

Bridget has studied the history and natural history of Hemingford Grey meadow for many years and was voluntary warden for the two strips owned by the Wildlife Trust. She has also visited many other floodplain meadows. Her talk covered how she has learnt about this fascinating and beautiful ecosystem.

Bridget was originally from Wiltshire and she showed us a picture that she had in her childhood bedroom which shows a young girl in a meadow – she wonders if this was where her love of meadows first started. She was involved with Hemingford Grey meadow for 25 years as warden.

There are still some excellent flood meadows scattered around the country but there a tiny number compared to what there used to be, as their importance in the local communities has diminished. Firstly, what is a flood meadow? There is a difference between water meadows and flood meadows. Flood meadows are naturally flooded, whereas, water meadows were flooded artificially by using sluice gates in Spring to give the grass a head start in growth from the warm water. Getting the right amount of water is key to a healthy meadow in both cases. The water needs to soak away quickly or a marsh is created. In Medieval times, the land price was four times that of arable land as meadows were a key source of fuel (food) for the village for feeding the cattle/oxen and for feeding the horses – animals being essential for food and transportation, as well as pulling farm implements for growing crops.

In regards to Hemingford Grey meadow, Bridget was the warden of two strips now owned by the Wildlife Trust and there are several other owners, which isn't such a bad thing, as this gives differing management regimes and more variety of plants. Traditionally, on February 13th each year, the Town Crier in St Ives would go round with his bell and close Hemingford Grey meadow for grazing. Then after 13th August, cattle and sheep were allowed to graze again. Hemingford Grey meadow is split into strips, as other flood meadows were. Traditionally, these were marked out with stone markers but on Hemingford Grey Meadow, they now have concrete posts with initials. In terms of plants, Hemingford Grey Meadow has three types of buttercup: creeping, meadow and bulbous. The distribution of these buttercups depends on where and for how long the meadow waterlogged. Other plants recorded on the meadow include strawberry clover, common knapweed, meadow cranesbill and a rarity, narrow-leaved water dropwort, recorded by Terry Wells in the 1970s. Locally named "water hyacinths" (green-winged orchids) were once recorded on the site but are no longer present. Some of the birds recorded include the barn owl, grey heron, sky larks and corn buntings.

Hemingford Grey meadow has survived down the years, despite once being surveyed for gravel (fortunately it was never dug!). One interesting fact is that when the Second World War began, trenches were dug in the meadow to prevent enemy planes from landing, before being filled in after the war. We all hope that it now has a secure future thanks to 25 years of passionate commitment from Bridget and the support of the Wildlife Trust.