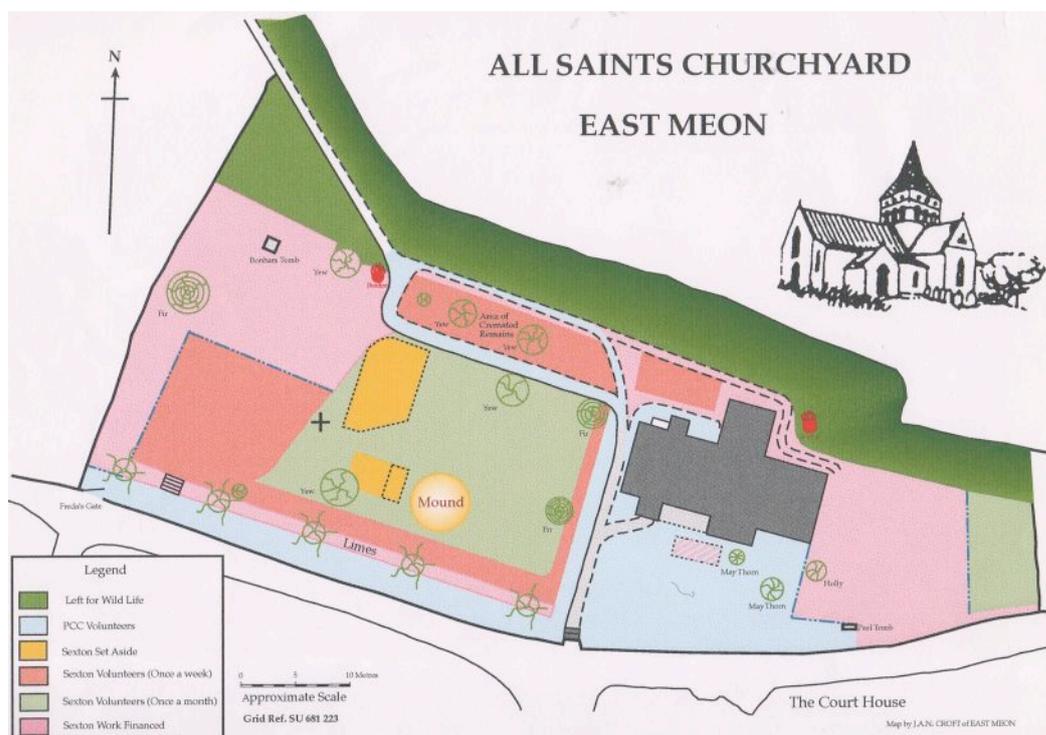


East Meon Churchyard

Just over 12 months ago, I was asked to speak to the East Meon Gardening Club in October of this year, on the Flora and to a lesser extent the Fauna of the Churchyard.

This gave me a full year to survey and document all the flowers, trees and the grasses that I could find growing during that period. I was aided by being given, by John Croft, a plan of the Churchyard showing the different maintenance schedules for the upkeep of various areas. (See below) This plan pre-dates the one in the porch of the church in that the Millennium Church Hall building had not been built at that time. Nevertheless apart from this, the plans are identical.



During the course of the year I documented 170 different plants (excluding lichens) growing. (See separate list) These included those that have obviously been planted and those that are 'wild'. I had expected to find a greater number of wild plants than I did. Indeed there is a greater diversity of plants in the much smaller Langrish Churchyard.

I did not document the lichens because this is a specialist subject and my knowledge of them is limited. Under the auspices of Hampshire Wildlife Trust, Francis Rose, a very eminent lichenologist visited the Churchyard and presumably documented the lichens, on both stones and trees, in July 2000. I have not been able to find this list either held locally or on the internet. (Recordings of other local surveys done by him at Catherington and Bledworth ARE on the internet) It is said that East Meon Churchyard contains over 100 different species of lichen. This is one of, if not the largest, number in East Hampshire, an area not noted for lichens.

Lichens on stone grow very slowly (1-2 mm per year) and some of the larger specimens particularly on the north-eastern aspect of the church must be at least 100 years old and some on tombstones are also quite large. The species of lichens found depend upon the type of stone on which they grow. Most of the tombstones are alkaline - mainly limestone, but some are acidic (sandstone). Different species of lichens grow on differing faces of stones so that the lichens on the East face of a tombstone may be different from those on the West Face. Those on the North face of the Church are different from the fewer numbers on the South facing aspect.

In spite of the relatively small number of plants found growing in it, the Churchyard is botanically very important for one particular plant – the ‘Rare Lords and Ladies’ (*Arum italicum ssp neglectum*). This plant, which looks superficially very similar to the ‘ordinary’ Lords and Ladies that also grows at East Meon, originates from the Western Mediterranean. It is rare in the UK and occurs only as thinly scattered populations in South-west England and the Channel Islands. At East Meon, it is at almost its most easterly and northern limits in this country. Typically it grows in deciduous woodlands in the ‘loamy’ soil at the base of chalk escarpments. This is where it is to be found in greatest numbers in the Churchyard but in addition there are quite a lot of plants around some of the larger planted tree in the Western end where they are quite vulnerable to vigorous tidying. There are said to be over 200 plants of it at East Meon – a very large concentration for this plant. For this reason East Meon was chosen as one of the reference sites for an article on the mode of its pollination, published in the Journal of the Botanical Society of the British Isles. (*Watsonia 2002; 24(Part2):171-81*). It can be differentiated from the common plant whose leaves appear in Spring, as its leaves ‘over-winter’, appearing in October/November.

The areas that are already ‘set-aside’ as wild places do allow birds and insects to survive. This year was a good butterfly year and I saw more than 10 different species this summer. However by the end of summer, these areas do become very ‘straggly’ and are populated by the weeds of unmown areas rather than more delicate plants. Among those plants growing in these areas, is Ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*). Contrary to popular belief, the Law does not seek to eradicate it, but only seeks to prevent it spreading to places where horses in particular might eat it. (*Ragwort Control Act 2003*) It is generally accepted that if it is more than 100 metres from horse pastures etc, it does not need to be rooted out. Ragwort is the food plant of over 70 different invertebrate species, some of which are extremely rare.

Another area that was rather ‘unproductive’ of interesting plants is the East end of the Churchyard. Although this area is cut more frequently than the ‘set-aside’ areas, it must be difficult to mow because of all the partially buried tombs. One of the best ways to get grass really short in places such as this is to graze sheep on them for a very limited period in the winter. I remember sheep in East Meon Churchyard in the 1980s. It may however be too difficult a task now and not worth the time, energy and money.

During the course of the year, there have been several quite vigorous ‘tidy-ups’, particularly at the very western end and behind and around the base of the Church itself. In doing this, some plants and shrubs have been cut right down and may not re-grow. The area behind the Church included part of the bank on which the Rare Lords and Ladies grow.

There are almost all the trees and shrubs that one would expect to find growing on chalk in the churchyard including what looks like a small English Elm (*Ulmus procera*). Whether this will be vulnerable to Dutch Elm disease when it is larger, remains to be seen. There are also quite a variety of trees planted probably within the past 50 years or so. These include Leylandii and some of the yews as well as more colourful trees. The 5 handsome common limes (*Tilia europaea (vulgaris)*) planted alongside the road are almost certainly over 100 years old, judging from the girth of their trunks and have probably now reached their ultimate height, although they were pollarded soon after the 1987 hurricane as, I believe, a 'protective' measure for the cottages near them.

According to the Hampshire County Council website – 'Hampshire Treasures' - , a tree/or trees in the Churchyard is/are subject to a Tree Preservation Order (*TPO No 37*). I was not able, and indeed I did not think it my place, to find out to which tree/or trees this applied.

Apart from the butterflies, I have not mentioned in this report, the Fauna. I saw evidence of most small mammals that one would expect and I believe that deer have been seen from time-to-time. Slow worms have been seen this year both in the Eastern end of the Churchyard and on warm days around the Bonham tomb. Both Kestrels and Jackdaws continue to nest in the Church spire.

This is a brief summary of a very interesting and I hope productive period spent in East Meon Churchyard.