

The History of a Floodplain Meadow Bridget Smith

I have lived in the village of Hemingford Grey near the River Great Ouse since 1976 and, like many others, walked the 1½ km into St Ives by the ancient right of way across the 50 hectare meadow. Then one day someone asked me why the cattle were being allowed to eat the wild flowers! This question made me realise that local people both loved the Meadow but knew nothing about its history or how it was managed.



Aerial photograph of Hemingford Grey Meadow reproduced courtesy of Geoff Soden

Knowing that my village had an open field system of agriculture before Enclosure, I went to the Huntingdon Record Office and looked at the Enclosure Act of 1801 and the Award of 1806 which allocated land in the parish and set the rules. What I found there led to nearly 20 years of delving into the history of what was historically known as the Great Meadow. After Enclosure, management of the Meadow and the Meadow Bank, which protected the arable fields and village from flooding, passed from the Manor Court to the Vestry who were allowed to raise a rate for management, especially repairing the Meadow Bank. The rules stated that "it shall not be lawful...to inclose or fence out or make any Mounds, Fences, Plantations or any other alterations....which ..may...obstruct prevent, hinder, confine, lessen or impede the passage of the Waters in times of flood...". Grazing was allocated based on the acreage of Meadow owned; one cow or two cows under 2 years old or three weaning calves or four sheep per acre

existed as we know it now. Advice from landscape historians, who observed ridge and furrow south of the Bank, led to the deduction that the date of the Meadow Bank may well be as far back as the 13th century; it is unlikely that there are any documents to prove this.

Daniel Defoe in the 1720s and Cobbett in 1822 both admired the Huntingdonshire meadows (most likely Portholme Meadow, 7km upstream of Hemingford Grey). Cobbett, a farmer himself, gives the first mention I found of the flora when he writes "Here are no reeds, here is no sedge".

Flooding is important for the meadow as it deposits silt, thus maintaining fertility, but it is equally important that water should move off the meadow quickly and that there should not be floods during the haymaking season. Damaging floods were remembered and often recorded in local newspapers, especially when they breached the Bank and flooded homes in the village. In 1875 the Meadow flooded in July which carried the cut hay downstream and we also have a mid 20th century memory of hay bales being carried down to St Ives sluice and the farmer being charged for their removal.

The 19th and 20th centuries were times of great agricultural change and the Record Office and the Norris Museum in St Ives were able to produce sale notices and writings referring to the Meadow including mentions of wildlife such as Land Rail (Corn Crake) on the Meadow. School log books held at the village school report when and why children were absent, including for haymaking, so we can see how much the date varied. On June 26th 1874 there was a "small school through the week, bird scaring in the cherry orchards, and hay-making, the chief causes". And in 1889 the hay harvest was late; July 21 "The attendance is still very poor: the hay harvest is now in full swing and many children are away in consequence."

Another map made by one of the farmers, probably in the 1920s, showed changes in ownership and tenancies and for 1914 onwards I had information from elderly residents and farmers who I could interview and get stories of how the meadow had been managed and used for recreation. At least in the early 19th century the marking out (referred to as "stumping") of the Meadow for haymaking was done by one person. This was a responsible job as poor marking could deprive tenants of some of their hay crop. In 1840 it was proposed that Mr Welstead who had dealt with the allocation of land at Enclosure should do it. At later dates, in living memory, this job was done by individual farmers and often lead to arguments.



Hemingford Grey Meadow in flower, looking towards St Ives. Bridget Smith

The Meadow was always a popular place for walking and courting and for skating when it froze after floods and people told me of the flowers including "Cuckoos" (*Cardamine pratensis*) and Tom Thumbs (*Lathyrus pratensis* or *Lotus* sp) and the birds, especially the numerous skylarks. It was used as a racecourse for a few years in the late 18th century and in the early days of flying as an informal airfield. For the wedding of the Prince of Wales in March 1873 and the gaining of borough status for St Ives in November 1874 there were sports on the Meadow and a huge bonfire which left signs of damage for several years afterwards. And the memory of a villager explained that what looked like drainage channels were in fact ditches dug in 1940 to prevent enemy planes from landing! The latest large event was the Inland Waterways Festival in August 2007 which caused some damage as only days beforehand the meadow had suffered a summer flood. The last hay was not cut until September that year.

When I started this study in the early 1990s I could never have imagined how much information there would be about one piece of land. My enthusiasm led me to visit many other floodplain meadows including the Lugg meadows in Herefordshire where the late Anthea Brian, who had written the very important paper on Lamma Meadows, gave me valuable advice. And my friend the late Derek Wells, who was as enthusiastic as me, taught me about their botany. I believe that a study of almost every floodplain meadow could give similar information

to what I have been able to find; the history of these meadows gives us an insight into their economic value over the centuries for hay and grazing and some of the reasons for their present ecological value. I have given talks to both local history and natural history societies, and had publicity in the local press and radio for an illustrated booklet. Guided walks have also given the opportunity to show local people the variety of grasses and wild flowers and to explain how the management of the Meadow has allowed them to survive.