

ancient unimproved grasslands like this doesn't mean leaving them untended, and the displays of wild flowers that will fill the summer with colour do not come without help.

"Grassland management is an exact science," she says. "It can take two or three years of regular cutting, during which you sacrifice flowers, to beat back the coarse grasses and the aggressive plants you don't want." A strict mowing regime is followed at Hope Bagot. "We make the first cut in February before the first flowering, then we wait until the spring flowers have died down and the summer flowers have set seed before we cut again, regularly, to the end of the season."

In each parish, a team of churchyard gardeners has been formed. "I'm a - horrible word - enabler," Sue says. At Hope Bagot, the Stourbridge Ramblers come regularly to bolster the efforts of villagers. To help in their work, the bands of volunteers that care for these churchyards, which number more than 100, can call upon a machine called the God's Acre Trimmer, which was developed - with help and cash from English Nature - to cut grass around gravestones without damaging them. Around £500,000 has been obtained in grants from the Heritage Lottery Fund and DEFRA.

Now Sue hopes that Caring for God's Acre will go national. Shortly after we met, a two-day national conference in Ludlow called Cherishing Churchyards drew interested people from across the country. David Bellamy was the keynote speaker. It was seeing how much of the countryside had been lost since her childhood that drew Sue to found Caring for God's Acre. "When I was a farmer's daughter in south Staffordshire in the Fifties, I had a book in which I drew the wild flowers I saw. There must have been over 60 wild flowers on the farm, but now I doubt you'd find half a dozen."

I ask how she settled upon the name, Caring for God's Acre. "Henry Wadsworth Longfellow wrote a poem in 1841 called *God's Acre*, and it has the lines: 'I like that ancient Saxon phrase/ which calls the burial ground God's Acre,' and I love the idea behind that."

Sue takes me to another of her churchyards, just down the lane at St Mary the Virgin in Whitton, where orange-tip butterflies flit between the mauve flowers on carpets of bugle. One of the church's treasures is a stunning stained-glass window that was designed by Edward Burne-Jones and executed by William Morris. It's an unexpected find in a simple country church. The backdrop is of vibrant foliage and deep red flowers.

Equally lovely is the tradition, revealed in the churchyard, of carving flowers and other plants on gravestones. On one cruciform stone there are ears of corn, fleurs-de-lis and daisies, surrounding clasped hands. On another there is a bold bas-relief lily, on another a clutch of ferns. And I'm struck at how closely interwoven in this English country churchyard are the twin themes of faith and of flowers.

■ Richard Abbott is a freelance journalist. This is the third in our summer series on gardens and their connections with religious belief.

ANN WROE

'Teetering on a ladder, he chopped down two rows of angels from the hammer-beam roof'



We know relatively little about the iconoclasts who, in the 1640s or earlier, smashed up England's churches. The marks of their depredations are not always obvious these days; time and weather, too, have knocked things about a bit. But the sight of defaced saints and beheaded angels, scratched-out brasses and mutilated fonts, still causes me real pain. And nothing is worse than a jumble of fragmented hands, scrolls and feet, or a white staring blank, where once shone the glory of medieval glass.

Among the most enthusiastic wreckers was a man called Thomas Denny, who smashed a trail through east Suffolk in 1644. Denny was a deputy for William Dowsing, whose bluntly written record of what he did - excellently edited by Trevor Cooper for the Boydell Press in 2001 - has made him the most famous of the iconoclasts. Dowsing gave "T.D." licence to destroy "in every particular ... as fully as I myself may or might execute the same", and Denny took that seriously. He "brake down", "beate" and "battered" stained glass all over the district.

At Otley, clambering up a ladder and wielding an iron bar, he broke 50 "superstitious pictures". No one seemed to help; he did it himself, before hacking off a chancel cross, breaking two brass inscriptions, chiselling from the font the faces of every lion and angel, using hammers to prise angels off the arch-braces, and wrecking the rood screen. At Woolpit, a church full of treasures, he could only break "some" of the windows, but ordered the others to be dealt with.

In what was probably his own parish church, East Soham, he again attacked the font with his chisel and, teetering on a ladder, chopped down two rows of angels from the hammer-beam roof. When he had finished, glaziers were called in to replace the glass and the metalwork in the ruined windows. The "inspection" of each church earned Dowsing 6s 8d; Denny, picking his way through a scree of shattered beauty, must have got his cut.

He was no unlettered fanatic, but middle-class and literate. A wife and

two daughters waited for him at home. He probably believed, as his boss did, that he was clearing the way for the New Jerusalem, sundering an unhealthy connection between the living and the dead, and correcting the pernicious doctrine that man was saved by works. But, however history may excuse him, he left behind desolation.

All the more heartening, then, that a namesake should now be working in exactly the opposite direction. The second Thomas Denny, who as far as I know is no relation, is busy creating the most glorious and spiritual modern stained glass that I have ever seen. Churches with a window of plain glass - whether it came that way because of storms, or changing taste, or the hammers and staves of the first Thomas Denny's co-religionists - approach Mr Denny, and he fills them again with hues and images that both feed the soul and take the breath away.

So far I have seen only two of his windows, and am hungry to see more. A Denny window is at first such a shock of colour and fire that the mind is lost in it; but then it turns quickly to meditation. The first Thomas Denny would have taken as his motto the words of Leviticus: "You shall make you no idols nor graven image neither rear you up a standing image ... for I am the Lord your God." The second Thomas Denny also draws his themes from the Old Testament, but this time from Isaiah and the Psalms: "For with you is the fountain of life; in your light we see light."

His glass deliberately takes its inspiration from the colours of other windows round it and from the landscape in which the church lies. At Malvern Priory, in the north choir aisle, his windows are predominantly red and silver-grey, with threads of blue, to reflect the neighbouring medieval glass; and they also contain the line of the Malvern hills, with woods and fields, over which a great red sun rises. At Bolton Percy, in North Yorkshire, his west window is mostly blue, reflecting the waters of baptism in the font nearby. But as you gaze at the glass you also see the River Ouse flowing quietly through it, and a curlew flying.

I'm especially fond of Mr Denny's human figures. They are shadowy, sometimes bedraggled, and, like the viewer, seem lost in the wonder of where they are, surrounded by beauty. Their heads are raised, their arms and hands slack, as if they are waiting and receiving. The glass around them is alive with movement, as if at any moment it will splinter and crack asunder - not from hatred, but from love, and access of grace.