

# St John the Evangelist Church

## Churchyard Management Plan 2022



### Background:

The parish church of St John the Evangelist has been prominent in Moulsham since the late 1830s when the population of Chelmsford effectively outgrew the parish church of St Mary's (now Chelmsford Cathedral). It is located on a busy thoroughfare which, when it crosses the inner ring road, becomes the City's High Street, and hundreds of people walk past the church daily.

The church is Grade II listed, and the churchyard is in the Chelmsford – Moulsham Street conservation area. The Moulsham War Memorial is situated in the front of the church building, also Grade II listed.

Having opened in 1837, the church burial ground filled quickly, and just 47 years later in 1884 it was closed to new burials. No comprehensive record remains of who and where people are buried, but it is believed that over 2,000 people have been laid to rest in St John's churchyard. As a closed churchyard, it is currently maintained by Chelmsford City Council.

With 140 years having elapsed since the churchyard's closure, sadly it is rare to have family historians visit, and relatively few gravestones remain either erect or intact, although there are a few monuments, mostly around the front path. There is much broken stone around the periphery of the churchyard, which wild flowers have largely colonised.



### The Church objectives for the Churchyard

As part of our commitment to care for God's Creation, we recognise that the churchyard is a valued asset for the following purposes:

**Worship and appreciating God's Creation** – our churchyard is used regularly for monthly Wild Worship, Junior Church explorations, Messy Church sessions and Green Communion Services, as well as our dawn Easter service and events at the War Memorial for Remembrance Day. During the pandemic, it was also an outdoor space where our Scout group could meet regularly. Listed below in the plan are some of the plants and insects spotted during worship activity sessions



and the congregation also takes part in the annual RSPB Great British Garden Birdwatch.

**Appreciating our heritage** – recognition that the churchyard holds an important part of our community heritage. Not only do we have the graves of prominent local benefactors, we also have an area which was used for the burial of unbaptised babies, and the stories of everyday people of Old Moulsham, as over 2,000 people were buried here. As one example, along the south side entrance pathway are the graves of 8 children of one parishioner. The losses of sons of Old Moulsham in the World Wars are recorded on the community war memorial which lies in the churchyard. Our heritage, and the heartache of the losses suffered, are what makes our churchyard “God’s Acre”, where we tread on holy ground.

**To provide and develop a green, open space for the use of all in our community** – our churchyard is open to the public for specific outdoor events such as a “Spooky Saints’ Trail” on All Hallows Eve, as well as for family events such as Wild Worship. At the moment it is mainly used by dog walkers and has attracted some anti-social behaviour, and our community consultation has shown a need for work on the churchyard to make it a more people-friendly space. Please see the section below on our future plans.

**To work closely with Chelmsford City Council to develop the churchyard as a public green space** – the City Council is responsible for the maintenance and safety of the churchyard. As a Council they have declared a climate emergency and they are committed to creating more public green spaces in an environmentally friendly way.

### **Chelmsford City Council’s Land Management Approach:**

The City Council’s Director of Parks and Open Spaces, whose staff maintain many churchyards, aims to manage them for the encouragement and conservation of native wildlife and wild flowers. Their approach for churchyards is ‘low intervention’, as low as is safe, which for them means:

- Monthly mowing
- Policy of no use of harmful chemicals, other than on paths when essential
- Annual topple testing of monument stones
- Routine annual inspection of trees, with only essential work undertaken
- Annual look at the boundaries for safety, ie fence and wall

### **Outcomes of the City Council’s approach:**

#### **Grass Cutting:**

- Monthly mowing regime during the growing season encourages native wildlife
- Grass cuttings are left allowing nature to reseed
- Unmown edges of the churchyard where unsafe and broken stones have been laid by the walls, are home to a number of wild flowers (something that will increase significantly with the introduction of our wild flower meadow)
- To date we have found primroses, bluebells, red campion, daisy, green alkanet, violets, clover, speedwell, ragged robin, dandelion, ground ivy, celandine, buttercup, wild strawberry, greater plantain and wild mallow

#### **Trees:**

- Prunings, large and small, are left against the church walls where they become home to wildlife.
- Timber from recently felled trees, cut down due to safety concerns, has also been left beside the churchyard walls

- During Wild Worship, children have found that the churchyard supports ladybirds, honeybees, bumblebees, shield bugs, earwigs, garden spiders, money spiders, woodlice, cabbage white and peacock butterflies, earthworms, centipedes, millipedes, snails, ground beetles, ants and squirrels

#### **Hedges:**

- These are trimmed annually, but never during birds' nesting season, and provide thick cover for birds to nest.

#### **Ivy and elder:**

Ivy and elder have taken hold around some of the neglected graves. The City Council cuts the elder down as part of its annual tree work in the churchyard, and where it could damage structures, church volunteers cut the ivy.

#### **Herbicides and fertilisers:**

- are only used on the York stone paths from the pavement into the church, and applied as per the manufacturer's instructions
- Fertilisers are not used in the churchyard
- The community garden raised beds will benefit from home-grown compost

#### **Bird boxes:**

- There are a number of bird boxes on the established trees in the churchyard
- The Great British Garden Birdwatch, now in its 3<sup>rd</sup> year at St John's, revealed that the churchyard is home to robins, blackbirds, blue tits, great tits, collared doves, wood pigeons, starlings and house sparrows

#### **Wild life structures:**

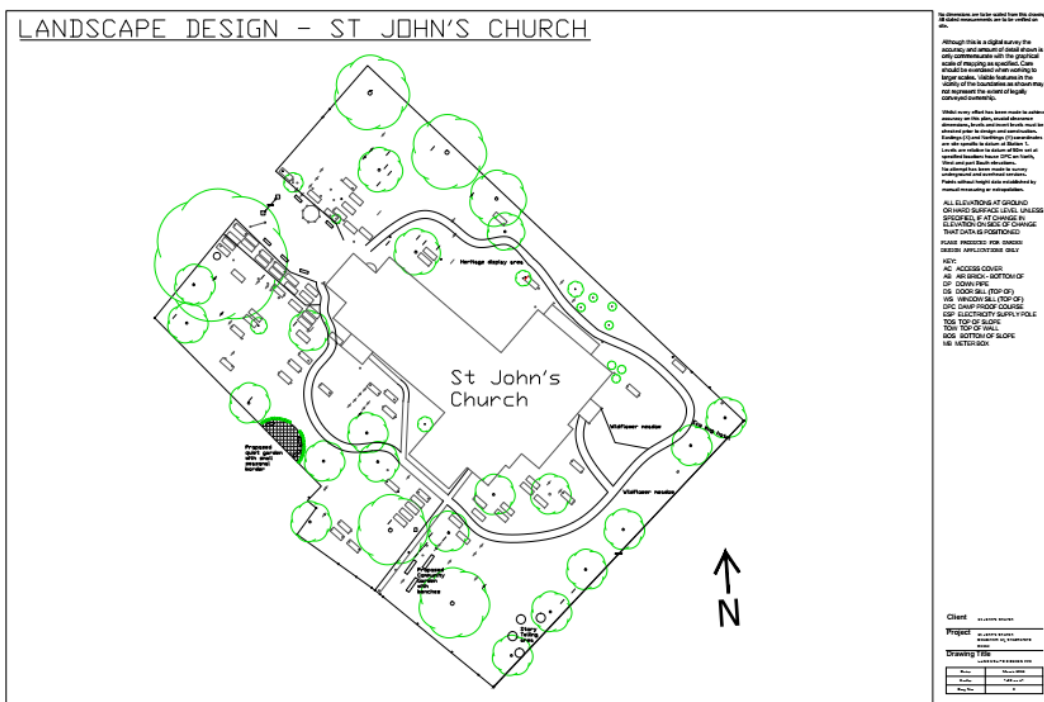
- The churchyard hosts a large bug hotel (made during Wild Worship), a hedgehog box and bird feeders.

It is worthy of note that the maintenance is undertaken by Council staff who view the task of churchyard work through a long-term lens, and the way that they have pruned trees, and maintain the shape of the relatively new Millennium Yews along the north side evidences that.

## **Plans to redevelop the Churchyard**

Public consultation, and our own work to discern how we can best care for the environment, made us realise that the church could be a blessing to local people by becoming a community hub, something missing from our urban parish on the edge of the City centre, with a small worshipping community at its centre. As such, the PCC resolved to redevelop the churchyard as a green eco space for our inner city community, that

- includes an area of rewilding to encourage biodiversity
- enables worship and other church activities within God's creation
- aims to make everyone feel welcome
- creates a real sense of God's Acre being a place of rest, reflection, relaxation, peace, welcome and shared enjoyment
- respects and appreciates our local heritage.



A memorial patch for broken gravestones has yet to be incorporated, but the drawing above shows the plan as at March 2022, and it has yet to be formally approved by the church authorities and City Council planners. Nonetheless, St John's has worked in close partnership with the City Council and Diocesan Advisory Committee in developing its thinking.

With its redevelopment, the addition of a plaza and place to sit at the front, a community mosaic, a community garden and a number of benches in those places and in the front plaza, the churchyard will also serve as:

- A journey through local history with the heritage path
- A place for people to share the joys and fruits of God's creation with the community garden
- A place to reflect on the joys and troubles of life in the quiet garden with a community mosaic (designed around John 14:27) as its focal point
- A place to share stories within nature in the story telling area beneath the trees.

### Redevelopments to increase flora and fauna around the churchyard:

As we move towards redeveloping the churchyard, the PCC will take advice from its professional landscape architect in how best to create and then maintain its new wild flower meadow, and ensure that new plantings in the quiet garden use native plants. At the point we complete the redevelopment, this land management plan will be re-written.