

Annual Review

A warm welcome to the Marches Meadow Group Annual Review for 2022



*Enjoying the meadows at Hurdley Hall,
Churchstoke (c) Sarah Jameson*

Welcome to the 2022 Annual Newsletter for the Marches Meadow Group. On the following pages we have tried to reflect the great diversity of activities occurring within MMG and beyond, some as part of the Stepping Stones project initiative. We expect that 2023 will bring many more events for you to sample, and without the heavy demands of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund projects, free time to be a little more spontaneous with some of our meetings. The very popular Hay Meadow Festival could make a come-back next year! Keep checking with the events programme on either the website or Facebook page. Let us know what events interest you and maybe you would be willing to host one of our informal gatherings.

We are always keen to see members more involved in our activities, so please do call or drop an email as your involvement will be most welcome.

As the days shorten, I'm mowing my meadow areas, more like scalping, and removing the cuttings, exposing quite a lot of bare damp earth before I sow some yellow rattle seed, before the frosts.... Once the wind calms. The joys of living at 1,400 feet. I have some plugs of home-grown Betony and cowslips which I'll plant over the next couple of weeks and then put the meadow to bed and visualise the anticipated show in 2023!

David Poynton, Chair



Seed collection workshop, Ratlinghope in high summer (c) Sarah Jameson

Marches Meadow Group: Chair's Report 2022

I'm writing this Chair's report a few days after the completion of a very heavy schedule of haymaking within the Group.

Our skilled contractors Tim Selman, Mark Oldham and Mark Wadsworth have completed a record number of sites, during the very hottest period of the year; favourable for hay making but less so for the operators!

Green Hay exchange

There has been a considerable demand for green hay transfers to meadows of members and to the National Trust where scheduled improvements to Jinlye Meadow and Fir Tree farm were completed.

This year many of you will have met Adrian Donnelly, one of our volunteers, who has worked closely alongside the contractors. Collectively they have looked for ways in which we can improve the effectiveness of our service in the future. During the work we very successfully developed a technique using a Buck rake to gather and load onto a trailer, green hay in large quantities. Without this development on the small scale BCS equipment we would not have been able to supply the green hay demand, as manual handling would have severely limited our capabilities. This development was scaled-up successfully to our tractors with the unplanned purchase of a 'muck grab', which perhaps should be known less prosaically as the Grass Grabber 2, or GG2?

Green Recovery Challenge Fund

In addition to hay making, the award of the Green Recovery Challenge Fund (GRCF2) to Marches Meadow Group earlier in the year has enabled us to continue with a number of projects highlighted in the People's Postcode Lottery Grant, within the Stepping Stones project area. This complex programme, consisting of the establishment of a new meadow, equipment purchase, plant species identification on new sites etc, has made it another extremely busy year. We are well on the way with all project areas - although the official closing date is in March 2023. One outstanding study will be a modelling exercise to fully cost out the various stages of hay making and meadow creation. We have not been immune this year to the substantial cost increases in equipment, spare parts, breakdowns, labour and fuel. It is unlikely that there will be grant money available over the next 12 months, so it is vital we fully understand our operational cost base, so we can continue to provide contracting services in the future.

Events programme & visits

The return of a full events programme after the disruption caused by Covid-19 has provided an opportunity to meet more of our members at local and more distant locations. A visit to the meadows at Erddig, near Wrexham, (a NT property) was enhanced on the day by detailed guidance from head gardener Glynn Smith, who established the



Scarlet Waxcap fungi
(c) Sarah Jameson

meadows around 35 years ago. A lively afternoon at Belmore Farm on the Long Mynd saw a large membership turnout, to explore the many different techniques for collecting wildflower seeds from our meadows. In addition to free yellow rattle seed, tea, coffee and biscuits, the views were amazing - all the more so because of the clear sunny weather. Please let us know of any site or activities or visits we should consider for the coming year.

Committee changes

The year also saw developments on the Committee with Adrian Donnelly offering his services, Paul Simon stepping down as treasurer, after being in post since our formation, and Martin Bonathan passing on the role of publicity and website coordinator to Sarah Jameson.

The Treasurer's role is now with Kerry Brown whose experience with National Trust (Wales) will be of value. Thanks to Paul and Martin for all their work over the years and welcome to Sarah, Kerry and Charlie Bell who have joined the Committee. Our Facebook page continues to develop under the care of Clare Donnelly.

Priorities for 2023/24

Looking ahead a number of priorities for 2023 and 2024 appear to be emerging -

- Establish a more active engagement with the Group's membership, which currently stands at around 150.
- Consider ways for future funding of MMG, both within Stepping Stones and beyond.
- Seek ways to communicate the real progress that MMG is making in the re-establishment of species rich meadows, throughout our sphere of influence to both older and younger age groups, who might volunteer some of their time to this objective.
- Finally to seek ways to generate more of the scarce, but highly desirable quality green hay which is such a valuable raw material - underpinning so many of our objectives.

... And thanks

Many thanks to Sarah Jameson for producing her first MMG Annual Newsletter, with an interesting mix of articles and photographs of our Group. I think it's stunning and hope you enjoy it.

David Poynton,
Chair Marches Meadow Group



*Early summer
(c) Sarah Jameson*

Appraising our meadows – what resource do Marches Meadow Group members hold?

Since its inception in 2015 MMG has conducted free walk-over plant surveys for members. The plant lists have been included in short advisory reports for the meadow owners, with recommendations ranging from ‘keep up the good work’ to (exceptionally) ‘this area will never make a meadow’! In the latter case we can usually suggest an alternative that will benefit wildlife conservation.

As membership has grown so has the demand for plant surveys; in addition, we should be assessing the effects of management as hay fields for those fields and lawns starting the process, or determining the species added by using green hay or seed. This year there were over 30 sites for which survey requests had been received in response to the annual call for MMG services, and this rose to over 40 sites as the season progressed. The two surveyors who had managed in previous years were clearly going to struggle, but the responses to MMG’s members’ skills audit had identified several potential surveyors.

Two new (to MMG surveys, but highly skilled field botanists) surveyors agreed to make a number of site visits despite being warned that some may be somewhat lacking in botanical interest! However, the aim is to help owners understand what they have and how it might be enhanced, and there is always the chance of discovering an unknown jewel of a meadow.

Although these surveys and reports have achieved the aim of informing owners, members of the MMG committee felt that better use could be made of the accumulating data – with this year’s surveys we have information on almost 100 sites, and some of those have several fields which may vary in quality. Perhaps most importantly, we need to know the quality of the meadows owned by members so that we can determine which would make good donors of green hay or, conversely, which would derive the most benefit from green hay of a particular quality.

To help with this another volunteer, Steve Griggs, stepped forward to use his particular skills in developing databases. Through an iterative process in which Steve patiently asked pertinent questions and encouraged me to populate the database before the task became even larger, we have established the MMG green hay database.

The main task was to develop a ranking system for our meadows. There are several existing schemes, but these tend to focus on the best and ignore the rest – we want to include ‘the rest’ as sites for which members want to increase their conservation value. So we adopted a very simple scheme in which plant species that would be welcome in a typical hay meadow were scored. We could have given higher scores to some species than to others, but this seemed artificial – should Common Spotted Orchid be scored as 5, 10 or 20? Is Betony worth more or less?

So the scoring system adopted was to give all positive species a score of 1. As long as this is consistent across all sites it provides a basis for comparison, and most sites with the more unusual species will also have the more common species. This gave a range of scores from 3 to 51. The range was divided into five classes (I to V). – again this is somewhat arbitrary and it is best to consider the boundaries between classes as ‘fuzzy’. The classes adopted are shown below.

I have tentatively started including the ‘MMG meadow class’ in the survey reports, but always on the basis that this suggests that the site is already good enough to be a donor site or that it could become a donor site with appropriate management and/or green hay or seed. The chart below shows the number of members’ fields in each class – there are 137 fields included but this will rise to >150 when all this year’s data are included. Of those only 15 fields are classed as good or very good donor sites, emphasising the scarcity of this valuable

resource, especially when following good practice of only taking green hay one year in three.

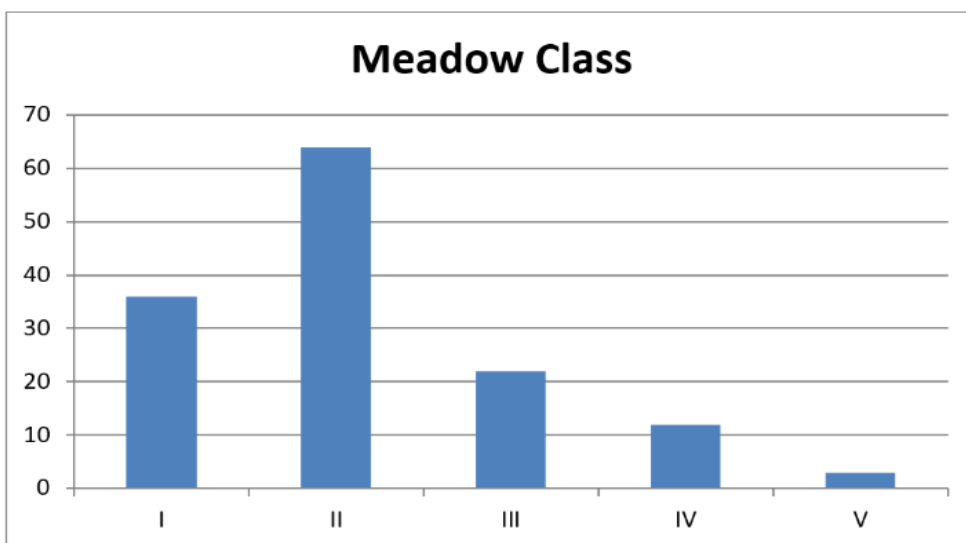
MMG’s aim is to help members improve their meadows until they can all be green hay donor meadows and the resource grows. We would welcome more requests from members for green hay and seed to achieve this aim.

My thanks to other members of the surveying team: Mike Carter, John Clayfield and Rob Rowe. If you had a survey but haven’t yet had the report please be patient and only blame me for the delay as I write most of the reports. At the time of writing I still have about 15 reports to complete!

Thank you also to Steve Griggs for asking the right questions, waiting for the answers without complaint and developing the database.

Richard Small

I	1 - 10 Possible recipient site donor class II (after yellow rattle?)
II	11-20 Recipient site for green hay from donor class III or IV
III	21-30 Recipient site for green hay from donor class IV or V
IV	31-40 Good donor site
V	>40 Very high quality donor site





Photos (c) Simon Cooter

‘Scything with a View 2022’ at the Stiperstones National Nature Reserve

Scything with a View was a weeklong event of scything training courses, bracken and hay meadow cutting at different venues on and around the Stiperstones National Nature Reserve.

It tends to run every other year when the Shropshire Hills Hay Meadow Festival has a rest. This year competitors came from as far afield as Lancashire and Cambridge and there was a good showing of local scythers too.

The introductory course ran at full capacity on the Sunday; however, the heat was building and with the predicted 38°C for Monday and Tuesday these events had to be cancelled. Wednesday was much cooler and saw a good team of scythers out on the Stiperstones, so we managed to tackle bracken on two areas of the hill around some of the old settlements.

On Thursday an even larger group went over to a local meadow owner and made short work of mowing his hay for which we were rewarded with lunch and sticky buns.

Friday morning saw more bracken controlled on some of the acid grassland pasture on the Stiperstones, followed after lunch by the competition where 5m square plots were cut by willing competitors and judged by time and quality of finish. The event ended with a barbeque and prize giving.

Bracken control

Bracken control on the Stiperstones NNR is necessary to maintain the important habitats that the nature reserve is designated for, particularly the upland heathland with its range of dwarf shrubs and the acid grassland known locally for its show of yellow mountain pansies. Bracken is a native fern that can be very invasive, shading out and smothering other plants. On much of the rocky ground of the Stiperstones the only way to control its spread is to spray it with herbicide. However, on grassland it can be weakened significantly by cutting or rolling. Machine or even horse use on the steep rocky slopes of the Stiperstones is not always possible and in these situations a team of scything volunteers is the ideal solution.

Hay Meadows

In the past hay meadows would have been cut with scythes and the benefit of this was that they were not all cut at one time, which allowed different plants to flower and seed at different times. Today’s commercial hay meadows are big fields allowing large machines access which compact the soil and the large-scale cutting leaves little in the way of flowers for insects or seeds for birds. The small flower-rich hay meadows that survive often do not have the access or the turning room for these big

Shropshire Hills Scything Competition Results

	Time (5m x 5m) mins/seconds	Quality score	Class
Peter Blackwell	2:31	8	
Jim McVittie	4:11	6.5	V
Shane O'Reilly	6:36	5	V
Andrew Macpherson	6:47	6	<75, N
Andrew Calder	8:04	3	V, N, <75
Ian Aldred	8:27	4	N, <75
Andy Hyde	8:49	5.5	V, <75
Chris Rowe	9:42	1.5	<75, N
Chris Savory	9:54	4	<75, M
Jayne O'Reilly	9:57	6	L
Caroline Cooter	11:21	7	L
Tom Bridge	11:27	4	<75, N

Mens scything winner	Peter Blackwell
Women's scything winner	Jayne O'Reilly/ Caroline Cooter
Veteran scything winner	Jim McVittie
Best novice	Andrew Macpherson
Less than 75cm blade winner	Andrew Macpherson



(c) Simon Cooter

machines. The Marches Meadow Group was set up to try and overcome some of these issues and now has a good variety of small-scale kit that can be booked through a local contractor to manage these small meadows. It even has a few scythes which, in my opinion, is always the best answer.

Scything courses

Scything courses are run annually at the Stiperstones and there is plenty of opportunity for

practice by becoming a volunteer on the reserve. Blades are prepared on National Peening Day on the first Sunday in April at a free event and a scything competition is held each year somewhere in the Shropshire hills.

Simon Cooter,
The Stiperstones NNR Senior Reserve
Manager and Scything Ambassador



Photos (c) Adrian Donnelly

Haymaking 2022

With the barometer set fair, blue skies over Shropshire and soaring temperatures, haymaking got off to a good start in mid July.

The contracting team, made up of Mark Oldham, Tim Selman and Mark Wadsworth (supervised by Scout the border collie), embarked on a busy season working on 27 MMG members' sites ranging from 0.1 hectare to 8.4 hectares.

We were delighted to accept delivery of a Deutz Fahr 4x4 tractor with front loader and a brand new BCS machine, all paid for by the MMG bid for the Green Recovery Challenge Fund round 2, administered nationally by The Heritage Lottery Fund and locally by the Stepping Stones Project. They were a welcome addition to the Lamborghini tractor and the existing BCS machine, particularly as the new tractor is generically compatible with the Lamborghini. Other new pieces of kit included a hydraulic grab with tines and a buck rake for the BCS, all funded by MMG.

Mechanical issues with the newly purchased tractor resulted in some delays to the work but these were swiftly resolved by the supplier. Unfortunately the unprecedented price of diesel added to the costs of operations.

There were two threads to the project.

The first involved mowing and baling hay at our members' smaller flower meadows and orchards. It was great to meet so many interested people and see the work being done. To see the abundance of butterflies, bumblebees, grasshoppers and other insects was very encouraging.

Then there were the 'green hay' projects, where meadows are cut and the arisings transferred to designated recipient sites, with the aim of increasing biodiversity.

The donor sites are species rich meadows, carefully selected after botanical survey. Orchids, ragged robin, devil's bit scabious, knapweed, bird's-foot trefoil and the hemi-parasitic yellow rattle are some of the indicators present.

The recipient site should be in the same locality, of similar soil type and have already been mown and cleared.

Since the hay should be transferred within a matter of hours to maintain maximum viability of seeds, a level of coordination is required. The group has had great success using this method in previous years.

Of particular interest is the St. George's Meadow Community project in Pontesbury where a new wildflower meadow is being created. The BCS cutter was used to clear the site, followed by the introduction of green hay from the Natural England SSSI site at Pennerley.

The National Trust meadows at Jinlye, All Stretton and the larger site at Fir Tree Farm, Asterton were also recipients of green hay from various MMG members' sites. The total area of recipient sites is

20.7 hectares including other members' fields. It will be exciting to see the changes in these meadows in the next few years.

In my role as coordinator, I would like to thank the team of contractors, the MMG members and all those who helped with the haymaking.

Adrian Donnelly





Bilberry bumblebee
(c) David Williams

Bumblebee Stepping Stones

If you are reading this, you may be the guardian of a vital habitat that encourages and maintains suitable foraging areas for bumblebees.

As you know, hay making and autumn grazing permits flowering and seed set to occur without interference. The factors that are essential for bumblebee conservation are a continuous succession of flowers through the season together with nesting and hibernation sites that will not be disturbed. Permanent unimproved grassland, once highly valued for grazing and hay production, is the stepping stone to a future where bumblebees can thrive.

Agriculture desperately needs bumblebees but the paradox is that farming practices are not currently supporting them. The switch from hay to silage production has had profound effects. You are the key to offering an alternative approach, educating others and participating in evidence based change.

Bumblebees are, of course, entirely dependent on flowers, because they feed exclusively on pollen and nectar. They do not store large quantities of honey in the way that honeybees do, and they store little pollen, so they are vulnerable to discontinuities in the food supply. The nest establishment phase in spring when the queen has to single-handedly gather sufficient forage to feed her first batch of offspring may be the time when availability of flowers is most vital, but few crops flower this early. Bumblebees need suitable nesting sites; with some species using dense grassy tussocks and others underground cavities, usually in abandoned rodent

nests. Bumblebees also need suitable hibernation sites where young queens can remain undisturbed through the autumn and winter, with research to date suggesting that most species hibernate in soil on north-west facing slopes or in the shade of trees.

In the Shropshire Hills we have a population of the bilberry bumblebee (*Bombus monticola*), a rare moorland edge species with a very bright red abdomen. Monitoring over the last three years has shown that it is present on hay meadows when the bilberry is in flower, making the habitats that you manage an important stepping stone.

In the face of disturbing news bulletins about the decline in our natural ecosystems, your most effective response is action. This winter, how about planting Goat willow (*Salix caprea*) for the emerging spring queens, joining the conversation about your hay meadow cutting regime to prolong the flowering season and considering your approach to meadow edges and rodents where bumblebees establish nests and hibernate?

Next spring it is hoped that the Stepping Stones project will have new ways for you to engage. In the meantime, maybe join the Bumblebee Conservation Trust and find out more.

Debbie Vivers



Moonwort: a curiosity!

We found the Moonwort (*Botrychium lunaria*) in our meadow by accident last year when searching for something else. At first I thought its ragged looking 'knuckle-like' head was bracken forcing its way through the sward. I took some photographs and posted them on to a wildflower page on Facebook I belong to. And lo and behold within minutes I had responses telling me I'd found something rather special.

Moonwort is actually a native fern in the Adders Tongue family. With its strange appearance, the fern was the subject of much fascinating folklore in the past. It had an association with metal and a piece of Moonwort, picked no doubt by the light of the full moon, could help you pick a lock. It also caused horses to throw their metal shoes if they stepped on the plant.

It is a plant of well drained, unimproved meadows as well as sand dunes and open woodland. Being small and green it is very easy to overlook. Although called Common Moonwort, the plant is now on the Red List of Threatened Species unfortunately, so we will keep a close eye on the two plants we have so far found. And I know where to go when I next lose my front door key.

Sarah Jameson

Proof of the Pudding

Debbie Vivers (see article on bumblebees) has started a trial of the hay preferences of her cob pony. Having acquired a bale of species-rich hay from Natural England's meadows, Debbie offered her pony a choice of species-rich (on the left of the hay rack) or 'ordinary' hay (on the right) – in the photo the species rich hay has already been eaten.

Debbie emphasises that this was the very first trial, so cannot be considered as conclusive proof, but the pony certainly seemed to prefer the species-rich hay in this first trial. Hopefully this will be confirmed by a longer trial, even if on just one pony, and perhaps MMG members will have found another customer for species-rich hay.

We'll ask Debbie for an update for next year's review.





*MMG group visit to
Lower View, Sarn in May 2022*

Events for 2023 (provisional only) MMG contact details

February: Zoom meeting: Topic: pre-season meadow preparation

Saturday 18th March: Seed Propagation workshop with Rob Lee at Albrightlee

Sunday 23rd April: St George's Meadow opening (Pontesbury) and Whittington Green Fair - volunteers needed!

Saturday 6th May: AGM

June: Ironbridge Trust Meadows coach trip with Mick Boulton & Monoprinting workshop with wild flowers and grasses in Sarah Jameson's meadow

Saturday 1st July: National Meadows day at Rob Lee's wildflower nursery

Saturday 22nd July: Hay Meadow Festival. We need volunteers - can you help?

August: Seed collection with Grass Grabber

September: Guest speaker

October: Fungi and Meadows

November: Meadows Questions & Answers
Social meeting

Thursday 7th December: Zoom meeting reviewing the year; contributions from members welcome.

Website: www.marchesmeadowgroup.com

Email: mmgmembership@gmail.com

Facebook: [@marchesmeadowgroup](https://www.facebook.com/@marchesmeadowgroup)
www.facebook.com/groups/463777554459852

Officers

Chair: David Poynton

Secretary: Richard Small

Treasurer: Kerry Brown

Donations

The Marches Meadow Group is a not for profit organisation. We are always very grateful to receive donations. If you would like to donate, please contact us by email requesting our bank account details.

Thank you!