tree roots.  |
| <b>Yew</b>                                | <i>Taxus baccata</i>  | This evergreen is a traditional symbol of longevity, as it can grow to well over 1000 years   |

## 7. Objectives, Actions and Targets

### Objective 1

To promote the biodiversity of cemeteries and churchyards to the wider public

| Action   | Target Date | Lead         | Other Partners |
|--|-------------|--------------|----------------|
| 1.1 Produce a promotional leaflet on sites accessible by public transport  | 24 months   | CS           | NCCM           |
| 1.2 Organise walks and talks, plus annual open days at 2 sites per annum   | annual      | CS<br>NCCM   | CC             |
| 1.3 Improve signage, make greater use of church notice boards to promote nature conservation within burial groups            | ongoing     | CS           | NCCM,<br>CC    |
| 1.4 Develop and co-ordinate a popular survey for burial grounds to collect base line data about the sites and their wildlife | 24 months   | ACCS<br>NCCM | CC             |

### Objective 2

To protect the biodiversity of Croydon's cemeteries and churchyards

| Action  | Target Date | Lead               | Other Partners |
|---|-------------|--------------------|----------------|
| 2.1 Produce guidance materials for those working in or who are responsible for burial grounds and churchyard to encourage a wildlife friendly management approach | 24 months   | NCCM               | LCP            |
| 2.2 Produce management plan (supplement?) for Croydon managed cemeteries and churchyards  | 24 months   | CS                 | NCCM           |
| 2.3 Collate data (new survey, existing data) that will allow to establish wildlife value of all sites   | 36 months   | NCCM               | NCCM<br>GIGL   |
| 2.4 Identify and monitor lichen populations on 2-3 target sites   | annually?   | NCCM,<br>CS        | GIGL           |
| 2.5 Install bird and bat boxes on suitable sites  |             | NCCM               | BTCV           |
| 2.6 To diversify habitat mosaic on one sites per annum, through i.e. change in ground maintenance regime, planting native trees/shrubs/hedge                      | annual      | CS                 | BTCV, CC       |
| 2.7 Ensure biodiversity issues are included in recruiting procedure for cemeteries staff and in contract documents for ground maintenance                         | ongoing     | HR,<br>EAST,<br>CS |                |



## Abbreviations

|      |  |
|------|--|
| ACCS | Association of Croydon Conservation Societies  |
| BTCV | UK wide nature conservation charity            |
| CC   | Church Community                               |
| CS   | Cemeteries Services                            |
| EAST | Environment and Sustainability Team            |
| HR   | Human Resources                                |
| LCP  | Living churchyards Project                     |
| NCCM | Nature Conservation and Countryside Management |
| GIGL | Greenspace Information for Greater London      |