

Take a 5 km (2 hour) walk in
Weardale – a landscape that has been
farmed and mined for centuries

Hay making past
and present...

Walk 2

Hay Time

Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty
NORTH PENNINES



Produced by the North Pennines AONB Partnership in association with IECF and Vivienne Crow. Cover photo: hay making in Weardale



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The information in this leaflet is
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To find out more
This is one of a series of hay meadow walks leaflets in the
North Pennines AONB. For details and more information
about the Hay Time project, contact:

In Freshopburn
• The Weardale Inn, located in the old schoolhouse,
offers accommodation and bar meals.
• Weardale Museum, a small folk museum, is open
during the summer. For more information, visit the
website at www.weardalemuseum.co.uk
There is a regular bus service to Freshopburn from
both Cowshill and Stanhope.
Phone Traveline on 0870 6082608 for more details.



How to get there



Hay making in the North Pennines in the 1930s

from "Haymaking"
John Clare (1793-1864)

As a meadow field in cock...
There's nothing looks more lovely

How lovely looks the hay-sward
When turning to the sun
How richly looks the dark path
When the rickings all are done

Among the meadow hay cocks
'Tis beautiful to lie
When pleasantly the day looks
And gold like is the sky

Haymaking

The evolution of hay meadows

Neolithic times

During Neolithic times, about 8 to 6,000 years ago, people began felling the trees of the ancient forests. The clearings that they created were lightly grazed by livestock and many of the plants that grew there are still found in hay meadows today.

The Middle Ages

By the time of the Norman conquest (1066), hay meadows were commonplace and the Domesday Book records them in eight out of 10 settlements. During Mediaeval times, stock were taken 'up the hill' in the summer to graze on communal 'shieling grounds'. In the winter, they were fed hay made during the summer in communal hay meadows that surrounded the village.

The 20th Century

Since the 1950s, the steady intensification of farming has resulted in a massive decline in hay meadows and the many plant and animal species they support. In a drive to produce more food, chemical fertilisers and fast-growing rye grasses have been introduced; native grasses and wild flowers then cannot compete.

The first cut

The timing of mowing is crucial for the continued existence of species-rich hay meadows. You may have noticed tractors working in the fields in the early summer – they are making silage. Most farmers prefer silage to hay as a winter feed for livestock because its production is less weather dependent. However, the making of silage represents one of the greatest threats to traditional meadow plants, because it is cut too early and too frequently for them to set seed.



Only about 11 square kilometres of upland hay meadow exist in the UK today. Nearly half of these are in the North Pennines where they survive thanks to the persistence of traditional management.

Taking Action

An internationally important habitat, these meadows are home to a unique combination of flowers and grasses, with sometimes as many as 100 species in any one field.

The North Pennines AONB Partnership's Hay Time project will restore and enhance many of the remaining sites by harvesting seed from species-rich meadows and spreading it on sites that have lost their special meadow plants.

The corncrake, which nests in the dense vegetation of hay meadows, was once a widespread species. The mechanisation of hay cutting and then the switch from hay to silage production caused its extinction throughout most of the UK. Today it can be found only on a few Scottish islands but may one day return to the North Pennines.



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From past to present

Ancient woodland Clearings created by Neolithic people Harvesting of grass by Bronze Age people to feed livestock Mediaeval communal field systems Land enclosure. Rise of the lead mining economy Labour intensive hay meadow management Introduction of tractors Modern, intensive farm management



9,000 years ago 8 – 6,000 years ago 4,500 years ago 1,000 years ago 4 – 300 years ago 300 years ago 60 years ago 20 years ago – Present



A Hay Meadow Walk in Weardale

This five kilometre walk close to Ireshopeburn crosses some beautiful meadows, with superb views of the surrounding moorland and villages in the dale below. The best time to go is between April and August.

How difficult is this walk?

The route follows public rights of way, quiet country lanes and farm tracks. The path is steep in places and may be rocky and muddy.



As soon as you head out of West Blackdene and up the steps into the first pasture, you get a taste of the rich variety of plants found in this area. You'll see knapweed and many plants with medicinal uses, such as eyebright, Lady's-mantle and the blue/purple flowers of Devil's-bit scabious. According to legend, the latter is so good for mankind that the Devil bit off the root of the plant in an attempt to kill it.

Devil's-bit scabious

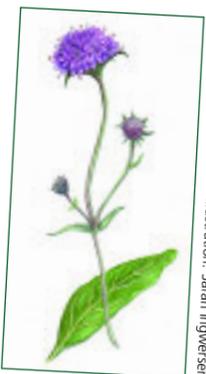


Illustration: Sarah Ingwersen

Walking up the track towards Whitstones Farm, you will see the first of two lime kilns on the route. There are a number of disused limestone quarries dotted about this landscape and farmers would have used the burnt lime from the kilns to put calcium, leached out by heavy rainfall, back into the soil.

In spring and early summer, listen for the long, bubbling song of the curlew. Having spent the winter on the coast, these and other wading birds move inland in the spring to breed. They particularly favour the rough, rushy allotments above the hay meadows for nesting.



© Nigel Blake (rsb-images.com)

The meadows here are a riot of colour – with the deep pink flowers of wood crane's-bill, a member of the geranium family, and the broad, lobed leaves of Lady's-mantle a common sight.

Beyond Whitstones Farm, the track verges in summer are alive with the sound of grasshoppers. Look out for ribwort plantain, easily identifiable when little satellites of white anthers develop around the flower heads. Because its leaves can absorb a lot of water, this plant is useful for farmers who make hay – they can use it to judge the moisture content of their hay-stacks.



When on the public rights of way, it is important that you stick to the paths, leave gates as you find them and keep dogs under close control, preferably on a short lead. Be especially careful in the hay meadows themselves, walking in single file and keeping to the path to avoid damaging the crop.



Hay meadows passed on this walk.



Walk route

Roadside verges are often an important refuge for wild flowers characteristic of hay meadows such as sneezewort.



Illustration: Sarah Ingwersen

Sneezewort

At 1,400ft (427 metres), High Whitstones is the highest point on the walk. Harebell and wood crane's-bill thrive at high altitudes and can be found at more than 6,500ft (1,980 metres) above sea level.



Trees are not necessarily a deterrent to meadow species. In fact, some of the flowers and grasses that you see on this walk have their origins in the woodlands of ancient Britain.

Along the riverside path back to West Blackdene you'll be able to see the delicate tufts of meadowsweet's creamy-white blooms throughout the summer. The flowers have a heady fragrance of honey and almonds and were used to keep 16th century homes smelling sweet.



Scattered throughout the allotments above Allercleugh are remains of the Weardale lead mining industry. The North Pennines' rich mineral veins have been mined since Roman times, but the industry reached its peak in the 19th century. When you cross Coronation Bridge over the River Wear later in the walk, look up the hill to the right and you will see the grand dwelling of Newhouse. This was built towards the end of the 17th century by the W. B. Lead mining company for its chief Weardale agent.