St. Mary's Church Hardwick. September 2026

A walk round the churchyard and cabin gardens

Start your walk here at the sign which says

1. 'Cabin garden'.

The gardens around the church provide, firstly, a burial ground, but they are also a place to sit and to walk around, a place of peace and quiet. The Cabin gardens are used for events and lettings and the whole site is dedicated to bio diversity. The purpose of these notes is to provide a background for people who wish to find out more about the site. All of the notice boards have been produced using second hand timber at zero cost other than a small amount of electricity for the pyrography. Thanks to Peter Owen for the wood.

The beds behind this first notice were planted with biodiversity in mind; the plants were chosen as native species which are highly attractive to bees, hover flies and other insects.The plants provide good cover for small mammals. The seeds offer food for the Autumn and Winter. The beds are fed annually with good quality leaf mould and mulched with bark to retain moisture.
The weaving on the far side of the bed was done by the Sunday Club with maximum cooperation and minimum disagreement.

2. Bug hotel

To the right of this bed, to the left of the main door, is the first of several bug hotels.
This was the first of the bug hotels to go up and the advice was that the apertures should be covered with wire netting to prevent attack by predators. Look for the apertures which have been sealed off.They are the signs that the aperture has been occupied. Now move through the gate to number three and the view of the pond.

3. The pond

The pond has had considerable work done on it in the last few years, mainly the removal of dead and dying material. All of the willows were pollarded in 2025 and the cut material was used to fill the brushwood fence over by the shed.The smaller willow to the left will be used by the Sunday Club for weaving this year. The islands in the middle are used by moorhens. This year (2026) has seen two broods. The broods vary,
some as many as seven. The tall spiked leaves are yellow flag iris; a fine display in the Spring.The LOTS team have cleared a large patch of the iris to allow for the pond to be better seen from the bank.The far bank is left fairly undisturbed to allow more privacy for the Rectory leaving the ivy to grow undisturbed providing Winter/Spring food for the birds.

'Ivy reverses the normal plant seasons by flowering in the Autumn and bearing seeds in the Spring. Its climbing roots draw no nourishment through the tree bark nor does it strangle the tree. Its underground roots, however, do compete with the tree roots for soil nutrients. Ivy, like

holly, was held to have magical powers, and at Christmas kept houses safe from demons.' (Book of the countryside.)

The pond is fed by ditches and the fields beyond the allotments to the west. It is reliant on rain water so that levels vary dramatically depending on the weather. When the pond is full, water drains off into the car park. The new gate will provide access to the pond area to collect water during dry periods and allow the team to do maintenance jobs without the team climbing over the fence! Tadpoles have been seen again this year. Frogs have returned to spawn over the last three years.
Water lilies were recently introduced but their survival is unlikely because of the severe drought. The trees above are field maples.

'Maple wood is used for violin making, and forms the back sides and neck of the instrument. The supreme violin maker, Antonio Stradivarius was the first to use a bridge of maple to support the strings.' (Trees and shrubs of Britain)

4. Experimental area

Walking further on and you come to the experimental area.This is an area set aside for the children who have piled dead logs, made a tepee- like bug hotel and made holes for slow worms. The plants here are left to flower and to seed. Look out for the rare snake's head fritillary plant in the Spring in this area.

5. Tawny owls
Walk up the path towards the shed.
Above your head is a box made especially for tawny owls. Tawny owls have been on the site for many years. This is an encouragement to them. Many of the children have been involved in dissecting owl pellets to discover what the owls have been eating.
The site is blessed with twenty or so bird boxes, mainly for blue tits or sparrows. It is hoped to put in more boxes in the future.

To your right is a bat box.

6. Bats

St Mary's (inside the building) is host to pipistrelle, brown, long eared and serotine bats all detailed in a professional survey completed in 2024. As yet we have no evidence of bats in this box.

This area is shaded by several ash and oak trees. To date there is no evidence of ash die back on the site. Across the concrete road at the five bar gate leading to the allotments it is a different story. To the right of the gate there are several dead ash trees. It seems likely that these have succumbed to ash die back and ours will be likely to follow, not necessarily this year.

7. The brushwood fence
Walk on again towards the shed.
The brushwood fence was built as a home for minibeasts and a screen to hide the compost area. Behind the screen are three compost heaps; one to use and the others 'cooking'. Large twigs etc go on the big pile in the churchyard. Immediately behind the fence is the storage area

for black sacks of leaves from the previous year. In the Autumn these will be decanted into the three plastic bins at the side of the shed before being used on the beds the following Spring Leaf mould is much loved by gardeners who think of it as the equivalent of gold dust.Unlike regular compost which relies on bacteria and a mix of green and brown waste, leaf mould is made entirely of leaves and fungi. It is low on direct nutrients but it works wonders on soil structure, moisture retention and beneficial garden microbes.

Thanks to Craig and Tom for putting in the stakes for us. The brushwood was all collected from the willows in the pond.

8. The untidy bin
Walk round to the bay on the right .
The untidy bin at the end is built especially for minibeasts and unlike the others will not be touched.

9. The bluebell area
Walk along the side of the fence.
The bluebell area has been planted up by the Sunday Club this year. We have tried to keep it especially for English bluebells which differ from their Spanish cousins who are very 'thuggish'. Spanish bluebells grow virtually upright with pale blue, open shaped flowers all around the stem, whilst English bluebells are droopy and have deep violet blue flowers on one side only. English bluebells have a strong sweet fragrance, Spanish bluebells have little or no scent.

The bluebells are interspersed with aconites and in the area nearer to the Cabin, primroses and snowdrops.

A record of the wild flowers on site is kept up- to -date. The list currently numbers over one hundred. The challenge now is to encourage the spreading of these flowers.

10. The bug hotel
The pile of bricks is a bug hotel.
This was created by the wild church families and has been added to over the years.

11. The stumpery and hazel

The stumpery is hidden by the hazel.

The builders of the cabin left behind six large stumps which have been partly buried to attract stag beetles, unfortunately none have yet been found but there was some excitement when our first soldier beetle arrived. Shading the stumpery are hazel bushes.
The hazel bush (Corylus avellana) provides early pollen for bees and nuts for squirrels, birds and dormice. The hazel produces long yellow male catkins and tiny bright red female flowers in the winter.

12. The herb garden

Cared for by the Sunday Club, the herb garden is very low maintenance. Most of the herbs survived the great drought of 2026 without water, but we gave plenty to the Cox's apple tree which was planted in memory of the much loved Clare Bigg.

Moving on between the Cabin and the shed we come to the bin area and

13. The HotBin

The HotBin is a specially produced bin which takes all the food waste from the Cabin kitchen. Its polystyrene frame of seventy mm width is designed to keep in the heat which is provided by the bacteria which live there. Temperatures can get up to 60 degrees c. The resultant compost, beautifully dark and unsmelly is used on the beds. The whole site is free of commercially produced compost and is completely organic. Organic gardens rely on the balance u of nature to keep pests under control, there is an absence of black spot, for example, because the plants are well- fed and healthy.We use absolutely no weed killers or chemicals.

14. The sparrow boxes

Walk on towards the water butt, on your left are sparrow boxes.
Like the other twenty or so bird boxes on the site, the sparrow boxes are occupied each year. When we came to clean out the boxes last year there was just one box which had not been used.

Continuing down the path to the car park we go across to the gap in the hedge.

15. The new hedge

The new hedge replaced thick set conifers which grew behind the old portacabin. One hundred and sixty small plants were put in and mulched, the LOTS team were enormously proud that only half a dozen were lost. Although we were encouraged by Cambridgeshire Wild life trust to allow the hedge to grow tall, it is deliberately being kept low to unify the two areas and to allow the stunning vistas, looking across the site from one side to the other. This is one place where aesthetics wins over the ecology. The hedge is composed of a large variety of all native species.

Go through the gap and across the drive to the next sign.

16. Hawthorn hedge two.

This hedge runs right down to the Lych gate and then across to the southern boundary, completely different to the earlier hedge this provides shelter for numerous insects and birds.Since the LOTS team was established approximately twelve years ago we have planted over one hundred small hawthorn plants to fill the gaps. With the last planting we used used

stakes and plastic sleeves to protect them from rabbit damage. It looks as though some have survived though the drought of 2026 will not have helped.
A huge amount of snowdrop planting has been done outside the hedge on the north side. Unlike the hedges on the far side of the pond, these have been cleared of ivy.
The hedge is dwarfed by the forty metre lime trees which cast shade over large areas of the churchyard. Limes are hugely beneficial to wildlife. Lime leaves are eaten by the caterpillars of many moth species , including the lime hawk, peppered vapourer, triangle and scarce hook tip moths.They are very attractive to aphids, providing a source of food for their predators, including hover flies, ladybirds and many species of birds.These long lived trees provide dead wood for wood boring beetles. We have recently begun to leave the suckers at the base of the trees because the wild church families found that these were virtually the only places on the site where there were significant numbers of snails.

Limes require fairly frequent maintenance. Thanks are due to the Parish Council who covered the recent five thousand pound maintenance bill.

17. Spring meadow area
Move on to the next sign.
This is an area which is left to grow into a meadow, to allow for marsh buttercups, hyacinths, snowdrops and cowslips. It is cut in late February or March and then left.
Sometimes called ‘No mow May.’From here we go across to the base of the tower.

18. Snowdrops (Galanthus)

This area is well covered by snowdrops from Christmas onwards.Other recently planted areas are the grass nearest to the church porch and around the bases of the Lime trees. St Mary’s is proud that so many people have been involved in transplanting teams each year. Each clump doubles or triples in size within two to three years. Of the twenty different sorts of snowdrop, we have five.

Snowdrops symbolise hope, renewal and purity because they are among the first flowers to bloom after the winter.
Move over towards the water butt.

19. Shallow ponds.

There are various shallow ponds on site. We put these out for the small mammals which would have difficulty drinking from the big pond.
Follow the line of the building around until you get to the next sign .

20. Summer meadow areas

There are two Summer meadow areas, one either side of the main path from the Lych gate to the church porch.(These are areas which are mown for the last time in late Spring and then left to bloom. Yellow rattle has been sown to limit the growth of the grass and lots of packets of seeds have been sown by the children and others, so far with only limited success.
Walk down to the lych gate.

21.The daffodil area outside the Lych gate

Last year a large working party was called to help put in several thousand daffodils. Their efforts were well rewarded in the Spring by a brilliant display. Few insects truly benefit from daffodils. Early bumble bees are one exception.

Look to the right of the lych gate.

22. The verges

The verges provide a rich source of food for minibeasts. The sunny bank to the right of the Lych gate is home to nettles (nurtica). In the Bible nettles are used as a symbol of ruin, neglect and judgment. In Proverbs they are used as a symbol of laziness. Bad press! The reality is that nettles are the main source of food for the caterpillars of butterflies like the Red Admiral, the Peacock and the Small Tortoiseshell. They attract aphids early in the season which draw in ladybirds, hoverflies and birds that eat harmful pests. Nettles can be used chopped up to provide a nutrient rich mulch. Just watch out for the equally rich smell as the nettles break down.
Other plants like the cow parsley grow well on the banks

23. Wild garlic flowers
In the Spring there are hundreds of wild garlic flowers here.

As you wander back up towards the church why not have a little hunt for
Fungi on the graves. Here are some which the wild church families found.

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Organisations involved

St Mary's PCC
Hardwick Parish Council

Sunday Club
The LOTS group
The Wild Church families

Nature notes

The nature notes are produced two or three times a year and published in the Hardwick Happenings and on the church web site. Also on the website can be found:
a case study produced by Ely Dioscese
The development plan
And development plan update

St Mary's church is proud to hold a silver award from A-Rocha and a bronze from the Wildlife trust.