

## Happenings at Haseley Mill – Saving Our Magnificent Meadows & Fallen Willow Tree Clear-Up



The land known as Haseley Gathering Grounds on Firs Lane is owned by Severn Trent Water and has been rented by John Cooper of the adjacent Haseley Mill for 20 years. Haseley Mill and the Gathering Grounds have a long-associated history. The first record of a mill at Haseley was in the Domesday Book of 1086 and there were two mills by 1632. The surrounding land, streams and hydrology supported the use of the mills right up to the 1900s when the last mill was demolished in 1977. The legacy that remains from this long, productive history is some of the last fragments of species-rich grassland in Warwickshire. In fact, the floodplain meadows at Haseley Gathering Grounds are one of the rarest lowland habitat grassland types in the UK. Only around 2,980 hectares are thought to remain in England and Wales. These floodplain meadows have evolved over hundreds of years using a system of allowing the vegetation to grow up in the spring, taking a hay crop in midsummer and then grazing the re-growth preventing taller, coarser species from becoming dominant and creating the diverse flower-rich meadows.

The decline and loss of meadows and species-rich grasslands is without parallel in the history of nature conservation in the UK. What had been a widespread and ubiquitous part of agriculture and people's daily lives, disappeared altogether in the space of a single generation. Six million acres of grassland was ploughed to grow cereals during the Second World War and this started a process which would see the area of lowland meadows decline by 97% in the following 40 years. The Haseley Gathering Grounds consists of three meadows located in a shallow valley alongside the Inchford Brook at Haseley Mill. The meadows are unusual for Warwickshire, in that for the past 140 years they have been owned by water corporations, initially by the old Warwick drainage board and latterly by STW, to protect and manage the local water supply for Warwick. As a result, herbicides have not been used and the traditional management regime of grazing and cutting the meadows has remained intact.

Meadows and species-rich grasslands can support a huge range of wildlife including wildflowers, fungi, bees, flies, beetles, spiders, moths, butterflies, reptiles, amphibians, small mammals, bats and

birds. In the UK, more priority species (for conservation attention) are associated with grasslands than with any other habitat type. Species-rich grasslands also provide other environmental benefits including carbon storage, water retention to prevent flooding and habitat for crop pollinators, they are also archaeologically important.

The meadows at Haseley Gathering Grounds are designated as a Local Wildlife Site by Warwickshire Wildlife Trust and are the focus of a research study by Chris Talbot, Biodiversity Manager at Warwickshire County Council and ambassador for the Floodplain Meadows Partnership. In August 2017 Chris Talbot and Jon Bowley undertook a survey of the meadows. The total number of plant species recorded was 150, including 94 wildflowers and 26 grass species. John & Becky also take part in weekly butterfly transects across the habitat recording butterfly and moth species for Butterfly Conservation contributing to the monitoring of the health of our native butterflies. Butterflies are the best-studied UK insects by far, providing vital insights into the changing state of wider biodiversity and the ecosystem services that depend upon it.

When John first took on the tenancy the fields were overgrown with brambles, creeping thistle, nettles and docks. Gradually, after being grazed for many years with traditional cattle and sheep breeds, the meadows have been partially restored, however, becoming aware of the legacy of the land has turned its management on its head. At first the grass was there to feed the animals and whilst we knew the land was special we didn't realise quite how unique it was. The formation of wildflower meadows is intimately linked with grazing animals and so now our traditional Aberdeen Angus cattle and sheep are there in the correct numbers to manage the land for optimum wildlife biodiversity and water quality.

For the last twelve months Severn Trent Water have been financially supporting the management of the meadows. This year they will also be taking on the project of clearing the unsightly fallen willows in the meadows which will allow for improved invasive species management and enhance the appearance of the fields further.

John & Becky are caretakers of this small but very important piece of history and hope to carry on its legacy and diverse wildlife far into the future. So next time you're driving, cycling or walking past, take a moment to slow down and consider just what these ancient meadows, teeming with roots, legs and wings, truly mean for our diminishing countryside.

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