

The even mead

Shakespeare often made reference in his poems and plays to particular plants, using their real or symbolic virtues to help sketch a scene, bring some character to life or add some emotion or twist to a plot. But in one particular place, he talks in a way that shows a deep understanding of how plant communities are related to our impacts upon them.

In *Henry the Fifth*, after the bloody battle of Agincourt, Henry comes with his entourage to meet the defeated French king and his nobles to negotiate a lasting peace between the countries. From the lips of the Duke of Burgundy comes a moving plea for reconciliation which laments the impact of war upon the farmland of France.

The even mead, that erst brought sweetly forth
The freckled cowslip, burnet and green clover,
Wanting the scythe, all uncorrected, rank,
Conceives by idleness and nothing teems
But hateful docks, rough thistle, kecksies, burs,
Losing both beauty and utility

This is surely something that Shakespeare must have observed in the landscape around his home in Stratford-upon-Avon, that when meadows are not cut for hay, the species-composition changes and they become rank and weedy. The plants he refers to – cowslip (*Primula veris*), burnet (*Sanguisorba officinalis*) and green clover (*Trifolium pratense*, *T. repens*) – these are species characteristic of the lowland floodplain meadows managed in the traditional way in mature river valleys like the Warwickshire Avon. Kecksies (the old name for big umbellifers like *Heracleum sphondylium*, *Anthriscus sylvestris* and *Chaerophyllum temulentum*), docks (*Rumex* spp.), rough thistles (*Cirsium* spp.) and burs (*Arctium minus*) on the other hand are plants typical of the rank weedy grassland that quickly develops where the necessary round of grazing and mowing in traditional farming is neglected. With the men away at war, the land is left unworked and the productive even sward of the mead loses both its beauty and utility, its appealing colourful diversity of colourful flowering plants and its value as a nourishing hay-crop.



This is then a description, long before its time, of what we can describe now as the shift from the *Alopecurus-Sanguisorba* grassland (MG4 in the NVC) to the *Arrhenatherum* grassland (MG1), a change we can readily see still when the corners of hay fields escape the mower or when whole meadows go uncut and ungrazed.

In the vicinity of Stratford upon Avon, traditional meadow vegetation remains only in the privately owned Racecourse Meadow (SP 185536) that lies near the confluence of the Avon and the Stour. You can find the locations of floodplain meadows near you and read more about their plant communities by clicking on More About Meadows on the homepage of this website.

The quotation is from *Henry the Fifth*, Act V, Scene ii, lines 48-54. The picture show clover from MS Ashmole 1504 reproduced by kind permission of the Bodleian Library, Oxford.