**Environmental improvement around St Matthew’s Church, Walsall**

**St Matthew’s Churchyard and the Church Hill Conservation Area**

[Photos](https://photos.app.goo.gl/P2FuAB9a1w6So8Wg6)

The Bumblebees Project and the Wildflower areas in St Matthew’s churchyard have drawn attention locally and regionally. Photographs are popular on social media and on several occasions photos have been used on television, Midlands Today. But these are recent feel-good highlights of a much bigger story.

I took on responsibility for maintaining the churchyard in March 2018. My wife was a churchwarden with a brief to look after “Buildings and Fabric”. She was losing sleep with stress about leaking roof areas and the poor state of the churchyard, so I said I’d take the job on. In the years leading to 2018, only the south side of the churchyard received significant attention, with borders maintained between the Lych Gate and the main church door.

The first matter to address was **safety**. Most of the churchyard felt unsafe with rough sleepers, drug users and sex workers, and was known for its high crime rate, notably mugging. These people and a culture of neglect led to litter including cans, broken glass, needles, drug detritus, condoms, human and dog faeces, takeaway food and wrappers, flytipping, domestic rubbish dumping, evidence of crime, superstitious/pagan items, vandalism, fires, graffiti, burial (often incomplete) of dead pets. Over a period of years, volunteers have changed the culture. In the last two years, only rarely do these problems reoccur and are swiftly cleared up. This area of work is unattractive, often unrewarded by thanks or other recognition, and a major drain on time/energy.

Initially I worked largely alone, but gradually others from the church and local people asked how to help. I ran a couple of large scale clear-up events, but far more effective has been having regular days when a few people give about three hours to tasks. On a typical Tuesday or Friday morning, about five **volunteers** give time from a pool of about 15. For six months, I had help for 20 h per week from a young long term unemployed person on the Kickstart programme - and subsequently he secured his “dream job”.

The second priority was to address **neglected growth** of bushes and plants which provided hiding places for antisocial acts. Undesirable behaviour in the churchyard was fed directly by all the cover provided by bushes in the Church Hill Conservation Area. Consequently, we had to address this neglect - which lay within the responsibility of Walsall Council, but realistically, it was not a priority for them. (I do have a good relationship with workers from Clean and Green from Walsall Council.) Much of this work was carried out by volunteers and Community Payback. We also received a day’s professional help from Transport for West Midlands and Acorn Environmental Tree Surgeons. See our [Supporters](https://www.stmatthewswalsall.co.uk/supporters/) page. A thorn and brush barrier was created to prevent drug users and rough sleepers accessing a substantial area to the north of the churchyard: it is now a haven for wildlife.

Next we had to address the **neglect of the built environment**, so important to a sense of security and wellbeing. This work involved clearing paths and walls of growth, repairing damage and painting, again a substantial amount of work beyond the boundary of church property.

Only when the matters above were addressed could the energies of volunteers be turned to aspects of **gardening**. About 2 tonnes of leaves fall each year in the churchyard. These are collected and composted, and the compost returned to mulch plants. The wildflower area has been agreed with Walsall Council Clean and Green Team so that no strimming takes place before July. A survey in 2022 identified 30 species, though it is likely more are present.

[Bumblebee Project Proposal](https://docs.google.com/document/u/0/d/1nBGoXAt4lZPZENnSwHTHCP4olSTWD5BzPWxMUQ8RjGE/edit)

[Bumblebee Project](https://docs.google.com/document/d/10BWQUl-pyJkkeUZsggRnYZnK6Ryo1Vvsq11M0M0bkeE/edit?usp=sharing)

The Church Hill Conservation Area is now an attractive amenity, with the churchyard a highlight, and a very popular area for people wanting to enjoy the splendid views over the town. People appreciate a spiritual sense of peace, a sanctuary in a troubled town and world.

**John Edlin March 2024**