

## AN OUTLINE PROPOSAL FOR THE “CHERISHING SIDMOUTH CEMETERIES” GROUP

– November 2023

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### BACKGROUND: CONCERNS LEAD TO A PLAN: 2020

The debate of how much, how often and where exactly to cut the grass in the Sidmouth Cemetery has been ongoing for some time – with this piece from the Herald back in 2009 reporting on feelings that the state of the area was a '[disgrace](#)'.

During the summer of 2020, the Herald reported on concerns that the [Sidmouth Cemetery was being neglected](#) – and on their social media pages there was quite some [discussion of the issues](#).

This was very much part of a wider debate, as councils were adopting a 'back-to-nature' approach, whether [letting grass verges grow](#), [letting greenery between pavements grow](#), and generally encouraging [biodiversity on the roadside](#)

As for cemeteries, the [Telegraph](#) pointed out at the time that councils had decided that “*cemeteries will be left overgrown in areas where graves are rarely visited to allow wildlife to flourish [and] rarely visited graves will be left untended in a bid to boost insect and butterfly numbers.*”

Indeed, there's been a long-standing initiative from the churches to [encourage wildlife in 'God's own acre'](#).

As part of this debate, the Sid Valley Biodiversity Group put together a [survey – with the results here](#). The conclusion was that “*Maintenance of cemeteries is a contentious issue. EDDC is walking a difficult tightrope, maybe they need to arrange some form of wider public consultation to guide future policy.*”

Following on from this initial debate and feedback the District Council's Streetscene team worked on [creating a new 'sensitive' plan](#) aiming to get the balance right between the cemetery being a resting place and a wildlife haven. They worked with district and town Cllr Denise Bickley and town Cllr Jenny Ware in late summer 2020 to come up with [a suitable plan](#):

*Under the new plan there will be measures to control the coarse grasses in the cemetery and encourage wildflowers to grow in their place. The newer top area of the cemetery will be cut every five or six weeks during the growing season. In the lower area the grass will be cut at the end of this month and sections will be exposed to bare soil, where native wildflowers will be sown. At the start of the growing season next spring, the area will be cut again. Throughout the growing season, pathways and edgings will be cut at the same time as the top area, and headstones that are visited regularly will also have paths tidied and the front of the plot cut.*

*There will be an information board explaining the management scheme, and giving a website and phone number for reporting a grave that needs tidying. Cllr Bickley said there are also plans to create a 'Friends of Sidmouth Cemetery Group' to help with maintenance and 'really give the cemetery a looked after feeling'.*

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## **BACKGROUND: IMPLEMENTING THE PLAN: 2020 - 23**

The District Council, who own the cemetery, is ultimately responsible for any planning and work on this site and at other cemeteries and churchyards in East Devon – and their [maintenance regime](#) provides some more detail:

*Our dedicated teams from Streetscene care for our Cemeteries at Seaton, Sidbury and Sidmouth, which are owned by EDDC as well as 10 closed churchyards, parks and gardens, doing all the grounds maintenance to keep your open spaces clean and green. Sidmouth & Seaton cemeteries are [Nature Recovery](#) sites within East Devon*

Over the last three years, there has been some effort made to implement both the general District-wide maintenance regime and the plans specific to Sidmouth Cemetery. However, it has become apparent that these efforts are not enough and that there are clearly serious shortcomings which need to be addressed.

Following the creation of the new plan for Sidmouth, in the summer of 2021, a [working party of volunteers cut the long grass](#) and collected it, with the longer-term plan “to replicate old timeworn harvesting schedules - cuts in March and August, harvest the grass (to cut down the nutrients - wild flowers prefer less rich soil), then plant native meadow seeds and yellow rattle to enhance the biodiversity and further subdue the grasses next year.”

Jumping to the spring of this year, Kate Tobin put together a piece “[celebrating nature and wildlife at Sidmouth Cemetery](#)” for the Sid Vale Association's quarterly newsletter.

This piece was written following on from two growing seasons, when the District Council's Streetscene had first stopped cutting in the summer, including the first year when they did as stated in the plan – and cut and removed the grass cuttings. It was at that point in time that Streetscene were praised for their work in the article, published by both the SVA and the Herald:

*“Sidmouth cemetery is a photographer’s dream and a pollinator’s haven. East Devon District Council’s Streetscene team should be applauded for managing this wonderful local asset so much better over the last two or three years...*

*Now in summer, wherever you look, there are stunning, surprising or atmospheric views. Outstanding craftsmanship sits perfectly framed by nature’s glory... Beech and Oak trees planted by Victorian Sidmothians now spread their canopy over much of this area, with some dating back to the opening of the cemetery in 1879. Nearly 50 [trees have been mapped and recorded by Sidmouth Arboretum](#), with a little story about each one on the website...*

*Combining short and long grass actually provides a more diverse habitat for a greater range of insect and plant species, so perhaps a happy compromise can be found for relatives who want their family graves kept clear and easy to visit, and those who prefer a wilder setting. The cemetery is now, ironically, heaving with life; and also beauty, surprise, monumental art and atmosphere. What better way to pay homage to our dead than to celebrate life by managing this outstanding fragment of our ancient landscape for nature and for the future.*

However, this article was written before Streetscene completely stopped cutting at Sidmouth Cemetery – with the result that months of abandonment has led to the loss of bluebells, primroses, ladysmock and other flora.

It has become clear, therefore that the current management regime as of 2023 is not working – and not only from the perspective of protecting and enhancing the site's wildlife.

This autumn, a [long discussion thread](#) on the Sidmouth Community Facebook pages began with this heartfelt comment:

*I visit Sidmouth most years from Sussex remembering the times I spent here with my grandparents in the late 1950s. I'm appalled at the state of the lower cemetery under the guise of rewilding aka cost saving. If I didn't know the location of my grandfather's grave it would be impossible to find it. Nothing is done, to the extent that paths are breaking up. Surely this cannot be justified*

In response, Ed Dolphin suggested:

*On the other hand there are plenty of people delighted to see the celebration of God's creation such as the butterflies whose caterpillars are now hibernating underground ready to emerge in the spring. There could be some tweaks such as cutting paths but I like it as it is. Beauty is in the eye of the beholder...*

*Buddleias bring in some adult butterflies such as red admirals and peacocks, but the caterpillars need nettles to feed on, no nettle, no butterflies to feed on the buddleias. The small coppers, ringlets, gatekeepers and meadow browns that were recorded in there during the Big Butterfly Count need the long grass for their caterpillars, as do the grasshoppers and crickets... Rats and mice do not use the long grass generally, they will be living under the garden sheds next door.*

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## **A PROPOSAL FOR A FRIENDS' GROUP: "CHERISHING SIDMOUTH CEMETERIES"**

Back in 2020, [the idea was put forward](#) of creating a friends group for Sidmouth Cemetery: *There will be an information board explaining the management scheme, and giving a website and phone number for reporting a grave that needs tidying... there are also plans to create a 'Friends of Sidmouth Cemetery Group' to help with maintenance and 'really give the cemetery a looked after feeling'.*

As outlined above, the District Council's Streetscene team worked on [creating a new 'sensitive' plan](#); and the council has designated Sidmouth Cemetery as one of its Wildlife Improvement Areas as part of its [Nature Recovery](#) policy. However, it has still not devised a management plan specifically for the area.

The Vision Group for Sidmouth is proposing that it set up a friends group for all of the Sid Valley's cemeteries and churchyards to help address these issues:

- The VGS set up the [Friends of Glen Goyle](#) in 2020, following discussions within the SVA's History Group [on Glen Goyle's heritage] and the SVBG [on its biodiversity]. The FOGG group has since created a website mapping out the area's history and natural history, as well as recognising the area as a public park; it has worked with the District Council's Horticultural Officer Paul Fealey; and has formed a working party of volunteers who meet every week.
- The VGS envisages a similar group, focussing on the heritage and wildlife of the Sid Valley's cemeteries and churchyards; it would create a website documenting these different aspects; it would work with the District Council and stakeholders to create a management plan for the sites; it would work with the [National Federation of Cemetery Friends](#); and it would help set up working parties of volunteers to keep an active eye on the state of the areas.

- The main difference of course between FOGG and a future CSC would be that the latter would be very much about respecting the fact that these are cemeteries – that it is consecrated ground which is visited by those tending the graves of loved ones; that it is a place of peace and quiet which should offer a sense of wonder and renewal; and that it is a place for research, whether for family heritage or for natural surveys. With these aspects in mind, the group would be called “Cherishing Sidmouth Cemeteries”.

The VGS would like to initiate further discussion on the possible setting up of a friends group.

- It is being proposed that any such CSC group would be launched at the VGS AGM next month (Tues 14th November), to allow for public engagement and discussion – and to take the CSC concept forward if agreed to at the meeting.
- Several questions will no doubt be raised, including: To what extent should a group include other cemeteries and churchyards in the civil parish? Should it include both those cemeteries owned and managed by the District Council (including the Sidbury Cemetery) – and those which are managed by the council (such as the Parish churchyard)?

Finally, there has been a great deal of positive engagement on the wonders of these unique areas. Over the last couple of years there has been further discussion and presentation – from [the 'beautifully biodiverse churchyards' of Devon](#), to renowned horticulturalist [Stefan Buczacki on churchyard conservation](#), to [a cemetery garden](#) in Yorkshire.

And this autumn, all sorts of fungi have been recorded – from the [Redlead Roundhead](#) to the [Weeping Widow](#) – perhaps apt for a cemetery.

We at the VGS and together with our friends and partners certainly hope to take this positive interest and determination forward as we start helping to map out the future of the Sid Valley's cemeteries and churchyards.

Vision Group for Sidmouth

November 2023