

St Mary's Churchyard Nature Walk

This walk wanders through some of the churchyard's special places. Take a minute to stop at each one for a moment of reflection.

The ground can be uneven under foot, as it is in a wood or a meadow, so do take care.

In the Beginning... a tree

Whether you go by the creation story in the Bible or by scientific estimates, trees have been around on the Earth longer than humans.

The Bible is peppered with significant trees. It tells us that many of the trees in the Garden of Eden provided sustenance for the first humans – except for one, which came with a stern warning not to eat its fruit. The Biblical edict thus tallies with the botanical reality that not all tree fruits are good for you.

Jesus grew up as the son of a carpenter, turning trees into worked wooden objects.

He was put to death on a timber cross, which especially in archaic language was often just called “the tree”.

And Revelation, the final book of the Bible, returns to the idea from Genesis of a Tree of Life.

There is a long tradition of singling out particular trees as special. The reaction to the felling of the Sycamore Gap tree is a case in point. Trees are living beings; sap and bark are their skin and blood. And with their longevity and ability to recover even from seemingly fatal harm, it is not surprising they have become associated with certain enduring values that are at the heart of Christianity: hope, steadfastness, resurrection, eternity.

1. The Holly and the Ivy

In the South West corner, there is a holly hedge intertwined with ivy. Evergreen even in the depths of winter, holly and ivy are rich in Christian symbolism:

*The holly and the ivy
When they are both full grown
Of all the trees that are in the wood
The holly bears the crown.*

The spiny leaves recall Jesus' crown of thorns, and the berries became associated with the drops of blood shed for humanity's salvation.

2. The Mini Meadow

On the left of the path to the church door, there is a meadow patch which is left unmown in the Spring. In May time you can see the lacy white flowers of the rare Meadow Saxifrage here.

Just opposite, you may see narrow-leaf plantain growing along the edges of many of the gravestones. This thrives on ground that has been disturbed. Its preserved pollen in archaeological sites is used as an indicator of when our prehistoric ancestors shifted from being hunter-gatherers to farming the land.

3. The Tree Chapel

Opposite the South door is a group of four Horse Chestnut trees. Walk through them and you will find an ancient part of St Mary's church: the *sedilia* where priests once sat. Look up, and you will see a ceiling of vaulting branches. At your feet, you may find horse chestnuts bursting out of their prickly jackets.

There's an ancient saying that the Bible is the book of God's word, and nature the book of God's works. This space is like a chapel formed by majestic trees.

The horse chestnut is a showy tree. In spring it is adorned with candles of blossom in cream or pink. In autumn its startling spiky seed cases reveal beautifully glossy chestnuts much-coveted by schoolboys in days gone by. Its wood, however, makes poor timber and its chestnuts are no good for eating. So perhaps its value is more as a symbol than as something of practical utility?

Anne Frank wrote about a horse chestnut tree that she could see from the place she and her family hid from the Nazis. When that tree finally came to the end of its natural life, saplings grown from its last horse chestnuts were sent around the world as symbols of hope.

4. The Yew Circle

Just beyond is a circle of Yew trees. Under your feet is a carpet of aromatic leaves and overhead the vaulting branches join to create an enclosed space.

Yew trees are among the most ancient trees in Europe, but individual specimens are often hard to date with accuracy because the original trunk tends to die out and be replaced with new shoots. For Christians, the yew's deep evergreen colour and its ability to renew itself make it a fitting symbol of the resurrection of Christ and the promise of eternal life.

5. The Stone Steps

These grand stone steps lead down into the wilder area of the Lower Churchyard. Nearby are gravestones decorated with splashes of yellow lichen. Lichen depends completely on its immediate environment for its colour and nature. This reminds us that we too are totally dependent on God's Nature for our existence.

6. The Tree Hedgerow

Along the Eastern boundary is a line of mixed trees, Sycamore, Elm, Holly. John writes about the Tree of Life in Revelations:

On each side of the river stood the tree of life bearing twelve fruits, each tree yielding its fruit every month. The leaves of the tree were for the healing of the nations.

We humans tend to think of hedges as dividers. They mark out who owns what land, keep livestock in and shut unwelcome visitors out. It's a case of "this side or that."

But wildlife's perspective tends to run along a hedgerow, not across it: a hedge is a useful corridor along which to move undisturbed in the dense undergrowth.

This overgrown churchyard hedge separates the farmland beyond from what is sometimes called "God's Acre" on this side. The "Caring for God's Acre" project values churchyards and burial grounds for their importance to people and our history and wildlife. Its mission is to champion the conservation of churchyards and burial sites across the British Isles.

7. The Root Cross

On the North boundary you may wish to rest on the first of two benches on this side. Take a look behind the bench and the complex roots of a tree can be seen forming themselves into the shape of a cross.

Perhaps this reminds us of the beauty and complexity of nature and how it can be misused, just as a tree, the symbol of life, became an instrument of cruelty and death when it was used to make Jesus' cross.

8. Seymour's Rabbit

Take a moment to sit on the second bench, dedicated to Richard Seymour. Just ahead you can see his grave, ornamented with a carved rabbit and a fox. In the hedgerow you may see a wild rose. Wild roses mostly have thorny stems and bear single flowers in the early summer. The heads then produce fruits known as rose hips, which turn a striking red in the autumn.

In Christianity the rose has long been used as a symbol of Mary – the woman who gave birth to Jesus and to whom this church is dedicated. A fragrant and beautiful bloom symbolising Mary's beautiful role in God's story of grace!

*There is no rose of such virtue
As is the rose that bare Jesu*

(Traditional English carol, c. 1420)

9. The Ivy and the Monuments

Returning to the Upper Churchyard via the Stone Steps, then heading to the North boundary, you will see a number of grand monuments to the Cowper family and others. Ivy has scrambled over the monuments and covered one of them completely.

What do you make of these grand monuments disappearing under ivy? They could be read as a symbol of decay and the pointlessness of human endeavours:

Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust destroy. (Matthew 6:19)

Looked at another way, here is a symbol of life. Ivy is an amazing habitat for many creatures. Insects love its nectar and pollen, and birds feast on its berries in late winter when other food sources are scarce. Ivy has even been found to trap fine airborne particulates, so it helps tackle pollution. By supporting ivy, these fading monuments continue to support life.

10. The Elder Tree

As you pass the Church on your left, you will see a single Elder tree, festooned in Spring with lacy white flowers and in Autumn with tiny red berries. The flowers and berries are food for birds and insects and can be made into cordials for humans.

The frothy white blooms of the elder that appear in the spring contain a natural wild yeast. It can be used to make beverages with a real fizz!

What is the Holy Spirit like? Theologians over the centuries have come up with many analogies. How about wild yeast? Something that invisibly transforms, excites and is beyond our control? Adds fizz, in fact.

God's kingdom is like yeast that a woman works into the dough for dozens of loaves of barley bread—and waits while the dough rises.

(Matthew 13:33)

11. Under the Ash Tree

Passing the Church and crossing the grass, you will find another bench on the North boundary. Take a moment to rest on the bench, in the shade of the overhanging Ash tree.

The branches are part of the whole tree, not separate from it. This reminds us how dependent we are on God and nature. Jesus said *I am the vine; you are the branches.*

12. The Spangled Lawn

In the triangle between the South East gate and the Main gate, the turf is springy beneath your feet. This lawn is not so much grass as Lady's Bedstraw, Bird's Foot Trefoil, Self Heal, Clover, Ground Ivy as well as Ox Eye daisies and Dandelions. In Spring it is rich with low growing flowers.

Jesus reminded us not to worry about our own clothes, seeing how beautifully the flowers of the field grow. *'They toil not, nor do they spin. Yet I tell you that not even Solomon in all his splendour was dressed like one of these. If that is how God clothes the grass of the field, which is here today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you?'*

Final reflection

From the hymn 'How Great Thou Art'

*When through the woods
And forest glades I wander
And hear the birds
Sing sweetly in the trees,
When I look down
From lofty mountain grandeur
And hear the brook
And feel the gentle breeze,*

*Then sings my soul,
My Saviour God, to Thee;
How great Thou art,
How great Thou art!*