

## AN ANCIENT FLOODPLAIN HAY MEADOW



*Following her description of Long Mead Orchard for Eynsham News in 2014, Catriona Bass has kindly written more of Long Mead.*

When I say that I live on Horseshoe Island, which adjoins Long Mead, some Eynsham people who have lived in the village all their lives ask: 'Where's that?' and I have to explain that if you look upstream as you cross Swinford bridge you'll see what looks like a clump of trees at the end of the meadow and that is Horseshoe Island. Other people reminisce excitedly about childhood adventures down on the island, fishing, smashing the windows of the little wooden house, which has been here since the 1960s, staying out late, getting drunk.

Every time Eynshamers visit, I acquire another piece of the puzzle of its 20<sup>th</sup> century history. Norman Butler Miles and Graham Podbery cut the hay on Long Mead over many years and, during one particularly rainy summer when the weather forecasters kept promising sun – and rain would come down just as we were starting to cut, Norman said: 'I can't be doing with weather forecasters – in the old days, if you could hear the steam engines at Wolvercote you knew you had five fine haymaking days ahead.' I was a bit slow and so he had to explain that you could only hear the Wolvercote steam trains if the wind was in the east, which meant that the weather would be set fair. Some years later, Anne Wrapson visited Long Mead with the Eynsham Society. She told me of the old man who had lived on Horseshoe Island in the 1930s and 1940s. He was a naturalist and taught Anne and her brother everything they knew about the wildlife and plants of the area.

From early spring, Long Mead is a blaze of colour as flowers appear whose names everyone used to know – oxlip, early marsh orchid, bird's foot trefoil, ladies' bedstraw, adder's tongue fern, red fescue, meadow foxtail, yellow rattle, great burnet. Great burnet with its red bobbly flowers that wave above the rest are thought to live for over 200 years. It is the main indicator of these now rare meadows.

Long Mead is part of the last three per cent of Britain's ancient floodplain hay meadows. Today, only an area the size of Heathrow Airport remains due to postwar demands for intensified production. But they were once the most valuable land in Britain, their fertility being enhanced by the river silt carried in during floods. They even feature in the

Domesday Book. These meadows allowed villagers to overwinter their livestock since they not only provided grazing but a hay crop as well.

Meadows like Long Mead remained the most sought-after land until the introduction of artificial fertilisers when, overnight, farmers could increase the richness of all their land. Grasses responded best to fertiliser, out-competing all the other plants, growing thick and tall and increasing hay yields enormously. So, in the last half-century, our meadows turned from a riot of colour buzzing with insects, butterflies and birds, to a quiet, rich, uniform green. Standing amid the flowers of Long Mead on a June afternoon, you understand that the richness has come with a loss. Farmers understand this too. As Graham Podbery says, although the hay yields are low from Long Mead, the mix of herbs it provides makes them a valuable feed for livestock.



I have owned Long Mead since 2000. It had slipped off the radar of environmental protection bodies and had narrowly escaped being dug up for a Thames Water main. I got it designated a County Wildlife Site and since then have been farming it traditionally, taking a late hay cut to allow flower seeds to set and ground-nesting birds to breed and then grazing it with cattle or sheep. I offer educational visits to school children, in association with Natural England, and work with Eynsham-based Love Care Farm and Wytham's Farmability to give adults with learning difficulties the opportunity to spend time in this extraordinary environment. I am about to embark on ten-year longitudinal study of the biodiversity of the site.

**CB, January 2018**