



August 2014

BUILT HERITAGE

REMOVING IVY FROM SIMPLE GRAVESTONES

SITE: Ramsey St Mary's Churchyard
Ramsey
Cambridgeshire

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AIM: To investigate the effects of ivy on simple gravestones with no joints, and to trial ways of removing it.

ACTIONS:

Step 1: In 2008 a team from English Heritage and Oxford University identified 4 levels of ivy coverage on gravestones in Ramsey Churchyard, Cambridgeshire. These were: Juvenile, Shroud, Shrub, Shrub & Shroud.



Juvenile



Shroud



Shrub



Shrub & Shroud

Step 2: The team removed the ivy entirely from 3 stones; one each of Shroud, Shrub and Shrub & Shroud. This was done using hand tools only – secateurs, loppers and hand saws.

They started by cutting off easy lengths of ivy from the outside and then worked carefully in, without pulling sharply (which risks dislodging the gravestone). The

growth was gradually cut back until only a framework of stems attached to the gravestone remained.

Step 3:



The team then removed the ivy carefully from the top of the stones making sure that tools did not scratch or chip the stone beneath. This needed particular care as the tops can have a variety of forms; stepped details, carved swirls or finials which may be quite invisible prior to clearing. The best way to tackle these was to remove stem sections individually rather than trying to peel off great chunks.

Step 4:



Once the top has been cleared the stems running down the sides can be cut and in all cases the rest of the framework proved surprisingly easily to simple peel away from the face of the gravestone.

When this was done the main stump and roots were pulled up if possible or else pulled up sufficiently to cut the main roots some way along their length. This should stop re-growth as ivy does not regenerate from the roots.

Step 5:



Prepare for a lot of waste!

Each gravestone produced over six sacks of ivy.

RESULTS AND BENEFITS: The study has shown that it is possible to remove even the densest of ivy from gravestones without any damage to the stone beneath. The ivy had not damaged the stone in this trial and aerial roots had not penetrated the monuments.

There is considerable scientific evidence that ivy cover protects the substrate that it is growing on (in this case, the gravestones) from weather damage and erosion and also any air pollutants present. It can however make it impossible to read the monument or to do a condition assessment.

There was some staining on the stones following ivy removal. This was caused by either:



- The ivy roots keeping part of the stone clean whilst the rest has a layer of dirt
- Organic matter building up above each ivy stem and colouring the stone.

This staining may well disappear after a few years of exposure to the elements

ISSUES AND LESSONS LEARNT:

- Hand tools were found to be entirely sufficient for ivy removal and reduced the risk of damaging the stone beneath
- Two people working carefully can clear a large stone heavily covered in ivy in 45 -60 minutes
- Nesting birds had clearly used the ivy on gravestones and so work should not take place during the nesting season (March to July). Similarly avoid clearance during cold winter months as the sudden change in temperature could be damaging to the stone.
- Uncovering previously damaged stones may lead to further damage through erosion and this should be expected, with potential repairs planned for.
- The ivy stems were inspected and proved to be 10 years old or younger, this is the time taken for the ivy to completely cover the monuments.

CONCLUSIONS AND NEXT STEPS:

- Ivy is damaging to complex monuments with joints (such as crosses) as it can get into the joint and push it open and so prioritise early removal of ivy from this type of monument. NB once established it may be the ivy which is holding the monument together so seek advice prior to acting. It may be safer to trim the ivy back annually rather than removing it in this case.
- Ivy is not damaging to simple monuments such as gravestones and is actually protective, so the decision to clear ivy is not based on monument preservation but aesthetics and the need to inspect or to read monuments.
- Even the densest ivy is not damaging and can be carefully removed. Following removal there may be some superficial staining and existing damage to the stone may also be revealed This damage can then increase with exposure to the elements, and may need repair.
- The dense ivy coverage in this study was 10 years old or less, so think carefully about what resources you have before deciding to remove ivy from simple stones. Ivy has many wildlife benefits as well as protecting the monument beneath. You might wish to remove the ivy in advance of a monument recording project for example but decide to leave it as a general rule on unvisited, unlisted monuments.

Further Information:

Caring for God's Acre Action Pack Sheets:

Section A sheet 8 Helping Wildlife

Section A sheet 9 Pesky Plants

Section A sheet 10 Caring for Stonework, Metalwork and Woodwork

These and other resources are available for free download from
www.caringforgodsacre.org.uk

For the full report on this ivy removal trial see the attached 'Ivy Removal Trial'
There has been interesting research done on ivy; see the attached English Heritage
Seminar Report; 'Ivy on Walls'



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