

OXFORD MEADS

In my view Oxford meads are the best places in the world! Their array of flowers in May and June is magnificent, full of bees and other insects and home to curlew and larks as well as reed bunting and cuckoos beside the adjacent river (Figs. 1 - 3). I find them occasionally along the river Thames floodplain from Cricklade in the west to the river Cherwell in the east. At the time of Domesday I could have walked that distance and almost never strayed from a flood-meadow.



Fig. 1. Great burnet



Fig. 2. Mead flowers



Fig. 3. Burnet moth

Flood-meadows, like the arable, were divided into unenclosed strips with a marker or mere stone placed at each end (Figs. 4 & 5). A strip of hay was associated with a feudal villein's holding in the arable fields and was based on the amount of land which could be cut by scythe by one man in a day. It was called a customary acre, 'dole' or 'lot'. Again they were long and narrow to ensure that the mowers did not have to break their rhythm to turn round. The lots could be divided into four parts longitudinally when each one of the four parts would be associated with a yardland or quarter of a hide of arable land. To ensure that each farmer had an equal stake in the common meadows one of three methods of allocating hay lots was practised at different times and places. The first was to award a particular farm every first or third strip in a set of strips. Secondly, as in some Welsh examples, account was taken of the position of the farmer's ox in the communal plough-team. A third and possibly earlier method was to use a lottery with tokens of various sorts e.g. Fig. 6.



Fig. 4. Mere stones in West Mead, Yarnton



Fig. 5. Aerial photo showing the lots on West Mead (on left), Oxhey Mead adjacent to and north of River Thames and Picksey Mead to the south (with diagonal stripe). The dark and light lots indicate that they have been cut on different dates. (Royal Air Force. Aug. 1947. Location of negative unknown).



Fig. 6. Dolmen apples used in the Lugg Meadows.
(Photo: Anthea Brian.)

The Oxford Meadows Special Area of Conservation and the Cherwell Meadows SSSI in Oxford are near to my heart, so I will tell you about West Mead, Yarnton, and about North and South Mead beside the Cherwell. Searching for records in Duke Humphrey's Library in the Bodleian was pure pleasure enhanced

by the sun shining in from the south and west windows onto ancient timber and reading desks. Here I found the Rev. Vaughan Thomas' notes (1856) on Yarnton tithes and lot meadows, including an account of how to resolve a problem related to mowing the meads all in one day. This was the common practice and had led to fighting between the locals and Irish mowers who moved up from the south mowing as they went. They had been imported in the late 18th and early 19th centuries because local labour had moved into nearby towns. A chat with Yarnton's Senior or First Meadsman was enjoyable and productive. The late Eddie Harris (Fig. 7.) told me of the day to day management of these ancient hay-meadows and showed me the cherry wood balls (Fig. 8.) on which ancient names had been inscribed for the 'lot ceremony' when hay was shared between those with rights to it. A description of the ceremony, with a map, was produced for a Public Inquiry when the common hay and grazing rights were extinguished to allow a road to be built across Oxhey Mead, Yarnton. Eddie also mentioned the Tythe Award and map held by the Rector. Later on the archivists of Corpus Christi, Brasenose and of Magdalen Colleges were very helpful when I was looking for symbols (instead of names) used to show ownership of hay in the lot-mead ceremony on the Cherwell meads. I had already found them in Burford, in North Aston and Duns Tew, and in Long Hanborough as well as hearing Anthea Brian talk about their use in the Lugg Meadows, Hereford.



Fig. 7. Yarnton's Senior or First Meadsman, Eddie Harris



Fig. 8. Cherry-wood balls with names used in Yarnton's lot ceremony.

Venturing into the County Museum, Woodstock I found a useful index of field names and small finds, and into the County Record Office where I found references to common rights in Yarnton and the Wolvercote Enclosure Award (1845) but no Award for Yarnton. These and other records have now been included in the relevant section of the Victoria County History for Oxfordshire, vol. 12, in which each statement in the text is marked by a footnote describing the source for the information given. The Domesday Book showed me how much meadow land was in Yarnton at that time and that it was the most expensive land. The Hundred Rolls of Edward I (1279) gave me the names of families living in Yarnton and Begbroke in the 13th century. This was important because up until 1968 the hay on Yarnton Meads was allocated using 13 cherry wood balls on which names had been inscribed: William of Bladon, Parry, Geoffrey, Boat, White, Boulton or Bolton, Green, Rothe, Freeman, Harry, Watery Molly, Dunn and Gilbert. The balls represented 13 pre-Conquest non-demesne one-hide estates in Yarnton and Begbroke. The names can be found in the Hundred Rolls except for Watery Molly which refers to the miller - in Latin molindarium. In 1294, a dispute arose over the hay tithes between Eynsham Abbey, as Rectors of Yarnton, and Rewley Abbey, the new owner. As a Cistercian foundation Rewley was normally exempt from tithe (Thomas 1856). The settlement ensured that instead of a tythe a piece of land (called the Tydalls or Tithals) was laid out in Yarnton's Meads from which rent was paid in lieu. This could be an explanation for why the names were inscribed on the balls. Management of the meads had fallen apart by the 20th century and the last lot ceremony was held in a local pub in 1968.

It is difficult to determine how far the presence of mead and pasture, in which cattle, horses, sheep or geese were grazed, implies an understanding on the part of the farmer of the feeding preferences of his stock, and the nutritional value of the different plants which make up a sward. From Walter of Henley, in the thirteenth century, several agricultural writers were aware of the various qualities of grassland and of the needs of their animals. Walter compared the quantity of cheese and butter made in a season from wood pasture, the aftermath in a meadow and the stubble after harvest, then advocated the use of salt-marsh as more profitable prime pasture for dairy cattle. This was not a solution in landlocked Oxfordshire.

Traditionally cheese was made from milk taken from a cow after the calves were weaned until St. Michael's Day (29th September) when the cow was allowed to dry out in order to maintain the quality of the calves to be borne the following spring. Both Walter of Henley and, later, Anthony Fitzherbert recommended that the hay should be cut by the Nativity of St. John (24th June) and that it should be properly dried and thatched before it could be spoilt by rain. This advice was probably followed throughout England.

Along the river Thames the value of the meads decreased as a result of the Act of 1751 For The Better Carrying On And Regulating The Navigation Of The River Thames. The new locks and weirs built under the terms of this Act at the end of the 18th century ruined the drainage of the land upstream. The raising of the water at King's Weir by 4 or 5 feet, for example, and the consequent rise in the water-table: "changed some of the best pasturage in Yarnton into coarse, worthless grass". The higher water-table would have provided conditions on West Mead in which, for example, the unpalatable meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*) (Fig. 9), and willow herb (*Epilobium hirsutum*) (Fig. 10), could flourish at the expense of more nutritive herbs and grasses. A few miles away in Water Eaton, the loss of the season's hay crop due to floods could amount to £500 (Young 1813). Small farmers who used to rely on it for winter fodder could do so no longer.



Fig. 9. Meadowsweet (*Filipendula ulmaria*).



Fig. 10. Willowherb (*Epilobium hirsutum*).

In contrast to Yarnton, Marston was a hamlet in Headington's Royal Estate and did not appear in the Domesday Book. Although all the low ground was apparently under water making Old Marston an island village, I suspect that in summer the floods receded and hay-making and aftermath grazing was carried out because this was such an important part of the agricultural economy. Marston was mentioned in the Hundred Rolls of Edward I (1279) but 1349 is the first documentary evidence for Marston's lot meads when an acre of the lot meadows was given to Oriel College. In 1458 Marston's King's Mill meadows came under the ownership of the newly-founded Magdalen College, and in 1520 Marston's remaining land began to be enclosed when Magdalen began to buy out the common rights in its meadows. The same year Brasenose College increased its land holding in Marston to over 100 acres and in 1529 Corpus Christi College acquired two half-yardlands and a quarter (Victoria County History of Oxford Vol. V.). The Corpus map of 1605 shows that the arable (600 acres) covered half the parish and lot meadows were maintained beside the Cherwell. So far I have not found any indication of the management of the lot meadows. Dr. Robin Darwell-Smith, archivist at Magdalen College, Oxford, suggested that there was no need to keep such records because their agent could saunter up the Cherwell from the College and oversee the sharing of the hay himself. Currently, these Colleges continue to hold land in Marston meads and Wolfson College owns the two most northerly parts of South Moore Lot Meadow next to the Cherwell.

Thus we have one very full set of records for flood-meadow management which illuminates the management history of those with sparse records.

REFERENCES

- McDONALD, Alison W. (2009) A history and ecology of North and South Meads, Wolfson College. privately printed by Wolfson College, Oxford.
- McDONALD, A. (2007) The Historical Ecology of some Unimproved Alluvial Grassland in the Upper Thames Valley. Ancient grasslands near Oxford: Port Meadow, Wolvercote Common and Picksey Mead. British Archeological Report 441. ISBN 978 4073 0122 8.

THOMAS V. (1856) Notes on Yarnton tithes and lot meadows. Bodleian Library. MS Top Oxon. b.19.
Victoria County History of Oxford Vols. V and XII. Now on the web.
YOUNG A. (1968) General view of agriculture of the Oxfordshire Board of Agriculture, [1813]. 2nd edition.
David Charles, Newton Abbot.. pp. 205–215.

Alison W. McDonald