

An English country churchyard

ALL Saints set in its tranquil churchyard is the image most people call to mind when thinking of East Meon.

Standing on the hillside above the village the magnificent church is surrounded by its spreading grounds.

In common with many other churches the parish had decided to keep the area immediately around the church maintained by volunteers and the rest of the grounds were left to wildlife.

But that has changed with the development of a very successful scheme.

Eighteen months ago one of the volunteers, Frank Wheeler, became aware that the workload was too heavy for the volunteers and the policy of leaving large areas to wildlife, in an unmanaged state, was not working.

He approached the Vicar and parochial church council with the idea of setting up a charity to manage the churchyard.

This would be able to fund raise and collect money.

It would then be possible to devise a

management programme using a mixture of paid professional gardeners and volunteers.

Sextons were responsible for maintaining the churchyard but few churches can now afford to employ one.

Sexton has three trustees, Frank Wheeler, Susan Delmar-Morgan and John Rendle, and a treasurer, Peter Mayer.

Work began with a careful survey of the churchyard. It was then divided up into areas of responsibility.

In some of the churchyard under the Sexton management plan grass cutting varies from area to area with some being cut once a week, and others once a month or once a year. Some is not cut at all.

The remaining sections, about 30 per cent of the total area, are maintained by Sexton financed professional gardeners.

The steep banks on the northern side of the church are left for wildlife.

The scheme is running successfully and Sexton have already held several fund raising events, including exhibitions, coffee mornings and a concert.

The churchyard looked magnificent this spring with not only a wonderful display of

daffodils underplanted with blue and white anemones but also other wild flowers and it is bursting with animal life.

Miss Delmar-Morgan is a wildlife expert and, with the help of pupils from East Meon School, she has carried out surveys for Hampshire Wildlife Trust.

These show that East Meon churchyard is among the top ten in the county for species of lichen.

There are now many wild flowers growing in the areas where mowing is restricted.

Bird life is prolific including kestrels and jackdaws in the tower, a large rookery at the west end of the churchyard, spotted flycatchers, green woodpeckers and occasionally a heron.

The surveys and the appearance of All Saint's churchyard show that it is successfully managing to maintain a careful balance between the needs of people and the needs wildlife.

The Sexton Churchyard Management Charity's contribution to that success has already been recognised by the presentation of a Hampshire county council Countryside Award.