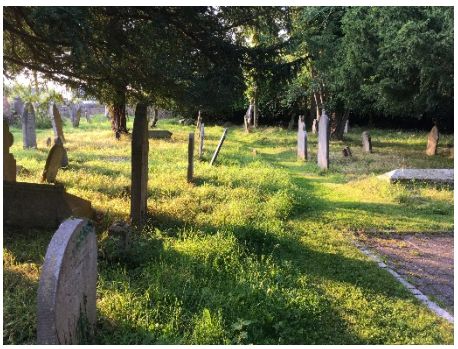
Mount Road Cemetery, St Asaph

Mount Road cemetery in St Asaph is a tranquil and beautiful space full of wildflowers, bird song, and trees waving in the breeze. There are over 700 graves there, including 8 war graves. Some date back to the 1700s. It is a closed cemetery, and no new interments have taken place there for many years. It is immediately adjacent to the current cemetery which can be accessed from further on down Mount Road via Clos Derw.



A record of all the graves and their inscriptions was made by Andrew Thomas and Paul Evers-Swindell in the early 1990s. This record is held at the parish church and is also available on the parish church website www.stasaphparishchurch.org.uk, following *history* and *tracing your ancestors*. It has a map of graves with an alphabetical listing to aid those seeking family graves. The inscriptions, though brief, are often very poignant, particularly those on war graves.

In 1920, at the disestablishment of the Church in Wales, it was decided that all closed cemeteries in Wales should be the responsibility of the parish churches. This is not the case with open cemeteries, which are looked after by local councils. With the passage of time, and with fewer family connections with the majority of those buried here, this has become quite a significant responsibility.

The cemetery chapel was sold by the parish church some years ago and subsequently converted into office premises. It is now home to a local business.

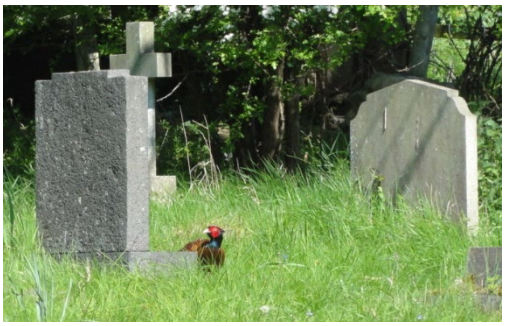
Responsibility for upkeep of the Mount Road Cemetery is therefore in the hands of the St Asaph Parish Church Committee, who set up the Mount Road Community Cemetery Group in 2007. This group is formed from church members and local residents and meets twice a year. About 3 or 4 work parties are held each year to maintain the cemetery, with individual contributions from others on a regular basis throughout the year as well. This work is carried out on an entirely voluntary basis.

Prior to the formation of the MRCCG, the cemetery had been getting increasingly overgrown despite occasional initiatives to keep the vegetation under control. Community volunteers were brought in on at least one occasion, and had a significant impact, but the undergrowth just seemed to come back faster. The MRCCG organised the regular work parties that were required to cut back the snowberry, briars, nettles and thistles that were making it impossible to visit many graves, and then set the work parties the task of keeping the cemetery in a reasonable state. The pictures below indicate the scale of the challenge faced.

Despite the ongoing work parties, the rate of growth of the grass and undergrowth made the work parties gruelling and relentless. Mowing around old headstones is a difficult task as the ground is irregular and stone fragments lurk in the grass ready to smash mower blades. Strimming was more successful, but was a hot, noisy and still somewhat ineffective practice.

Working with the County Biodiversity Officer, we adopted an idea from another North Wales parish, and decided to bring in a small number of sheep to help. We initially brought 8-10 sheep to the cemetery for a couple of months at a time, but then purchased some mature ewes past breeding age that have lived in the cemetery very happily since then. Their arrival has transformed the maintenance of the cemetery – no longer do we have to spend work parties mowing and strimming but can take on other important tasks such as tree trimming, grave maintenance and biodiversity work as well. The advent of the sheep would not have been possible without grant assistance from the **Church Acts Fund** and the **Community Chest fund**, which enabled a fence to be put down one side of the cemetery where the wall was low. The funding also allowed purchase of a new bench and construction of a notice board giving information about the cemetery – its history, flora and fauna, and details of the graves.

The sheep chosen have mainly been Hebridean sheep (see appendix 1). These small bodied and dark woolled sheep are often used for conservational grazing as they will eat not only grass, but also ivy, young briars, and sometimes also nettles. They are hardy, and quite sociable, requiring low maintenance only. They are clipped yearly, and their feeds are supplemented through the winter with sheep nuts, as well as sheep licks. As they are rarely handled, and possibly because of their ancestry, they are usually not very keen to be rounded up for clipping, and so we are helped by a professional sheep dog trainer and one of her young dogs each year. They are rounded up into a temporary pen at the south-west corner of the cemetery, and expertly clipped by Tudur Roberts, seen below. The temporary pen and funnel, which is constructed with fencing and pallets, is then dismantled and stored.



In recent years, the biodiversity in the cemetery has become more apparent. **Rabbits** have joined the sheep in their work in keeping the grass manageable. **Squirrels** have been plentiful most years. There are **slow worms** (legless lizards) to be found regularly along the front and side walls, and large **anthills** have been made in many places. A wide variety of birds is to be found, including **pigeons**, **crows**, **thrushes**, **tits** and an occasional **pheasant**. A **buzzard** frequently perches on the tall trees at the back of the cemetery. Two owl boxes have been installed, as well as a number of smaller bird boxes, and have been occupied in the last year. Hibernaculae are piles of wood and twigs designed to be safe havens for reptiles and amphibians, and several have been set up at various points in the cemetery, with assistance from the Denbighshire Biodiversity officer and local children.

Again with advice from the County Biodiversity Officer, we have adopted best practice with respect to our work parties – we now time them to allow seeding of wild flowers, and strimming has been minimised. We do not trim bushes or trees during the nesting season. On the much less frequent occasions when we use strimmers, we do not cut lower than 6 inches on the first pass, then check for small vertebrates (reptiles and amphibians) before proceeding any further.

We have also recently added two insect hotels, made by children from local schools at a Naturefest event in the Parish Church. These hotels are designed to encourage a variety of insect life, including ladybirds,

woodlice, spiders, centipedes, millipedes, earwigs and beetles. In addition, we have installed a solitary bee hotel.

The cemetery is surrounded on three sides by a stone wall, which has needed repair on a few occasions in the last 20 years. This is a specialist task using lime mortar and is undertaken by stonemasons. The cost of the repairs has fallen on the parish church, but we have occasionally had grant support also.

Wall repairs at the north gate.

From time to time, gravestones can become unstable. Such headstones are the responsibility of the family, but as many graves are of people who no longer have family locally, the task of dealing with them falls to the MRCCG. For that reason, each headstone is checked annually for stability, and if unstable, are laid down horizontally.

Over the course of the years, trees have grown readily in the cemetery – both those planted and those that have self-seeded. Species include yew, ash, laurel, conifers and oak. Some older trees have fallen, and others have required felling or tree surgery. In the picture below, a conifer stump about 16 feet in height is taken down with great care, as it was leaning and threatening a neighbour's garden.

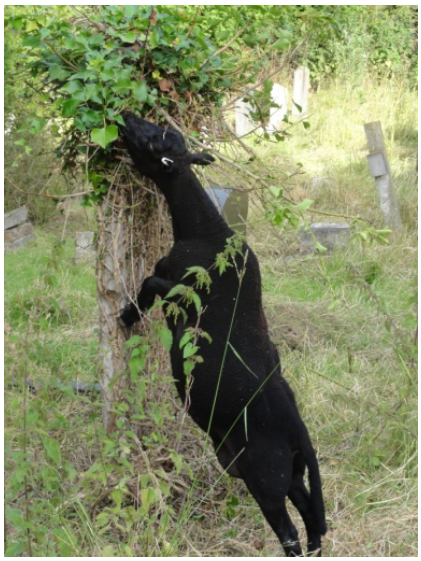
Ropes attached to ensure correct direction of fall

Self-seeded ash saplings growing within a plot

Hebridean sheep

The Hebridean is a breed of small black sheep from Western Scotland, similar to other members of the Northern European short-tailed sheep group, having a short, triangular tail. They quite often have two pairs of horns. They were often formerly known as "St Kilda" sheep, although unlike Soay and Boreray sheep they are probably not in fact from the St Kilda archipelago.

Hebrideans have black, rather coarse wool, which fades to brown in the sun and often becomes grey with age; there is no wool on the face or legs. If not shorn the wool may moult naturally in spring. Hebrideans are hardy and able to thrive on rough grazing, and so are often used as conservation grazing animals to maintain natural grassland or heathland habitats. They are particularly effective at scrub control, having a strong preference for browsing.



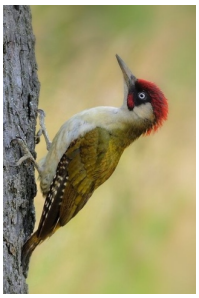
These Hebrideans have come from a flock in Tremeirchion. The ewes are past their breeding age and are of indeterminate age. Each sheep is named after an island in the Hebrides. In addition to liking grass, they particularly enjoy ivy, such that they will strip ivy from the headstones – a useful contribution! There was some concern at the outset that they would be poisoned by berries from the yew trees but this has not been a problem. During the winter, they are fed sheep nuts, and also have sheep mineral licks through the year. Once a year, they are clipped, have a dose of worming medicine, and have their hooves trimmed and the wool is given to local knitting enthusiasts.

The sheep are extremely shy and will not approach visitors unless they come with a saucepan full of sheep nuts, when the sheep become more interested, though still cautious!

Ants and Anthills

Each mound is created by a single colony of ants, numbering between 8,000 to 14,000 ants. The anthills collect heat from the sun, and allow a fairly stable internal temperature which favours ant colony development. The ants dig soil from the ground and pile it up, creating galleries for raising their young. Anthills are thus made of fine soil and do not contain stones. The age of the anthill can be estimated by their size above ground, amounting to one litre per year. They may grow up to a metre tall. The ants lay eggs, which then mature into larvae and pupae before becoming adult ants. Ants feed on aphids, and indeed farm them to feed on the "honeydew" that he aphids produce. The ants protect the aphids against other predators

Each summer, usually in July, when the air is warm and still, there is a 'nuptual flight' in which several hundred new queens (fertile females) and drones (males) fly out from the colony. After mating, and they mate only once in their life, the queens break off their wings and look for somewhere to start a new colony. This is a risky business. Such swarms of ants are attractive to predators looking for an easy meal. Queens also may be killed if they land in an occupied territory. Sometimes more than one queen start up a colony together, but mature colonies usually have only one queen. A queen can lay as many as 100 eggs per hour to maintain her army of workers! Whether females develop into queens or workers depends on how they are fed when larvae. By living deeper underground, Yellow Meadow Ants can co-exist and avoid competition with Black Ants that live in the surface soil layers and have much larger territories.



The presence of ant hills results in a greater diversity of flora and fauna. Several insect-eating birds will feed on ants, but the most specialised is the **Green Woodpecker**. Although it nests in tree holes, it feeds mainly on grassland ants, which may be as much as 80% of its winter diet. The woodpecker pecks into the mound, breaking into the galleries and gathers the ants with its extraordinarily long tongue which it protrudes deep into the mound. The sun-warmed soil of an ant hill attracts many other insects, for example the Common Field Grasshopper prefers the soil of the mound for egg laying. The mounds make good basking sites for butterflies like the Small Copper and reptiles such as the Common Lizard. https://www.royalparks.org.uk

Slow-worms

Despite their name and appearance, slow-worms are neither worms nor snakes, but are in fact lizards - they're given away by their ability to shed their tails and blink with their eyelids. They can be found in heathland, tussocky grassland, woodland edges and rides: anywhere they can find invertebrates to eat and a sunny patch in which to sunbathe. They are often found in mature gardens and allotments, where they like hunting around the compost heap. However, if you have a cat, you are unlikely to find them in your garden as cats predate them. Like other reptiles, slow-worms hibernate each winter, usually from October to March. http://www.wildlifetrusts.org/species/slow-worm

Gallery

One of the two owl boxes, and a standard bird box

Twig and branch pile for amphibians and various reptiles

Sheep don't like wild garlic

Rabbits trimming the grass

Information board and low budget work party sign

Insect hotels made by local children

Biodiversity Officer directing youngsters in creating hibernaculae.


Wildflowers and blossom in profusion


Work parties – with the all-important refreshments...