

Gloucester City Council

Gloucester City Council – Setting the scene

Hucclecote Haymeadows SSSI & LNR, Robinswood Hill Country Park & LNR, Alney Island LNR.

Although Alney island lies on the River Severn floodplain, our best ‘floodplain meadows’ are actually to be found at Hucclecote, as far from the current floodplain as you can get without leaving the City. Even in July 2007 they weren’t flooded – just damp!

That said, Alney Island and Robinswood Hill sites have significant amounts of unimproved (or semi-improved until the 1950s) species-rich hay meadows, and all sites are within the City boundary. Robinswood Hill has housing to 3 sides, and a golf course and the M5 on the 4th side. Alney Island has 2 substations, a bypass since 2004, and a cycle way on a former railway line.

Hucclecote Meadows (5 fields) is split by the M5 between Gloucester City (3 fields), which has been surrounded by housing since c.1985, and Stroud District and Tewkesbury Borough (1 field each), which has a brand new, not yet complete housing development on its boundaries.



The ‘best’ meadow on a very heavily used route on Robinswood Hill – haycut for c.20 years

All sites are public open space, and managed for conservation, and informal recreation. They total around 200Ha, managed by 3 rangers, covering 7 days a week. During the summer peak period (late April – mid August) we cover 08:30 – 21:00 on a rostered shift pattern.

Although the conservation value of the meadows has been recognised for many years there was little management for conservation, apart from the SSSI, until the late 1990s.

Many of the less accessible grasslands were simply flail-mown during the winter, which has now left us with a legacy of increasing areas of nettles, thistles and docks. Some of the fields

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were cut for hay, either by the Countryside Unit, or by a contractor. The timing and frequency of haycut was somewhat erratic, due in part to the contractors cutting earlier than ideal, and their not wishing to damage their machinery on the ridge & furrow, and the 'poor' quality of hay due to all the 'weeds'! When cut, we were generally charged for the job. Using stewardship funds, the Unit set about acquiring mowers, haybobs and balers, enabling us to cut as and when we wished (weather permitting of course). Until this year, the Council's own City Farm (part of the Countryside Unit) used all the hay we could produce. However, the cuts have resulted in the takeover of the City Farm by a charity, so we are now selling the hay to them (at a price designed to encourage them not to go elsewhere!). We also plan to sell our best hay on the open market to raise revenue.



The field in front of the houses is haycut annually

Meadow hay is now becoming so expensive, and desirable that it may be possible to sell as a standing crop, to a local fodder merchant who can organise the cut and removal. Alternatively, contacts such as a City Farm, or a local hobby farmer or Rare-Breeds Survival Trust member, may be able to organise a hay cut and grazing – worth a try if all else fails.

On to grazing. Alney Island was grazed by local farmers, either with sheep until c.1995, or latterly with beef cattle. However, although a contract was drawn up, this was totally ignored by the grazier and the land was being used by a factor of 2-3 times the specified number of cattle, resulting in severe overgrazing – a billiard table has more sward! The lack of keep 'encouraged' the animals to break out onto the neighbouring rugby pitches, looking for food, and the sheer numbers discouraged visitors to the site. Despite various pleas and threats, the numbers never really reduced until we hired a haulier, rounded up the 100+ cattle and dumped them on the grazier's farm.

By then we were starting to build our own herd of rare-breed Old Gloucester cattle. Not only are these animals generally docile and manageable, but they don't seem to be fazed by dogs, simply lowering their horns to face any that get too close. We now run our own herd of around 20 cattle, currently including a Gloucester bull, with whom we have had no problems. We graze the Severn meadows for most of the year, confining them on to higher, accessible ground during the peak flood periods. During the winter we move some of the stock to Robinswood and Hucclecote, and gain some income from contract grazing the Stroud and Tewkesbury parts of the SSSI. Although a few people are unsure of walking through our fields of cows and calves (due mainly to press coverage of deaths and other incidents), many have now started asking when the cows are coming back, as they like to see them and get close.



Gloucester cows and calves on Robinswood Hill
Housing estates start just beyond the hedges.

When we are moving cattle back into an area after a period of absence, we put up notices so that those with less manageable dogs are aware. In 12 years, we have had two minor incidents. The first came when a 4 year old child couldn't control a Staffie, which slipped its lead and grabbed the throat of a Highland cow – fortunately not causing any damage. She managed to dislodge the dog by charging through a bush, but then she couldn't catch it as it ran away (shame!). The second was when a spaniel got very close to a very young calf, to which the cow took exception, and 'moved it on' with her horns. If the owner had been watching, rather than chatting to a ranger, she may have prevented the incident. We did pick up the vet bill for this one. At no time have we had a situation where cattle chase, or surround people and / or dogs, nor have we seen evidence of dogs chasing cattle – the older animals just don't bother to move so the dog backs down – younger animals seem to take their cue from this.

Each year we aim to extend that area that we haycut and/or graze, in order to make the sites more resilient and less fragile by linking up the areas of species rich grassland. On the basis that manual labour limitations may well have resulted in meadows remaining uncut in some years, we have left one uncut this year in the hope that it might benefit the butterflies and other insects by reducing the loss of immature at haycut, and providing an improved overwintering resource for them

Issues:

Nettles, thistles, docks:

– some fields on Alney Island were inaccessible during the bypass construction in 2003 - 2005, and were not cut or grazed for a couple of years. They were then flooded in July 2007, which seems to have brought in plenty of undesirable species.

- many years of flail mowing (or even neglect of) some areas has similarly resulted in an increase in undesirables.

Although we have tried topping at various times of the year to reduce the vigour of these plants, it does not appear to be having much effect, and it is likely that we will resort to weed-swiping before long.

Trampling of meadows:

Although it occasionally happens, by cutting 2m wide paths on desire lines, the majority of people are encouraged to stay on them.



Paths cut across a meadow - although this results in some loss of meadow, it does tend to keep people on track as their feet stay drier!

This is the Toboggan Slope - as soon as there is a hint of snow it is heaving with people and littered with all the paraphernalia used as toboggan substitutes.

Been going on for decades, and doesn't seem to hurt the grassland – no way to stop it anyway!

Interference with hay bales:

This can take the form of building dens, and consequent broken bales, or of burning of bales overnight. We try to make sure that bales are lifted from the more heavily used or public areas on the same day as baling. However, lifting all the bales manually from field to trailer, then trailer to barn is labour intensive, and time consuming. Of course bales get 'decorated' by dogs if they are near a path, so making small stacks them in the field, away from paths reduces the risk of having to handle contaminated bales (yeeuch!). Unfortunately foxes don't stay so close to paths as dogs often do, so ideally lift 'em quick!).

The other contamination of bales comes from the sticks that are thrown for dogs getting picked up by the baler. These can sometimes be of such a size that they cause breakage of the shear-pin in the flywheel, which has to be replaced before continuing – only 10 minutes but a pain if you've forgotten the spanners!

Fence damage:

When we initially put in some permanent fencing, despite several months on consultation and posting of notices, we had a long period of regular fence cutting. We had put in access points at all the obvious paths, and there was often no apparent reason for the cutting. We replaced some sections of post & wire with post & rail so it couldn't be cut with wire cutters. Having also moved from sheep grazing to cattle grazing (sheep spent too much time running from people / dogs, rather than eating!), we replaced cut sections of stock mesh with strands of barbed wire (with a plain wire bottom strand to reduce the risk of damage to dogs in full flight). This has eventually led to a halt in the cutting – we can only surmise that 'someone' thought that 'wildlife' (badgers, foxes, rabbits) couldn't get through the stock mesh. The most recent fencing has been welcomed by visitors as they love to see the cows – result!

Electric fencing is more of a problem. Installing 'walk-throughs' allows access while still keeping in the cattle, but it seems that most of the damage is vandalism – we suspect from the desire to see the flash and sparks when something is thrown at the wire as it does on the television!! We use multi-stranded wire, with an additional strand of polytape to improve visibility, and plenty of 'caution' signs attached to the wire, particularly along path edges. The wire is cable tied to the tread-ins, and we run the wire in straight lines and use wooden posts (or trees) with screw-ins at all turning points (make sure you remove the screw ins at the end of the season – otherwise the trees eat them!!). The fence unit and battery is contained in a locked steel box, chained to a tree (even then we have lost one!) – unfortunately Gallagher no longer seem to make them so we now have had to have our own made. All we can really do is check electric fencing at least daily (often twice – particularly at weekends). Electric fencing is generally only used during the winter when fewer vandals are about, and it gets dark and cold earlier.

Of course, if a certain part of a fence is obviously cut regularly to allow access (albeit unauthorised), then put in a stile, squeeze, or even kissing gate so that at least the access is managed and less likely to allow livestock escape as would cut fencing – not ideal, but manageable. We ended up putting in 2 squeezes within 15 metres of a kissing gate and each other – fence cutting stopped though!

Motorcycles:

We go to a good deal of trouble to keep our sights bike-tight. The Sustrans cycle route on Alney Island has Centrewire motorcycle barriers fitted over custom mini-cattle grids to keep M'cycles out and cows in, while still allowing cycle access. We specified K-barriers to the County Council as we thought they were better, but in their infinite wisdom..... Otherwise a combination of stiles, kissing gates and aggressive patrolling by rangers keeps most out. That said, we currently have an off road bike reported almost daily – but only seen once from a distance. We record all reports / sightings with the police – if it starts to get out of hand they are then aware of it, and put in more effort on the surrounding roads.

I know it seems at times like a constant battle, but 12 years has seen our visitors change from "but there are cows in all the farms around here – why do we need more?" and "but the cows will just eat all the flowers and trample them" to "we love coming here to show the cows to the children / grandchildren – you can get so close" and a simple "I really appreciate what you are doing – The Hill looks better than it has for years". Nothing comes easy that is worth doing – particularly on the urban fringe full of townies who know no better, and then abuse you for trying to enlighten them!

Keep up the good work y'all