

# Birds and Churchyards

## Title

Birds and Churchyards

## Description and Summary Results

In England there are some 10000 churches and 43 cathedrals of medieval origin and perhaps the same number again of more recent origin. Many have churchyards and if the average area is assumed to be one acre then there is a total of around 8000ha of "reserve". These are subject to varying degrees of management but it often only amounts to periodic grass cutting through the summer. Churchyards are also often islands of woody vegetation in a sea of intensive agriculture or urban/suburban areas. Overall therefore they are potentially an important habitat for birds, and they are known to be very important for other forms of wildlife notably ancient trees, some lichens, other plants and bats. The intention was to do this survey as a small-scale extension of the Common Birds Census with six or so visits in the breeding season, and with an intention to look at the importance for roosting and feeding in the winter to follow later (though this never happened). Although originally suggested as a potentially worthwhile survey in *BTO News* of March 1971 with that year being billed as a pilot survey, the number of responses was very few and it never caught the imagination of observers. Nevertheless, 15 churchyards were studied in detail at various times 1971-1998 (36 mapping years in all), varying from less than 1ha (several) to about 20ha (cemeteries in London and Surrey). Forty-three species held territory in these with an average of 17, and a further 30 species were recorded. Blackbird *Turdus merula*, Robin *Erithacus rubecula*, and Blue Tit *Cyanistes caeruleus* were the most commonly recorded, and the relatively high numbers of Greenfinch *Carduelis chloris*, Coal Tit *Periparus ater* and Goldcrest *Regulus regulus* were probably accounted for by the relatively high number of yew trees and other conifers which are often characteristic. In the second breeding atlas of 1988-1991 several observers noted that churchyards were often ideal places to prove breeding of otherwise elusive species. The building itself, large individual or clumps of trees, a mixture of short and longer grass and some rough patches were thought to be the most important habitat features promoting the numbers of birds.

## Methods of Data Capture

Casual records were requested from anyone visiting a churchyard. For anyone wanting to do a more detailed study (the fifteen noted above) a Common Birds Census style mapping census was carried out (six visits were suggested rather than the standard 10 for CBC) to determine the number of territories of each species present.

## Purpose of Data Capture

To find out how many of which species could be found in churchyards.

**Geographic Coverage**

All of Britain although in practice the results came from England.

**Temporal Coverage**

The breeding season of 1971 was the start and it continued at a very low level until that of 1998.

**Other Interested parties**

The survey was organised and run by the BTO as a Trust-aided enquiry.

**Organiser(s)**

Ken Williamson and David Glue.

**Current Staff Contact**

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**Publications**

The only report is:

Glue, D. & Greenoak, F. 2001. 'God's acres' live on as local nature reserves. *BTO News* 233: 8-9.

The proposal for the survey is in *BTO News* no. 43. It was withdrawn as a separate survey due to inadequate support and in effect merged with the Common Birds Census.

**Available from NBN?**

No.

**Computer data -- location**

None.

**Computer data -- outline contents**

N/A.

**Computer data -- description of contents**

N/A.

**Information held in BTO Archives**

1 box with 3 folders containing results (CBC-style summary sheets) and letters.

**Notes on Access and Use****Other information****Notes on Survey Design****Specific Issues for Analysis**