

Rawcliffe Meadows

In 1991 the cycle track charity, SUSTRANS, wanted to establish a route from the centre of York to Beningborough. As part of the route they wanted to establish a track across land near the River Ouse owned by the National Rivers Authority, the predecessor of the Environment Agency, which was part of York's flood plain and they would only permit the passage through their land if the adjacent pasture was managed as a nature reserve. The site, some 25 acres of poached pasture covered in creeping thistle, adjacent to Clifton Ings but slightly elevated and separated from it by a dyke became Rawcliffe Meadows.

The first few years were spent removing noxious weeds such as creeping thistle and dock. This was done by reintroducing traditional Ings management¹, along with some spraying to initially kill off the acres of weeds. At first we used scythes to do the cutting, then as we got assistance from the local authority, a student with a tractor. Making contact with different farmers brought us at first someone to remove the arisings for bedding, then as the crop improved, for hay. Eventually we found a farmer who was willing to both graze and cut the hay, although the payment for the crop is often minimal but this does resolve the main concern for us in that the meadow is managed. For a period Bluetongue disease restrictions created complications when flooding threatened, as the grazier lived one side of the boundary and our site on another, we are now looking at establishing an emergency field adjacent, should the need arise again.

However, weather changes in the last eleven years have brought their own problems, summer floods and autumn droughts have required flexibility with cutting and grazing, and the spring grazing regime had to stop. The site has been under Countryside Stewardship for twenty years, permitting a little external assistance on top of the few volunteers. However, managing a traditional meadow in a city is a constant battle against vandalism and ignorance when partiers dump empty alcohol bottles that have to be collected and removed. The same people frequently start bonfires, using our fences and trees as the fuel. The fences then have to be replaced to keep the cattle in. Again, being urban, illegal motorcyclists use the cycle track, harassing the cattle and disturbing the peace in addition frequently breaking fences to get on and off. Getting the hay cut near school holidays when hay, whether baled or loose, is frequently the target for arson, and also causes us and our friendly farmer some concern, so the job has to be carried out in the shortest window of opportunity available.

Some walkers are not much better than the motorcyclists, and if there isn't an opening where they expect it, they sometimes break the fence, gate or style to gain unimpeded access. We've also had our fair share of stolen motor vehicles ram-raided through fences or even steel gates to get on and plough across fields before either being

¹ The ancient methods of Lammas management that was reintroduced basically consisted of grazing cattle for a few weeks early in the spring, allowing a hay crop to develop during the summer, cutting the crop for hay in late June or early July, permitting some regrowth and then grazing again for a few more weeks in the autumn. This compensated for river residues deposited during flooding and kept nutrient levels in balance to ensure a rich herb crop within the hay - a tasty meal for any cow.

torched or dumped in the river. Our landlords have now installed the strongest gate we'd even seen at the main entrance, but we now find chains cut, presumably for their scrap value, and logs being cut up and removed by persons unknown. We are also recipients of regular complaints of cows and their cow pat by-products interfering with someone's country walk.

In the twenty years of the project at Rawcliffe Meadows, the Friends group have been resilient in the face of many challenges from fire, flood and pestilence, in the form of aggressive weeds, native and otherwise, and people who can't or won't accept cattle being grazed.

However, its twenty years on and the half-dozen regular volunteers plod on.

The remnants of a year-long blog about how the site is managed are still available on the BBC website http://www.bbc.co.uk/northyorkshire/we_love_ny/blogs/meadow/