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 ryegrasses 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.

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.

From past to present

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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

Walking up the track towards Whitestones 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.

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 Whitestones 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.

At 1,400ft (427 metres), High Whitestones 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.

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.

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.

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

Sneezewort

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.

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.

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.

In the surrounding moorland, beware of the hare, wild boar and fallow deer. The rough coat of the wild boar and the distinctive white patch on its forehead make it easily identifiable. The wild boars are a recent arrivals after European Union legislation allowed them to return to the UK. The relentless culling has ensured that there are currently no wild boar in the Weardale area.

When you return to Ireshopeburn, you will see a delightful herd of small white lambs. The surrounding moorland is used by local farmers to graze these sheep, which then return to the farms to provide the milk for a variety of cheeses and butter.

In the local pubs, ask about the local cheeses and butter. You will find that a wide variety are produced and available to purchase.

How long is this walk?

1.4 miles (2.3 km) and 300 feet (91 metres) ascent

Alternative Route

At the top of the concrete steps leading down from the car park, take the public footpath on the left not shown on the map. Cross the A689 road and turn left at a gate. Follow Hay Bridge Road, turn left at the road junction, then follow the signs to Whitestones Farm. Use the farm track to walk up to Whitestones Farm. Follow the public footpath to the left of the farm until you reach the A689 road. Turn right and retrace your steps to the car park.