

the birds and the bees...

I have a confession to make. On the subject of the flora and fauna of our fair isles I possess a great deal of general ignorance. I know the odd species, as we all do, but when it comes to identifying a stonechat or discerning which plant may be a three-cornered leek, I am not your man. Given this fact, why on earth would I, a crematorium technician, attempt to write an article on creating and maintaining ecological sustainability and biodiversity within memorial gardens and crematoria grounds?

Well, I believe that in these times of heightened environmental awareness, it is of vital importance for all services and businesses to actively change their working practises to become as 'green' as possible. The funeral industry is no exception. One resource which many crematoria can actively change and promote to the public is their memorial gardens; here at Penmount Crematorium in Truro we do just that.

In the course of this article I would like to explore the ways in which we have, through good management of the grounds, created an exceptional environment in which the bereaved can rest the remains of their loved ones and spend time in quiet contemplation whilst surrounded by a very diverse selection of plants and wildlife.

We are, admittedly, very lucky at Penmount. Our grounds consist of twenty-eight acres that once belonged to a country estate; the crematorium building was once the manor house. We have been able to create some very different areas within our gardens of remembrance which, in turn, has led to a large number of different insects, birds, mammals, fish and amphibians to take up residence. However, it must be said that without a highly knowledgeable and hard-working gardening team we would be in possession of twenty-eight 'wild' acres, in which only persistent weeds would flourish.

The gardening team, led by the very capable Manti Tauren-Bent, have many tricks to encourage biological variety. A key part of the gardens' biodiversity concerns the way in which the grounds are cared for. Some examples of good management are;

An example of our strong lichen population



Penmount Crematorium after a visit from Jack Frost!



- Pesticides are avoided as much as is possible and natural predators, such as ladybirds and lacewings, are encouraged to deal with aphids.
- A lichen policy is in place which protects our large and varied lichen population. Incidentally lichens are a good indicator of clean air and lack of pollution and chemical pesticides.
- Organic based fertilisers and mulches are used. For example, a lot of locally sourced spent mushroom compost is used each year.
- The floor of our wooded area 'quiet acres' is cut just once a year in June. It is left to grow throughout the other months. This allows wild flowers such as snowdrops, bluebells and primroses to flourish.

- We have a wild flower meadow which is cut in a traditional way, once a year.
- A pond was installed in our arboretum to further diversify the grounds.
- Plant materials from floral tributes is composted and used for soil improvement in the garden's borders.

Our focus on maintaining biodiversity through good horticultural practise is specifically mentioned in our service plan, which states that:

"We will endeavour to retain areas of conservation as an aesthetic feature and as an ecological resource within the crematorium whilst still maintaining the grassland overall in a neat and tidy manner" (4.4.1)

Incorporating this statement into our service plan has been an important step in showing that we have a strong commitment to working in an environmentally friendly fashion.

Waste not want not



Awaiting the return of the house martins



So, we have seen how environmental practises can be put in place to encourage biodiversity. The next question posed is: *"What benefits can be seen by working in this way?"*

At Penmount we have noticed a number of different changes resulting from our gardening practises. The most notable indicator of increased variation in wildlife is that of the bird population. We have listed forty-seven species of birds that can be seen here, ranging from common crows through to green woodpeckers and field fayres. This large variety of species is encouraged by a range of habitats that support varied shelter and food requirements. For example, since the wild flower meadow was created we have noted the arrival of skylarks, who are presumably attracted by the increase in insect life. We also have seen stonechats, which have been drawn in by the shelter provided by the gorse that surrounds the meadow.

Arboretum pond; a haven for aquatic wildlife



The advent of the pond in the arboretum has seen an increase in the numbers of house martins and swallows that we see each year.

The pond encourages insect life to proliferate and also provides mud and debris for nesting materials.

The pond also offers food and shelter for mallard ducks and moorhens, frogs and newts and a few goldfish that we think must have been supplied by members of the public!



'Quiet acres' supports a large variety of woodland life including an active badger set. Dead wood habitat piles support a myriad of invertebrates, which in turn support birds and small mammals. A stream that runs through the area encourages the growth of ferns and even giant-leafed Gunnera which hark back to Penmount's country estate days.

Much to the dismay of Manti and her gardening team, our gardens support a great population of rabbits; even the caretaker's cat can't resist munching on the odd one or two! The rabbits in turn support populations of foxes, weasels and buzzards.

Nero looking for lunch



The great variety of plants and animals is a huge asset to our crematorium. They help to create a tranquil and reflective atmosphere. It is heartening to hear the many comments we receive each year from members of the public who enjoy our gardens; we are sure that the care and attention that is evident in our grounds reflects on our service as a whole.

This is, in fact, a key benefit gained from sustainable grounds management; well kept diverse gardens speak volumes about the high levels of service throughout the crematorium as a whole.

We are very keen on moving forward at Penmount and are looking at undertaking some exciting new projects:

- We are hoping to install some beehives on the land to aid in the pollination of our wild flowers and plants. Supporting bee colonies is also a great way of promoting our green credentials further and proving that we are committed to upholding our service plan.
- We also hope to extend the pathway in 'quiet acres' further and open up some old Victorian ponds, which will provide new habitats for wildlife and offer new areas for private contemplation for the bereaved.

'Quiet acres' – a peaceful spot



The giant-leafed Gunnera



Wild flowers and ferns in 'quiet acres'



So, watch this space, or should I say 'Listen for the buzz!'

Adam Ransom