

Retired couple John and Darylin Francis joined a small rural church in Wiltshire a couple of years ago and in that time have had an extraordinary impact on the church's community life.



The couple joined St Leonard's Church in the village of Stanton Fitzwarren, just north of Swindon and began caring for the churchyard, clearing graves dating back to the 17th century and potting up summer flowers for each grave. They have planted hundreds of bulbs to enhance the churchyard and encourage wildlife, as well as establishing bird-feeders and water sources.

The ancient Saxon church has since seen an increase in attendance as visitors are attracted to the wildlife areas. Darylin, 71, explains: "Where the lord of the manor once lived is now a hotel. As a result, we have visitors from all over the world, as well as those who live locally. A knowledge of our church's history and the manor, gives us an ice breaker and starts a conversation.

"There is something for everyone to appreciate, whether it is the architecture, the church building, volunteering inside the church or the churchyard. What a joy to see someone who was quick to tell you they are not religious, spending time in the church and can be seen taking away a prayer card just in case."

John and Darylin's transformation of the churchyard began when they decided to start mapping and recording the headstones. They were told the earliest known grave was dated 1674 and were determined to find it.

It was during this time the couple began to notice the wildlife around them. John said: "A small robin always hopped along with us, looking for something tasty to eat. This made us sit and look around us, and it was not long before we began to notice evidence of squirrels, hedgehogs, burrowing bees, butterflies, ladybirds and birdlife.

"Not to mention an increase in our human friends coming through the gate to see what we were up to and taking the opportunity to have a chat."

Environment

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