

East Ham Nature Reserve

Nature Trail

Welcome to East Ham Nature Reserve. The Parish Church of St Mary Magdalene is over 800 years old and its churchyard is one of the largest in Britain. The church is still used but since 1977 the churchyard has been managed to protect its wildlife and is now a nature reserve.



The area near the church is kept tidy for the benefit of worshippers and other people using the church.

There is a nature trail to explore - use the map in this guide and follow the marker posts to see things of interest and avoid getting lost.

The trail starts at the wooden post near the big weeping willow. There is a schematic plan on each of the posts and they are marked on the map.

Be careful if you leave the main paths. There are deep holes and bits of metal in places as well as natural hazards like low branches.



You may see snail shells on the graves. These are broken by song thrushes using the stones as an anvil, so they can eat the snails. Mice and voles also eat the snails, but make a hole in the top of the shell and pull them out.

Nature Trail Map



Post 1. The trees in this area are mainly ornamental, not native species. The rough bark of the big weeping willow is home to several types of insects including ladybirds.



Beyond the church is a large yew tree. The red fruits are poisonous to people, but are eaten by birds. The walnut tree next to the yew is partly rotten and a good habitat for insects. It is not usually warm enough in this country for the nuts to ripen.

The arch marks the limit of the original churchyard, which was expanded in the 1830s to cope with a rapidly increasing population.

Post 2. The arch leads into the woodland, which was planted with native trees in 1980. This area is a bluebell wood in spring. Later, when the trees get their leaves, it becomes too dark for many plants to grow.



The hawthorn hedge has white blossom in spring and red berries called haws in autumn. Scrubby elm bushes are a remnant of the original hedge. They become infected with Dutch elm disease, so never grow to their full size.

As you walk round, listen for birdsong. Bird numbers have declined in the last 20 years, but you can hear blackbirds, robins and thrushes. A wren may shout at you. They have very loud voices for such a small bird. Listen also for woodpeckers drumming on the trees.

Post 3. Three Monks Corner (look at the gravestone). Choose the short route to the left or continue round the corner to the right.

In summer hops trail over the blackberry bushes in this area. They are a reminder of when this area was market gardens, growing vegetables to feed the increasing population of London. Hops were used to make beer.



They were the favourite food of the caterpillars of the comma butterfly. Now there are fewer hops around the caterpillars mainly feed on stinging nettles.

Further on sycamore trees, already stressed by hot, dry conditions, are dying of sooty bark disease.

Post 4. Pass a large mock orange (*Philadelphus*) bush on the left. Not native but scented and good for bees and hoverflies in early summer. Pruning out old wood will help it to flower better. See if you can find the angel in her cave. There are several dead hedges made of the wood from the mock orange. They provide shelter for insects and small mammals. As they rot down, fungi, such as jelly ear will appear.



Buddleia (butterfly bush) beside the path is visited not just by butterflies, as its name suggests, but also other insects. Buddleia is also not native. Generally native plants are better for native insects, but where non-natives are established and not causing problems, they will be left.

There are several war graves in this area. The symbols on the gravestones show which regiment they served with.

Post 5. Turn to the left along Pine Walk, or take a seat on the wooden bench by a big lilac bush.

The tall Scots pine trees were planted in 1981, along with the Austrian and Corsican pines further away from the path. They form a barrier to the noise and pollution from the A13. Unfortunately, the hotter summers and dryer conditions are taking their toll and several of the Scots pines have died, with others surviving, but in poor condition.



Look out for pine cones that have been nibbled by squirrels. In autumn fungi grow on the buried remains of the cones.

To the right are cherry plum trees. They produce tasty little red or yellow plums, which are food for many animals. If you're lucky you might see a slow worm in the grassy clearings.

Post 6. There is a shady seat under a large plum tree.
The Bhutan pine has long, silky needles and giant cones.
It comes from the Himalayas, but seems very much at home here.



The open glades are being invaded by ivy and soapwort, which prevents other wildflowers growing. The soapwort is pretty, and is a native flower, but this is a double form that has escaped from surrounding gardens. It does not produce pollen or nectar, so is of no use to insects.

Post 7. Turn left into more open grassland. The large alder tree is doing surprisingly well for a species normally associated with wet ground.

Many graves here have collapsed into deep holes, so take care if you leave the path. The birches were once in better shape but are now beginning to die.

To the left, tall pink rosebay willowherb appears in summer. Also known as fireweed, it colonised London's bombsites after the Blitz.



You may spot common lizards basking on logs or gravestones. Slow worms are common but usually remain hidden beneath the grass

Continue through the arch in the blackthorn hedge, covered in flowers in early spring and sometimes sloes later in the year.

Post 8. Turn left into Cricket Meadow. The grassland here is home to grasshoppers as well as crickets. Grasshoppers have long bodies and short antennae. Crickets are fatter with very long antennae.



This meadow was cleared and seeded with wildflowers in autumn 2015 and produced a wonderful show of flowers in 2016. Unfortunately, the coarse grass had taken over so most flowers have gone although woodruff and knapweed still appear every summer.

This is a favourite place to spot slow worms under the survey mats, which are used to monitor the population. Lift them to have a look, but be very careful and put them back exactly as you found them.

It is also a good place to pick blackberries. Leave some for the birds. Bramble flowers are an important food source for bees. The dry stems are hollow and used as nests by bees, spiders and other insects. The spiky mass is a good refuge for small animals like mice and voles as well as providing nest sites for birds.

Post 9. Pass the dogwood on the right. It has berries for birds (not edible for humans) and the leaves go purple in autumn. A large privet bush produces nectar and attracts Britain's largest hoverfly *Volucella zonaria*

On the left is the war grave of Queenie Grace Crook. It is unusual because most people buried in war graves were men.



In a good year there are lots of sloes, like little bitter plums, on the blackthorn bushes.

Paths have been cut through the Wilderness, but they are uneven and hazardous, so be careful exploring them.

Post 10. The obelisk near this marker was damaged by a landmine dropped on the churchyard during the 1939-1945 war.

Turn right past the marker. The mature ivy to your left provides nectar for ivy bees and other insects in the autumn and berries for birds in the winter.



There are dead elm trees in this area, killed by Dutch elm disease. Look for tracks made by beetles that burrow under the bark and carry the disease into the tree. Standing dead wood is a very important site for invertebrates.

Post 11. Turn right past a stand of coppiced hazel. Cutting the trunks as near to the ground as possible makes them grow a mass of straight poles. We harvest the poles to use around the site, for fences and hedge laying. Excess wood is put into woodpiles.



You have a choice of continuing along the side of Cricket Meadow to the end of the path and turning left past more coppiced hazel.

Alternatively take the metal bridge to the left and explore the paths through the woodland, which is a bluebell wood in spring. You will come out by the church, or at marker 12, or in the mini-meadow near marker 13.

Post 12. The path from the gate was made for fire access in the 1980s. Native trees and cherry plums were planted along the fence.



On the other side are sycamores dying of sooty bark disease. When they fall it opens up glades in the woodland, allowing smaller plants to grow. The ivy does not harm the trees, but is kept under control because it can make the trees more likely to be blown over if it forms a dense mass in the canopy. The flowers and berries of mature ivy are important for wildlife.

Post 13. The lime trees along the fence are about 100 years old. In early summer, their nectar can make bees appear almost drunk. Nettles are important food plants for the caterpillars of red admiral, peacock and comma butterflies, while honeysuckle and brambles provide further food.



By the seat is an evergreen oak, *Quercus ilex*, a southern species native to Spain. It may become more common as climate change and disease put pressure on our native oaks. It doesn't look much like an oak until you spot its acorns.

Slow worms shelter in the grass, while common lizards may be seen basking on the log piles. The compost heap on the left provides a valuable winter refuge for reptiles, invertebrates and small mammals.

The young oaks in the meadow often have marble-shaped growths on their twigs. These are oak marble galls, caused by a tiny gall wasp, and do not harm the tree.

Post 14. Through the arch to the original graveyard.

The hedge is laid in the traditional South of England style. Tree trunks are cut through near the ground, leaving a small amount of wood and bark. They are laid down and woven together. Hazel poles with thinner hazel rods woven along the top hold the hedge in place. It continues to grow, making a thick barrier right to the ground. Originally used as boundaries to livestock, laid hedges form safe routes for small mammals. They are nesting sites for mammals, birds and insects and provide food in the form of nuts and berries.



Turn to the left along the hedge to a dogwood bush where there is a small wooden grave marker. There would have been many of these and wooden crosses throughout the graveyard. Most people could not afford gravestones. This was properly made in 1896, with lead lettering. Others would have been simpler homemade markers.

The walk finishes back at the visitor centre where there is a large clump of comfrey whose flowers are visited by several species of bees and beeflies in the spring.