A rich tapestry

There can be more than 30 different plant species growing in every square metre of upland hay meadow and up to 100 in any one field. They provide an important habitat for birds, insects and mammals – even during the night when bats swoop over them catching insects.

Meadows are great for water voles as they favour stream-sides with a wide range of flowering plants. The North Pennines is one of their last strongholds.

There may be 10 or more species of native grass alone, including sweet vernal grass, which gives hay its lovely smell. In addition to the grasses, there are herbs such as Lady’s-mantle and clovers, which are able to fix atmospheric nitrogen in their roots, adding this vital nutrient to the soil for use by other plants.

Local beauties
Plants such as melancholy thistle, wood crane’s-bill, water avens and globeflower all thrive in the North Pennines and bring the meadows to life with colour in the summer months.

Special Species

Great burnet, melancholy thistle, meadow-sweet, rough hawkbit, wood crane’s-bill

Red clover
Much loved by bumble bees, red clover is an important fodder crop.

Lady’s-mantle
Nine different types of Lady’s-mantle grow in the North Pennines and three of these occur nowhere else in the country.

Changing Colour

Wood anemone, marsh marigold, cuckoo flower

Meadow buttercup, common sorrel, pignut, wood crane’s-bill, yellow rattle

Great burnet, melancholy thistle, meadow-sweet, rough hawkbit, wood crane’s-bill

Common knapweed, Devil’s-bit scabious, meadow-sweet
Along Briscoe Lane, you are surrounded by pastures and hay meadows, rich in native grasses and wild flowers. The "Tatty Field" is a particularly striking example, but please don’t enter the meadow as there is no public access to it. The flowers are best viewed over the wall or from the gate at the top end of the field.

Starting from Fiddler House, head down the lane. In the spring and early summer, you are likely to hear the long, bubbling song of the curlew or the “pee…witt” of the lapwing. These, and other wading birds such as redshank and snipe, nest in large numbers in the pastures and allotments of Baldersdale. Look out for the long, wispy crest of the lapwing and the curlew’s long, down-curved beak.

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.

Great burnet, meadowsweet, knapweed and Lady’s-mantles fill the roadsides above Hury Reservoir. Road verges are often important havens for plants that are no longer able to survive within the neighbouring fields following intensification of farm management. In the North Pennines road verges are now the best places to see the striking ‘shaving brush’ heads of melancholy thistle.

Great burnet, meadowsweet, knapweed and Lady’s-mantles fill the roadsides above Hury Reservoir. Road verges are often important havens for plants that are no longer able to survive within the neighbouring fields following intensification of farm management. In the North Pennines road verges are now the best places to see the striking ‘shaving brush’ heads of melancholy thistle.

Many hay meadow plants have legendary healing properties. The Romans claimed that betony, for example, could cure 47 diseases. It was also said to be so powerful that wounded animals would seek it out. In more recent times, research has been conducted into the potential cancer-treating properties of common bird’s-foot trefoil.

Highways authorities are now encouraged to take account of the needs of flower-rich verges. For instance, they are asked not to leave clippings on the verges after cutting because this would increase soil fertility, higher nutrient levels lead to the loss of many meadow species and the establishment of vegetation dominated by nettles, thistles and other more competitive species.