

Hay meadow flowers at Lower Winskill

The traditional hay meadows at Lower Winskill are home to many different flowering plants. Careful management and a program of hay meadow restoration in partnership with Natural England as part of the farm Higher Level Stewardship scheme are making sure the rare and distinctive plant communities that grow in the traditional hay meadows are maintained and thrive.

After the last of the ewes and lambs are taken out of the meadows in early May they are 'shut up' to let the grass grow to make into hay to feed to livestock over winter. The ewes and lambs have already eaten the first flush of spring grass and leave the meadows cropped short so that sun light reaches right down to the surface of the ground. This encourages the wild clovers which naturally add to the fertility of the soil. It also checks the grasses, and gives a precious advantage to colourful flowering wild plants which race ahead of the grasses in May and June.



Daisies, buttercups, and bluebells flowering in the Far End meadow at Lower Winskill in mid-May. The hay rattle is just coming into flower and this semi-parasitic plant will further check the grasses and so help the other wild flowers compete.



Hay rattle coming into flower in the Over Ing meadow at Lower Winskill in mid May.

For a few weeks the traditional hay meadows at Winskill are transformed by the colours of the wild flowers until they are eventually overtaken by the taller grasses in late June. The meadows are not mown for hay until after the middle of July to allow the wild flowers to set seed which then falls back onto the ground as the hay is made.



Bluebells flowering in the Lower Stackbottom meadow at Lower Winskill in mid-May before the ash tree has come into leaf.

The bluebells might be an indication that these meadows were formerly wood land. The Lower Stackbottom meadow is recorded in the early seventeenth century so that the woodland must have been cleared hundreds of years ago. The cycle of meadow management with the ewes and lambs eating the first flush of grass then being taken out of the fields in early May mimics conditions during spring on the woodland floor before the tree canopy comes into leaf. Traditional hay meadow management creates a 'window of opportunity' for vernal or spring flowering plants such as bluebells to flower in grassland.



Bluebells, buttercups and pignut in a corner of the Far End meadow at Lower Winskill.



The Higher Stackbottom meadow at Lower Winskill in June.



The Over Ing meadow at Lower Winskill in early June.



Curlew's nest with four eggs in the Over Ing Meadow at Lower Winskill, late May.



The Over Ing meadow at Lower Winskill in early June. Buttercups and hay rattle turn the meadow a gold colour.



A hawthorn in flower in late May at the edge of the Caker Scar meadow at Lower Winskill.



The semi-parasitic hay rattle, with its multi-flowered stem and nettle like leaf (centre and right foreground), has an important part to play in the restoration of traditional hay meadows. By checking the growth of the more vigorous grasses it helps other wild flowers get established. It is a prolific producer of seed; and the seeds are large and easily collected by mechanised seed harvesters for use in meadow restoration schemes.



A mechanised brush seed harvester pulled by a quad bike collecting seed for hay meadow restoration from the Nether Ing at Lower Winskill.



Quad bike pulling a mechanised brush seed harvester in the Nether Ing meadow at Lower Winskill.



Collecting seed from the mechanised brush seed harvester in the Nether Ing meadow at Lower Winskill. The seed was dried and then spread onto the Great Meadow and Bottom Close meadow at Lower Winskill as part of the Higher Level Stewardship funded hay meadow restoration scheme in 2007.



A common spotted orchid (centre) and wild clover in the Higher Stackbottom meadow at Lower Winskill in early June. The hay rattle has already flowered and produced seed heads (right foreground).



Meadow cranesbill and common knapweed at the edge of Caker Scar meadow at Lower Winskill in mid-June.



Yellow hawks-bit in the Caker Scar meadow at Lower Winskill in late June. The grasses are now beginning to take over and the golden colours of early June are now nearly gone.



Common knapweed in the Caker Scar meadow at Lower Winskill in early July. The grasses have largely taken over and their seed heads are turning brown. The meadow is now very different to how it looked a few weeks earlier in June.



The Higher Stackbottom meadow at Lower Winskill just before hay time in mid-July. Compare this view with how the meadow looked in early June (below).

