

Report from Saltash Environmental Action on work to establish wildflowers at St Stephens Cemetery Winter 2021/22

Teams of various sizes, from a total of 7 volunteers, worked at the cemetery on 4 separate sessions, from the middle of December to 3rd January. The aim was to rake out the thatch, cut any remaining long grass, scarify the earth surface and sow rattle seed. The whole area had already been cut by mower and strimmer.

We soon completed the West and South margins, up to about 1 metre wide. We had much more trouble with the Eastern margin, for 3 reasons: the verge is longer and wider there (we worked up to the line of trees, about 2 metres); there are longer stems of bramble and so on, invading from the hedge; and the grass mowing by the Council had been less successful, as the longer grass was often just pushed flat. It was very slow cutting by hand (we used long-handled shears and a small battery strimmer) and Richard Enticknap kindly agreed to arrange a repeat mow by machine. I have to say even that mow did not deal with the problem completely.

Overall, we removed a great deal of thatch and tree leaves from the Eastern boundary, which we dumped among the trees at the back. In the end, we could only clear maybe a dozen patches of ground to a state suitable for sowing i.e.. minimum 50% bare earth. We sowed yellow rattle, kindly donated by Rotary funded by Rotary's Billion Seed Challenge.

We added some knapweed and other mixed wildflower seed, all sourced in Saltash. Also, alongside the benches, we planted some daffodil bulbs that had been donated to SEA by Eunice Davis; and we added some grape hyacinths at the base of a few trees. We wait to see which of these will naturalise.

The North margin, which is a traditional hedge and standard trees, already has many native wildflowers; we have not disturbed that and will be interested to see which of them will colonise the adjacent marginal strip that is due to be mown on the new, reduced regime.

Several people visiting the Churchyard gave their appreciation of our work.

We did notice a considerable amount of litter around the areas we were working, which we picked up. Regrettably, much litter is caused by plastic flowers, and I am sure the Burial Board is aware of the problem.

Finally, we scarified a few areas on the small section to the East of the East End and sowed rattle, but this area is already quite rich in native plants so we do not intend to disturb it more.

Future management

From our experience at Pillmere, we expect the yellow rattle to germinate sometime in March; so further light mows up to the end of February would be acceptable, if needed to improve appearances. We are growing some plug plants from seed collected in Saltash, and will plant these in early Spring.

Once again, we want to beware of raising expectations about the appearances this spring and summer: it will take Nature a few years to restore itself.

Adrian White January 2022