

**SMALL MAMMAL SURVEY  
(Abridged)  
RUYTON XI TOWNS CHURCHYARD  
2nd SEPTEMBER 2003**

**Conducted by  
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## **1. Introduction**

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what species of small mammal are using or inhabiting the churchyard at Ruyton-XI-Towns. The churchyard consists of many different types of habitat ranging from short grass to wooded areas; because of this the churchyard is capable of supporting many species of small mammal. Churchyards are normally relatively undisturbed areas, which allow populations of small mammals to exist without interference

Small mammals are the most numerous mammals found in Britain and are important prey to many species. For example foxes, stoats, weasel, mink, polecats, pine martins and wild cats all use small mammals as prey species. Birds such as kestrels and owls also prey on small mammals. Small mammals can be thought of as being the 'bread and butter' of the animal world with almost all predators taking them as a prey species.

## **1.1 Ecology**

### **1.1.1 Wood Mouse (*Apodemus sylvaticus*)**

Wood mice are common and can be found throughout Britain and Ireland. They are brownish yellow with a grey underside and a small patch of yellow on the throat. Wood mice inhabit gardens, hedgerows, cliffs, scrub, copses, reed-beds, and farmland, surprisingly they tend to avoid thick woodland preferring open woodland or scrub with a ground cover of bramble or bracken, however areas with little or no ground cover will still be colonised. Where wood mice are found they tend to be the dominant small mammal species. Males occupy a large territory of up to 1km<sup>2</sup> and will range over this area in search of food. They feed on seeds, insects, fruits and nuts. They are active both day and night and throughout the winter.

### 1.1.2 Bank Vole (*Clethrionomys glareolus*)

Bank voles can also be found throughout Britain. They are reddish brown with a yellow underside; their tail is normally 50% the length of their body. They are mainly found in both deciduous and coniferous woodland however they will also inhabit hedgerows and scrub. They require thick ground cover and may not be found where ground cover is sparse.

Bank voles, tend not to cover large areas when looking for food, having ranges of up to 50m. In spring and summer they feed on tree and shrub leaves, grass, bark and seeds; in autumn and winter rose hips, acorns, hazel nuts, blackberries, ash and yew seed, fungi, insects and worms are eaten. Bank voles do not hibernate but remain active throughout the winter. They are more active than mice in the day but are also active at night.

### 1.1.3 Field Vole (*Microtus agretis*)

Field voles are common throughout Britain. They are sandy brown with a grey underside; their tail is 30% of the length of their body. They are found in long grassy habitats including open woodland, hedgerows, meadows, marshes and on riverbanks. The staple food of field voles is grass; however they will also feed on bulbs, roots and bark. Bank voles and field voles have regular population cycles with plague years occurring when food is plentiful, normally every 3-5 years; during these plague years significant damage can be done to the woodlands and pasture in which they live. Like bank voles, field voles do not hibernate.

### 1.1.4 Common Shrew (*Sorex araneus*)

Although rarely seen in the wild common shrews are abundant in Britain. Common shrews are a chocolate brown colour on the back with a red brown around the side and a pale underside; they are instantly distinguishable from rodents by their long snout. They are found in all habitats with the necessary amount of ground cover. They are the most vocal of small mammals and their squeaking can be frequently heard in suitable habitats. Common shrews are insectivores feeding on insects, spiders, woodlice, snails and earthworms. Shrews eat their own body weight in food each day and must eat every 1-3 hours or they will starve to death. Shrews are active both day and night but spend three quarters of their time underground, when they are above ground they are hesitant to leave areas of thick ground cover.

## 2. Methodology

G. Pearce and A Yarrington carried out the trapping during July and August. The animals were trapped using Longworth traps; these are reliable aluminium humane traps allowing the animals to be caught live and held in a nesting box until the traps are checked. They were placed in various positions around the churchyard in places where it was felt animals would be caught, for example along linear features such as wallslogs and in areas of vegetation. The traps were baited for mice and voles using peanuts: bait for shrews is unnecessary as they will enter traps out of curiosity however mince meat was provided to prevent shrews starving when caught. Bedding was also provided in the form of shredded paper.

When set the traps were covered in vegetation to insulate them and to hide them from the public. The churchyard was trapped for eight days; on five of these, the traps were set in the morning and checked every hour up to 5pm. On the remaining three days the traps were set in the morning and checked every hour up to 10.30pm.

## 3. Results

Four species of small mammal were discovered during this study, wood mouse, bank vole, field vole and common shrew.

## **4. Conclusions**

### **4.1**

The varied habitats in the churchyard provide both food and cover for small mammals. The hedgerows, wooded areas, long grass and bramble are good for wood mice, bank voles, weasels, moles and shrews. The long grass found to the east of the churchyard is ideal for field voles, both as food and cover; however there is not enough long grass in the churchyard to support a large population of field voles. It is likely that the long grassed areas of the churchyard are used in conjunction with the long grass to the north to form the field vole territories.

### **4.2**

Yew berries and seeds are an important food source for the mice and voles in the churchyard; piles of yew seeds could be seen in areas where mice or voles had taken them to store and feed on. The bramble in the churchyard provides a good food source during the spring, summer and autumn for wood mice and bank voles. The areas of dense cover are ideal for shrews, allowing them to hunt for their prey without having to go into the open.

### **4.3**

Individual small mammals will not only be using the churchyard but also gardens of surrounding houses and other natural areas.

### **4.4**

A Mole (*Ta/pa europaea*) was seen extending its underground feeding tunnels.

### **4.5**

A Grey Squirrel (*Sciurus carolinensis*) was observed in the east of the churchyard.

## **5. Management Recommendations**

### **5.1**

The long grass in the churchyard is already in use by field voles, however if the grass was left uncut in unobtrusive areas the habitat for not only field voles but also bank voles and shrews would be enhanced. This would allow larger populations of these small mammal species to exist; this in turn would improve hunting grounds for prey species such as owls, kestrels and weasels.

### **5.2**

Bramble is a very important food plant for small rodents, breeding females use dense bramble as an area to raise young, which provides both cover and food, not only for her but for her young once weaned. Areas of bramble that are not in the way could be allowed to grow and mature to provide a safe breeding area and a good food source for small rodents.