

Graveyards as greenspaces for health and wellbeing

About this learning resource

We have created this guide to offer some inspiration on using graveyards as local places to explore the past and the present. We have created three different scavenger hunts aimed at early learners (Primary 2-4, or 6-9 year-olds), however the activities are fun for all ages and can be adapted to suit different groups. We have provided specific Curriculum for Excellence guidance in an additional document.

About graveyards

Graveyards are spaces set aside for the burial of the dead. The term 'graveyard' covers lots of different burial sites, from churchyards to cemeteries.

Most of us will have access to a graveyard in our local community. There is a long history of people throughout Scotland using graveyards as greenspaces not just to commemorate and memorialise the dead, but also to gather together with the living.

Remember to explore graveyards responsibly, be respectful, and wear suitable clothing and footwear for the weather and be careful of uneven surfaces.



Sanctuary for nature

Graveyards are often calm and tranquil spaces. When they remain undisturbed over many years, they can develop into valuable refuges for both plants and animals. Your local cemetery may reveal a variety of wildlife living alongside its historic memorials.

Beyond their cultural and historical significance, cemeteries provide important habitats for nature. In older burial grounds, gravestones, boundary walls, hedges, and shrubs create sheltered corners where wildlife can find protection. Mature trees offer nesting and roosting sites for birds and bats, while less-managed areas allow a wide range of plants to flourish. Historic stone walls are particularly important. They can mimic natural rocky habitats, which may be uncommon in the surrounding landscape. Over centuries, ferns, mosses, and lichens establish themselves on these surfaces, creating striking patterns, colours, and textures. The gaps within traditional dry-stone walls provide shelter for small birds, reptiles, and other creatures. Walls built with lime mortar can also support specialised plants and lichens that have become scarce in neighbouring areas.

The flower-rich grasslands often found in old cemeteries are equally valuable. The mix of grasses and wildflowers can represent habitats that have disappeared from built up areas. Although burial activities have disturbed the soil in the past, these areas generally experience less intensive management than land beyond the cemetery boundaries. As a result, they can support a diverse range of insects, including butterflies, bees, and other important pollinators.

Graveyard wildlife observation

Lots of living things make their homes in graveyards. From insects to birds, graveyards are biodiverse greenspaces. Biodiversity means different types of living things and how they interact with one another. Take a walk around your local graveyard and see what you can spot!



Trees

Most graveyards have trees in the grounds or along the perimeter walls. Can you spot any green ivy growing in the graveyard? What else is growing at this time of year?



Animals and Birds

Many birds make their homes in trees and bushes. Can you spot any birds in the graveyard? Do you know what species they are?



Plants

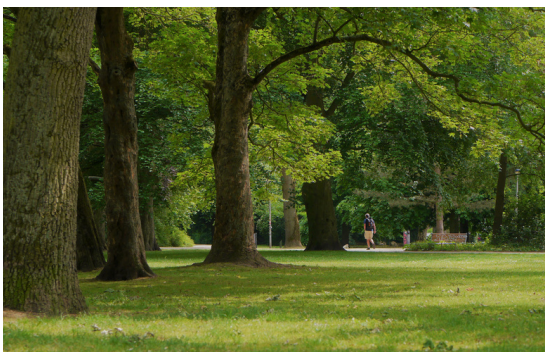
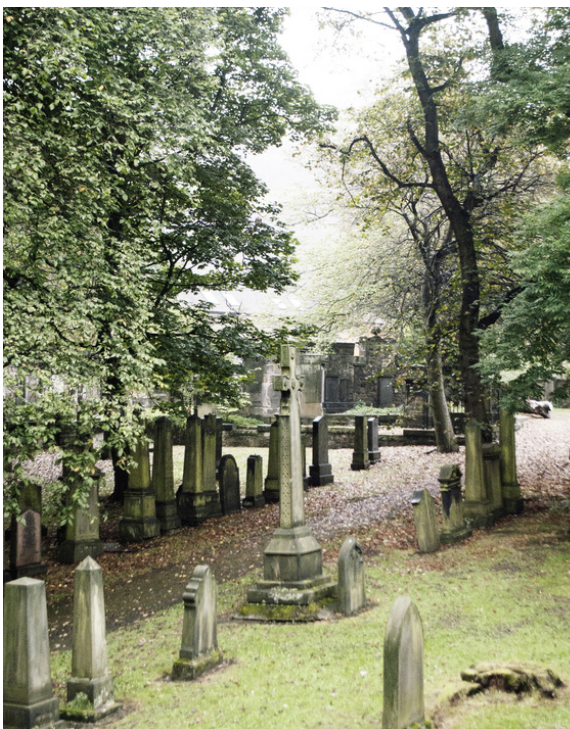
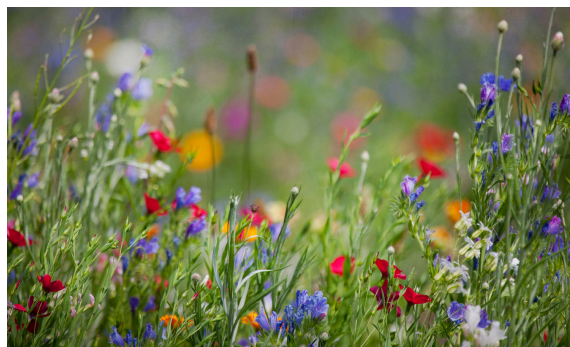
Graveyards tend to have ivy and lichen growing stays green all year long, even in the winter. Can you spot any green ivy growing in the graveyard? What else is growing at this time of year?



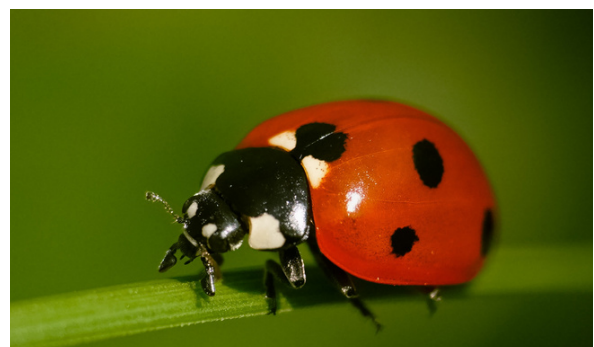
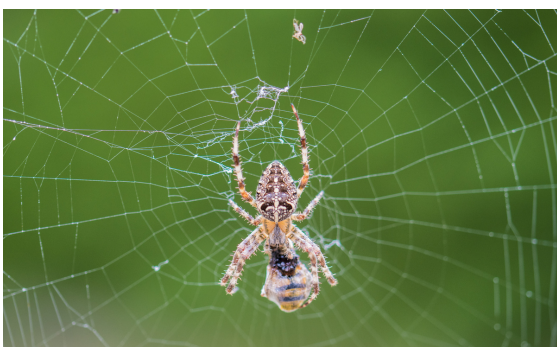
Insects

Many insects live and roam in old graveyards. What animals can you spot in the graveyard?

Plants and Trees you might see



Animals and Insects you might see



Content warning

Before and during the activity it is important to consider the understanding and reaction of people (young and old) when present in a graveyard. Some discussions may be upsetting to different audiences for many reasons (for example, talking about death, child graves, or religious segregation) and should be carefully considered.

It is also important to ensure the safety and accessibility for visitors. Be clear and honest regarding areas of the site that may not be accessible (for example, stairs or uneven ground, areas with poor lighting, areas impacted by weather conditions, where there are places to rest, access to toilets or other facilities, etc.).

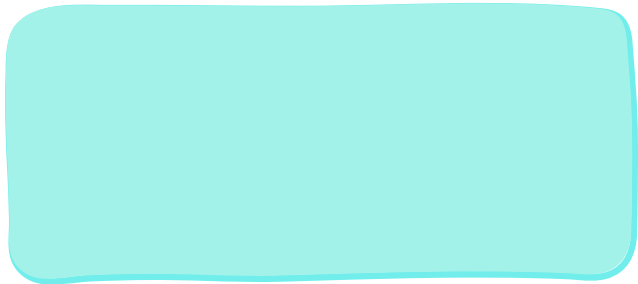
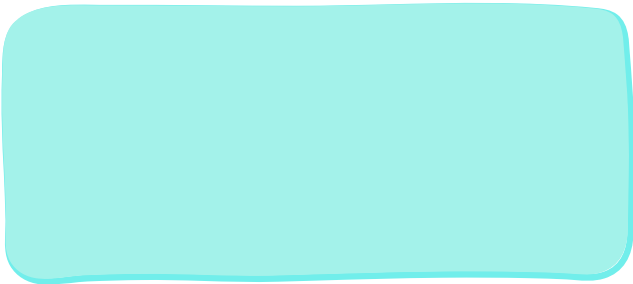
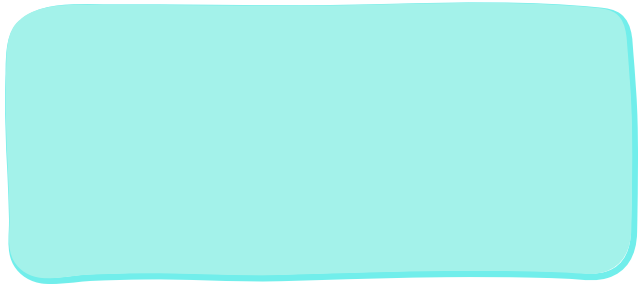
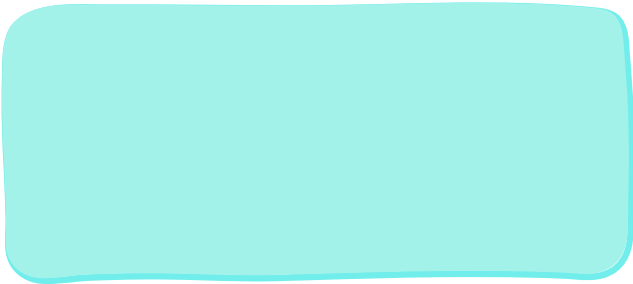
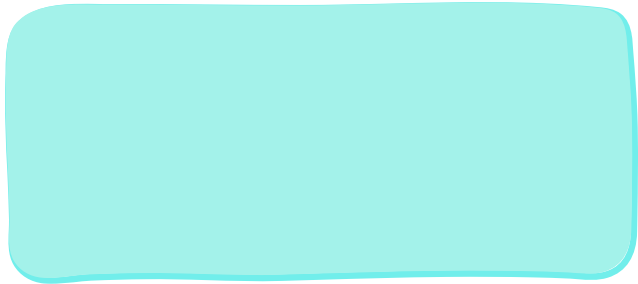
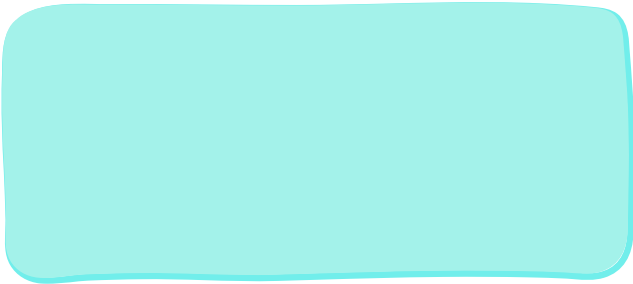
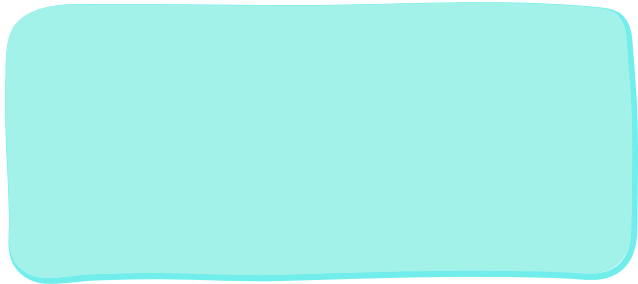
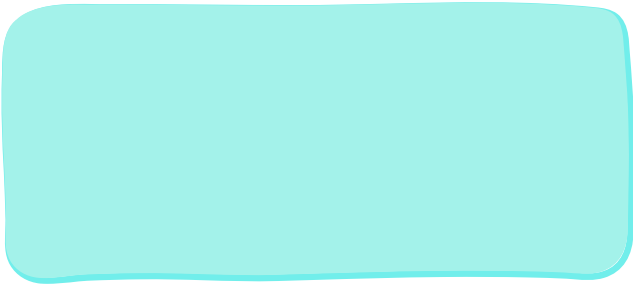
Further reading

- Archaeology Scotland provides a number of [resources on graveyards](#), including how to look after or record sites
- Scottish Archaeological Research Framework has a [guide to graveyards](#)
- Consider turning your I-SPY activity into a photography activity and use our My Place Photography Competition [guide to taking good pictures](#)



Have comments or questions? Get in touch at sch@scottishcivictrust.org.uk

What plants and animals did you see today on your visit? What was your favourite?



Backpack Essentials

Pencil and paper for notes

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Our graveyards guide

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A map of your local area

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An umbrella or raincoat!

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Notes: