

At a glance: species counts / a lichen survey / a delayed Spring / the impact of volatile weather and climate / butterfly and insect population decline / glyphosate / the new website / a Sussex Local Wildlife Sites initiative survey / comparison with rewilding / 'meadowland with graves' or 'a graveyard with trees'?

Species counts

	12 / 2020	12 / 2021	10 / 2022	9 / 2023	9 / 2024
Amphibians	1	1	1	1	1
Arachnids	6	10	16	19	20
Birds	22	36	37	37	38
Butterflies and moths	20	29	46	54	60
Flowering plants	174	184	200	212	221
Fungi	29	31	32	33	82
Insects (other)	32	56	103	155	203
Invertebrates (other)	13	25	25	25	27
Mammals	5	6	6	6	6
Non-flowering-plants	24	24	24	24	24
Reptiles	2	2	2	2	2
Totals	328	404	492	569	684

We continue to benefit hugely from the participation of our skilled and enthusiastic volunteers. In addition, Stuart Ball, an amateur entomologist with excellent photography skills, pops in from time to time. Off-site, we are supported by a network of county recorders (and others), specialists in their field, whose work is co-ordinated by the Sussex Biodiversity Record Center. To all involved, giving freely of their time, the species counting project remains indebted. It remains a collective endeavour; thanks to all who participate.

[You might find the work of the Friends of Tower Hamlets Cemetery interesting (at <https://fothcp.org/>). Their 27 acre cemetery park – also a wildlife site – had recorded 1,111 species (August 2024 figures). They use a combination of sweep nets, transect surveys, pitfall traps and mist nets.]

Lichen survey

The year since the last AGM started with something of a coup in the form of a visit in October 2023 by the President and Data Officer of the British Lichen Society (from Kew Gardens and the Natural History Museum). They added a further 46 species to our survey count (correctly appearing in the fungi row of the table above). The cemetery, they reported, had a reasonable total of lichens for an urban site in a fairly polluted environment. Additionally, headstones do not date back centuries, as in other graveyards, so typical numbers for a 'good' cemetery could be three times higher. They added that we should ensure that good light levels are maintained by discouraging large-scale tree growth – a theme that will recur in this report.



Beehives

After much debate, the beehives were finally removed on 19th April 2024. The first two had been put in place in 2016. A further couple arrived in 2018. Between 100,000 and 200,000 honeybees (approximate high summer numbers) had the cemetery as their base for between six and eight years. It's too soon to know what effect their removal will have on the cemetery's wild pollinator species (anticipated to be a positive one), but we hope that the next six to eight years may reveal this. There are however, larger factors that will influence this, as can be seen below. (By coincidence the first species noted after the removal of the final hive was the small Lathbury's Nomad Bee, which was seen within a metre of where the last hive had stood, a place where few of us had ventured for many years.)



The wettest spring since 1986

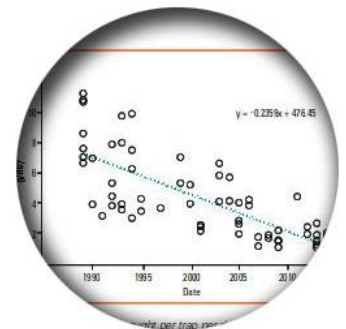
Last year's lock-out by the Council between February and May 2023, which lasted 94 days, meant that volunteers struggled to keep abreast of the growth of the cemetery's vegetation. That struggle has continued into and through 2024, being aggravated by an extraordinary amount of rainfall. Spring 2024 was the wettest since 1986. March, April and May were also the warmest on record, with temperatures being high overnight. The growth of vegetation simply took off. A two-metre tall Water Figwort plant appeared for the first time since it had been noted in August 2018 by Sue Denness of the Sussex Botanical Recording Society. (Interestingly, Professor David Streeter of Sussex University says that these plants grow to a maximum of just one metre. Spring 2024's rainfall had clearly left a mark!)



The cemetery's usual spring flowering was therefore held back this year. When it did emerge in full flush, visitors seemed thrilled with the spectacle, making it something of a local attraction.

Insect decline

The hugely variable weather with its swings from extreme to extreme has undoubtedly impacted butterfly, moth and insect populations. More so than many recent years, anecdotal observation and scientific measurement testify that 2024 has been marked by devastating insect declines. Read widely and you'll encounter these observations globally, not just in Britain. Climate is clearly a driver of this. Bee and hoverfly species in Britain have become 42% less widespread than in 1980. 80% of British butterfly species have declined since the 1970s. Who knows what might have been lost since the cemetery was created from meadowland in 1873?



Insect populations can increase or decrease 100-fold or even 1,000-fold from one generation to another, so one cannot predict how next year will look. What we can say with some certainty is that the value to insects (let alone us and the wider community) of us supporting the cemetery's floral and plant diversity will be immense.

It does not help, of course, that West Sussex sprays our verges, including the patch right outside the cemetery gates, with glyphosate (aka 'Roundup') several times a year. This herbicide, banned by Worthing Borough Council, is thought to be a carcinogen and is known to be neurotoxic to insects. The impact on the town's and the county's environment will be very considerable.



The website (current and new)

All new species records find their way onto the website. Of the 684 records (at the time of writing), all but 27 have been photographed in situ (with the understandable exception of a further 46 lichens).

Since the last AGM, new blog posts have been contributed by Philippa (on roses), John (on lichens) and Rob (on wasps). Members and supporters are invited to contribute to this endeavour.

A new website is currently undergoing a complete rebuild and redesign. This aims to make a better job (than the current website) of presenting all of the work of the Friends (the burials, the species and the blog posts). Species will enjoy a more accessible presentation with users being able to run searches that straddle different species families. For example, trees, which belong to as many as 15 different species families, will be able to be shown together as one of the “often requested groups” (showing 21 different tree species). Other multi-family groups being given this treatment are bees (24 species), beetles (17), crickets and grasshoppers (7), dragonflies and damselflies (5), hoverflies (30), invasive plant species (4), mosses (19), umbellifers (5) and wasps (19). (Numbers valid at the time of writing.)



In a similar fashion, users will also be able to see everything listed and grouped by species families, which will make for quite a compelling presentation.

Launch may be before the end of the year.

The Sussex Local Wildlife Sites initiative survey

You will recall that the Site of Nature Conservation Importance (SNCI) designation was awarded to the cemetery in 1992 in recognition of its ‘old meadow’ community, ‘a much threatened habitat’. That designation changed to a Sussex Local Wildlife Site in 2018 and we have for some time been awaiting our first visit to survey and advise us. Dan Watkins of the Sussex LWS initiative made contact and visited the cemetery on 9th July 2024. We shan’t receive the resulting report until next year, but it was confirmed that the cemetery won’t be losing its treasured LWS designation.

Ecologically, Heene Cemetery’s importance is as a slice of countryside in an urban setting. Its meadowland origins contribute to that with the remarkable biodiversity that we see today. Of the 11 plant species listed as being typical of *British NVC community MG5* grassland, Heene has 10. This habitat is uncommon in southern England.



Dan’s take-away advice was that (a) we need to instigate and maintain a variable strimming regime and (b) we need to put a brake on the encroaching trees and their thickening canopies. Failure to manage this long-term will inevitably result in the reduction and perhaps eventual loss of the ‘old meadowland’ character of the cemetery.

Dan thought that our species records showed a comprehensive list that covered a wide variety of taxonomic groups.

Implications for volunteer workers

Retarding the onward march of trees within the cemetery (including thinning branches that overhang from trees on St Michael’s Road) needs to be carried out with some determination. This should also include taking out some of the many small Elm, Goat Willow and Holm Oak trees.

We have on file a 1996 report from the Sussex Wildlife Trust that advocated the removal of Sycamore, Willow and Elm saplings in the centre of the site. It was something that Dan had endorsed when he visited Heene this year. At a Dome Cinema screening in June of the film 'Wilding' about the Knepp Estate's rewilding project, Isabella Tree participated in an on-stage Q&A to a packed house. It was fascinating to hear her say that without their large herbivores (Old English Longhorn cattle, Tamworth pigs, and Red and Fallow deer) the Knepp estate would quickly revert to woodland.

At Heene we are not engaged in a rewilding project. We deliberately intervene to leave access to many of the graves and ensure that pathways allow access round the site for volunteers and public alike. Even so, volunteer workers will need to perform the role of Knepp's large herbivores to ensure that the trees don't take over.

In terms of historical sequence, we need to ensure that Heene resembles 'meadowland with graves' rather than 'a graveyard with trees'. Protecting the meadowland character of the cemetery should be one of the top priorities of the volunteer workers.

The future

New members may appreciate the following from last year's environmental report:

As you know, the cemetery was closed in 1977. The Disused Burial (Amendment) Act of 1981 stipulates that a building may be erected on consecrated ground if there are no objections from the personal representatives or relatives of anybody interred within the last 50 years. This protection may therefore lapse for Heene Cemetery in 2027.

The legal complexities may be abundant but, at the least, the more that can be done to identify and highlight other reasons why the cemetery should be preserved for the future the better.

Its status as a Local Wildlife Site does not in itself provide legal protection, but the Sussex Wildlife Site Initiative maintains that by following a carefully thought-out management plan and documenting the biodiversity that a site has, an LWS can "be given due consideration in the planning and developing process". The ongoing species work is an attempt to do just that.

The work of the Friends is certainly raising the profile of Heene Cemetery within the community – and beyond. It is increasingly being seen as a cherished community asset. This is thanks as much to the work of the conservation team, as it is to the often unseen heritage team – or the species surveys. The combination of all three offers an unusual mix. A deeper social past dressed in an uncertain environmental present and future may serve to speak to a broader sense of vulnerability. At every level, the cemetery is a place for contemplation. The graves without the flowers or the flowers without the graves would be a lesser treasure.

Rob Tomlinson
rt@rob-tomlinson.com