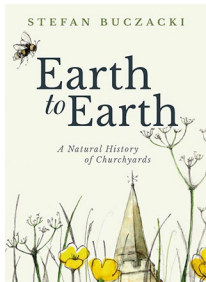


Beneath the yew-tree's shade



Earth to Earth: A Natural History of Churchyards

Stefan Buczacki and
Felicity Price-Smith

Unicorn: 2018. 160pp.
£15.00

Our lives and the lives of our predecessors have shaped the country in which we live. Today, the vast majority of our rural landscapes are a patchwork of cultivated land far removed from the 'natural' habitats that predate widespread, mechanised, intensive agriculture. Just as human involvement has shaped the architecture of the British countryside, so too have we modified the biodiversity of the flora and fauna that live alongside us. Churchyards are undeniably a human construction, and yet in these enclosed, protected spaces we have inadvertently created wildlife oases that hark back to the ancient habitats and biodiversity of the area in which they were built.

In *Earth to Earth*, botanist and horticulturist Stefan Buczacki (best known

in the UK for his prolonged spell as a panellist on the BBC Radio 4 programme 'Gardeners' Question Time') discusses the place of churchyards in both our history and countryside, with specific emphasis on their role as unique microcosms of ancient natural habitat. Buczacki's accessible overview of the natural history of churchyards attempts to inspire the reader's interest in a wide range of intertwined disciplines from history and archaeology, to ecology, botany and zoology, and encourages further reading with a comprehensive list of recommended titles. His poetic writing-style is punctuated by photographs, literary quotations and the charming, sketchbook-style illustrations of Felicity Price-Smith creating a beautiful example of 'escapist non-fiction'.

The book's central chapters discuss in brief the specific diversity of plants and fungi, mammals, reptiles and amphibians, birds, and 'other small creatures' harboured in Buczacki's chosen habitat. The overall conclusion that churchyards are rich in a variety of flora and fauna is assured and clearly made but, although in-keeping with the accessible, narrative style of the rest of the book, the lack of scientific detail in these sections is disappointing. In

particular, given Buczacki's specific interest and expertise in mycology, one may feel an opportunity has been missed in the very brief mention of fungi that concludes a chapter predominantly focussed on plant diversity.

The book concludes with a nod to the future and accompanying cautionary postscript; as congregations (and therefore church incomes) dwindle up and down the country, the importance of conserving these unique habitats for both their historical and environmental significance must be recognised by a wider population. It is here that Buczacki states his intention for his book: that readers will recognise the worth of our churchyards and be inspired to aid the conservation efforts of numerous organisations, scientific societies and wildlife trusts. In terms of achieving that particular aim, this elegantly crafted book deserves to be a success. □

Reviewed by **Katy Surridge**

Department of Biochemistry, University of Bristol,
Bristol, UK.

e-mail: katy.surridge@gmail.com

Published online: 2 November 2018
<https://doi.org/10.1038/s41477-018-0274-y>