

Aberdeenshire's Historic Kirkyards

Mammals

Bats are often associated with churchyards but really prefer to share warm clean houses with us. However they are sometimes found in old buildings and the tower at Fordyce makes for an atmospheric bat roost and the burial aisle under the old kirk at Pitsligo are ideal for hibernating bats. Hedgehogs, and shrews can shelter under flat stones and feed on slugs, snails, spiders and other insects found around the cemetery.

Wildflowers

Regular mowing and fertiliser means that there are relatively few wildflowers in Kirkyards but ferns, ivy leaved toadflax and stonecrops cling to Kirkyard walls.

Birds

Ivy-covered walls and trees attract birds looking for shelter and nest sites and the late flowers provide food for butterflies and many other insects. Pied wagtails, blackbirds and robins are often seen feeding among the short grass while kestrels hover overhead. Swifts, swallows and house martins nest in the roofs and eaves of buildings and wrens, blackbirds and tits in hedges or in the ivy covered walls.

As the historic kirkyards project progresses through future phases, leaflets on the natural environment shall be published which cover individual sites and topics.



Aberdeenshire's
HISTORIC
KIRKYARDS

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Aberdeenshire's HISTORIC KIRKYARDS



The
Living
Kirkyard
an introduction

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Aberdeenshire's Historic Kirkyards

The Living Kirkyard...an introduction

Kirkyards provide us with one of the most tangible links to the nation's past and as such act as a rich resource for the study of a wide range of topics relating to human influences on their development. However these sites together with their associated buildings, structures, memorials and grave markers are also hugely valuable in terms of local biodiversity and as a resource for the study of the natural environment.



Aberdeenshire has a wealth of old kirkyards which are generally well managed with neatly cut grass and trimmed hedges, however wildlife can still flourish on these quiet sites. There are a range of habitats for wildlife, from ivy covered walls to hedges, trees and mown grassland.

Some Kirkyards are set up on knolls overlooking the surrounding area, Midmar kirkyard is on a knoll surrounded by an old drystone dyke with access across a lovely wooded burn with wych elm, bluebells and ferns. Fourdon Kirkyard at Auchenblae is high up overlooking the village with the steep slopes covered with ivy growing up contorted old trees.

Lichens

A particular feature of Kirkyards is lichens which cover many of the old gravestones and walls. These are fascinating plants, a combination of fungus and algae, which generally prefer an unpolluted habitat and are therefore great indicators of a healthy environment.

The species composition varies with the age and material used for the headstones.

The lichens in Fordyce Kirkyard are remarkably different from those found in other Kirkyards in Aberdeenshire. The reason for this is not known. Some lichens, such as *Ochrolechia parella* are rarely found on headstones dated after 1860. This may indicate that the headstone lichen

flora is slowly changing over a period of many years due to changes in the chemical composition of the air.



Trees

Trees traditionally associated with churchyards include yew, holly and elm. These provide a home for lichens and mosses and a rich source of food, cover and breeding sites for many animals. The trees in churchyards are often very old, like the single old elm in St Ciaran's Kirkyard at Fetteresso and the knotted old ash surrounding St Drostan's Kirkyard at Inch. Dead and dying timber is also a valuable habitat for mosses, fungi, insects and birds such as tawny and barn owls and great spotted woodpeckers.

