

# Annual Review

**A warm welcome to the Marches Meadow Group Annual Review for 2024**

**The Marches Meadow Group continues to achieve positive results for meadows and grassland conservation.**

One of the most important things we do is offer free surveys and advice on managing and creating meadows to our members. I've enjoyed doing three of these this year and can see the potential for creating habitat that this work achieves, and the face-to-face conversations are very enjoyable.

There are many enthusiastic people who want to create wildflower meadows on their land ranging from lawn to small paddocks and occasionally tens of acres.

Marches Meadow Group owns two tractors, two BCS mowers and we do our best to try and keep these moving. This is one of the most challenging areas of our work because of geography, the widespread distribution of meadows, difficulty of access, the weather and shortage of contractors. We only managed to use this kit to cut 11 or 12 meadows a year. Our main contractor, Mark, has given much thought to improving on this and we have tried to interest other contractors.

The problem is most contractors don't want to spend capital on kit that they only use for perhaps 10 or 15 days a year and with the weather and haymaking proving challenging, other work such as fencing, forestry, and landscaping is much more reliable. However, a new contractor has come onto the scene, Dan Turner from Oswestry, and we've also met a new contractor at the recent Meadows conference - both of whom are prepared to come and cut meadows in Shropshire.

However, if there are members in this area who require a contractor we could try and coordinate so that the contractors do several sites over a couple of days which reduces the cost of moving kit and saves them time; do let Richard or myself know if you're looking for a contractor and we will try and help. It may be that there are different solutions in different areas - one size might not fit all.

A new member and the High Leasowes group successfully borrowed a BCS and cutter bar this year.



*Photo: Richard Small*

The committee are very aware of the need to generate more grass cutting/hay making services to spread overheads. The expense of the service is a problem for some members.

The National Meadows conference which took place on 15<sup>th</sup> November in Norbury was a great success thanks to the energy and drive of Janet Cobb. Thank you Janet! You can read about it later in this report.

## Minsterley Meadows

Perhaps the most exciting news is the purchase of Minsterley Meadows delivered through a partnership between Marches Meadow Group and Middle Marches Community Land Trust. A total of £152,000 was raised through pledges and

£224,000 has come in as a grant from the National Lottery Heritage Fund. The latter is in part to contribute towards the purchase, but also to do the necessary land management and conservation work going forward, and to support the developing local interest group into a Friends of Minsterley Meadows type support group. This will keep a regular eye on the meadows, pick up any problems, become trained in land management, hedge maintenance, fencing and stile repairs, and support the school and young people's work – to develop children's interest in wildlife and meadows!

**Peter Carty**  
Chair, Marches Meadow Group



## MMG Membership update

Membership has increased exponentially since MMG's formation in 2015. From a membership base of less than 40 in the early years, the membership now stands at 188 members. Of that number 45 are new members who have joined since January 2024.

In the past membership recruitment was particularly linked to major events such as the Hay Meadow Festival but the pattern which is now emerging is of a steady flow of new members joining throughout the year. The most likely explanation for this is that the group is becoming more well known and in fact the majority of new members say they have learnt about MMG through word of mouth.

The geographic range of members is continuing to expand. Thanks to some talks given in the north of the county we now have new members in the Whitchurch and Oswestry areas, where previously we had one. Membership in the deep south continues to grow, with new members in Cleobury Mortimer and one group based in Presteigne. Currently there are 21 members living in Powys.

Although the majority of members remain smallholders and landowners with less than 5 acres, the number of estates and farms that have joined in the last couple of years is a relatively new development and one which is to be welcomed.

As grant income has diminished in recent years the membership subscription fee has become our main source of income. Faced with increasing costs for insurance and machinery maintenance in particular, the decision was made at the AGM this year to raise the subscription fee from £20 to £25. I hope that members feel this is still good value.

**Siobhan Reedy**  
**Membership Secretary**  
**Marches Meadow Group**

*Devil's-bit Scabious was a priority plant for Shropshire Wildlife Trust  
 Image attribution: Christian Fischer.  
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## Enrich your meadow!

*Wild flower seeds available from RL Wild Seeds Limited through the MMG scheme*

Following a visit to his wild flower nurseries, Robert Lee, owner of RL Wildflower Seeds Limited kindly offered to provide seeds (**see 2024 catalogue here**) to MMG members at wholesale prices. He has a minimum order size, but by collecting directly and organising distribution ourselves we can make these top quality seeds available in smaller quantities to members. We ran the first purchase last autumn with members able to buy quantities between 5g and 100g which was ordered collectively and then divided between members and delivered free of charge. The prices are a fraction of the retail price. Note that 'meadow mix' seed appears cheaper in some cases, but this is often mostly grass seed with a relatively small percentage of wild flower seed. Single species seed orders are 100% the ordered species and generally contain far more of the wild flower seeds to sow directly or to germinate in seed trays before planting out as plugs.

We hope to run the scheme again next year so look out for the catalogue to order from the spring seed harvest in May 2025. We hope to get an order placed around March time. We do not yet have the catalogue but expect the range of seeds and prices will be similar to last year, so email Alan and Philippa Herbert at [leton.hall@gmail.com](mailto:leton.hall@gmail.com) to express your interest or to order from the catalogue. We will confirm prices and availability as soon as we know!

**Alan and Philippa Herbert**





## The National Meadow Groups Conference 2024

On Friday 15 November, 113 representatives from meadow groups and other organisations gathered at Norbury Village Hall for the first national meadow groups conference.

Delegates came from as far afield as Hampshire, Wye Valley, Salisbury, Cumbria and Merseyside.

The conference was organised by MMG committee member Janet Cobb, and sponsored by the [Shropshire Hills Landscape Trust](#) and supported by [Middle Marches Community Land Trust](#)

The conference has had a long incubation. Back in 2016, MMG's second guest speaker was George Peterken, best known as a woodland ecologist but the author of the book *Meadows* and a leading light in the Parish Grasslands Project (PGP), a meadow group in St. Briavels in the Wye Valley.

In his talk George explained how PGP had abandoned its hay-making service as it couldn't sustain the financial losses – a worrying thought for the then recently established MMG hay-making service!

Later MMG was frequently compared to Herefordshire Meadows, which seemed to be operating at a much larger scale and with paid staff. These comparisons led to thoughts about how other meadow groups were organised and funded, but until Janet's conference organising skills came along, we hadn't taken the plunge of bringing those groups together.

The conference was therefore designed to explore how the various meadow groups operate, including how they are organised and funded.

In the morning speakers explored this theme:

- Shropshire Hills Landscape Trust (Rachel Cockett)
- Ceredigion Local Nature Partnership (Jake Rayson)
- Plantlife (Claire Parton)
- Herefordshire Meadows (Rory Johnson)
- Carmarthenshire Meadows Group (Isabel Macho)
- Floodplain Meadows Partnership (Emma Rothero)
- Buglife B-Lines (Rachel Richards)
- Styles Ecology (Josh Styles)

These talks have now been posted on the [MMG](#) and [MMCLT](#) websites.

The afternoon was a discussion of whether there was a need for a national meadow groups network and, if so, which organisation would be best placed to host the network. The break-out groups concurred that there was such a need and that, if it was willing, Plantlife would be the best host.

Prior to the conference, meadow groups had been asked to complete a data-gathering questionnaire and the collated results will also be posted on the MMG website.

Due to the generosity of the Shropshire Hills Landscape Trust and the donations from delegates the conference costs were more than covered.

Feedback has been entirely positive:

*"It was a really inspiring day"*

*"Many thanks again for an excellent day"*

*"Thanks so much for the invite and for a great conference the other day! It was great to meet so many people who love grasslands!"*

*"Every aspect of the event was excellent and I very much enjoyed being part of it"*

Spin offs from the conference so far include

- Two offers of hosting a conference next year (Cornwall & Salisbury)
- Connecting seed producers
- Flagging up with Plantlife that it should be the key organisation
- Conference report
- Analysis of the questionnaires and key themes from the discussion session
- Thoughts on a churchyard conference

In summary, it was a great day that led to much networking and discussion of the future for meadow groups. And that should have a positive impact on meadows throughout the country.

**Richard Small & Janet Cobb**

## NATIONAL MEADOW GROUPS CONFERENCE 2024

### MANAGEMENT OF MEADOW GROUPS

**FRIDAY 15 NOVEMBER 2024**  
**NORBURY VILLAGE HALL, BISHOPS CASTLE, SHROPSHIRE**  
 Bookings: [conference@middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk](mailto:conference@middlemarchescommunitylandtrust.org.uk)

#### PROGRAMME

9.15am Arrival/tea/coffee/pastries

10.00am Peter Carty, Chair, Marches Meadow Group:  
Welcome, introductions and outline of the day

10.05am Rachel Cockett, Shropshire Hills Landscape Trust

10.15am Jake Rayson, biodiversity assistant, Ceredigion Local Nature Partnership:  
Everything you wanted to know about setting up a grasslands group but were afraid to ask

10.30am Claire Parton, Head of projects, Plantlife: An overview of Plantlife's grassland work

10.50am Rory Johnson, Director and Meadows Adviser, Herefordshire Meadows:  
From Facilitation Fund to fully registered charity: why and how?

11.15am Tea/coffee break

11.30am Isabel Macho, Carmarthenshire Meadows Group

12 noon Emma Rothero, Project Manager, Floodplain Meadows Partnership

12.30pm Josh Styles, Styles Ecology, botanical specialist

1pm Lunch & networking

2.00pm Mini workshop discussion, facilitated by Simon Cooter:  
Natural England, Stiperstones and Downton Gorge NNRs

3.30pm Q&A next steps (establishment of a national network/Online meadows Group resource).  
**All - outcomes from today**

4.00pm Peter Carty, closing remarks

4.15pm Finish











**£25 donation towards costs per delegate would be very much appreciated**

artwork: sarah jameson



## Plant Surveys and the MMG meadow database

The last update on MMG's plant surveys and the database in which the results are kept was in the 2022 Annual Review, which is still available on the MMG website. Then there were four plant surveyors and around 150 sites in the database, but we now have five surveyors as Pete Carty has joined the team, and the database has over 280 sites. The basis of the meadow ranking system is also described in the 2022 review, so won't be repeated here except to say it is based on the number of desirable plant species.

The surveying team managed 25 surveys in both 2023 and 2024, including a few re-surveys. Most, but not all, the sites belong to MMG members: this year I took advantage of the property neighbouring our house being on the market and had a walk around the fields. Unusually they had been allowed to grow into hay, and they were more diverse than I had expected based on their usual sheep grazed appearance. Similarly, some other local fields had been entered into Countryside Stewardship and were allowed to grow into hay for the first time in at least 12 years; they too were better than I had expected, even when surveyed only from the public footpath that crosses the fields.

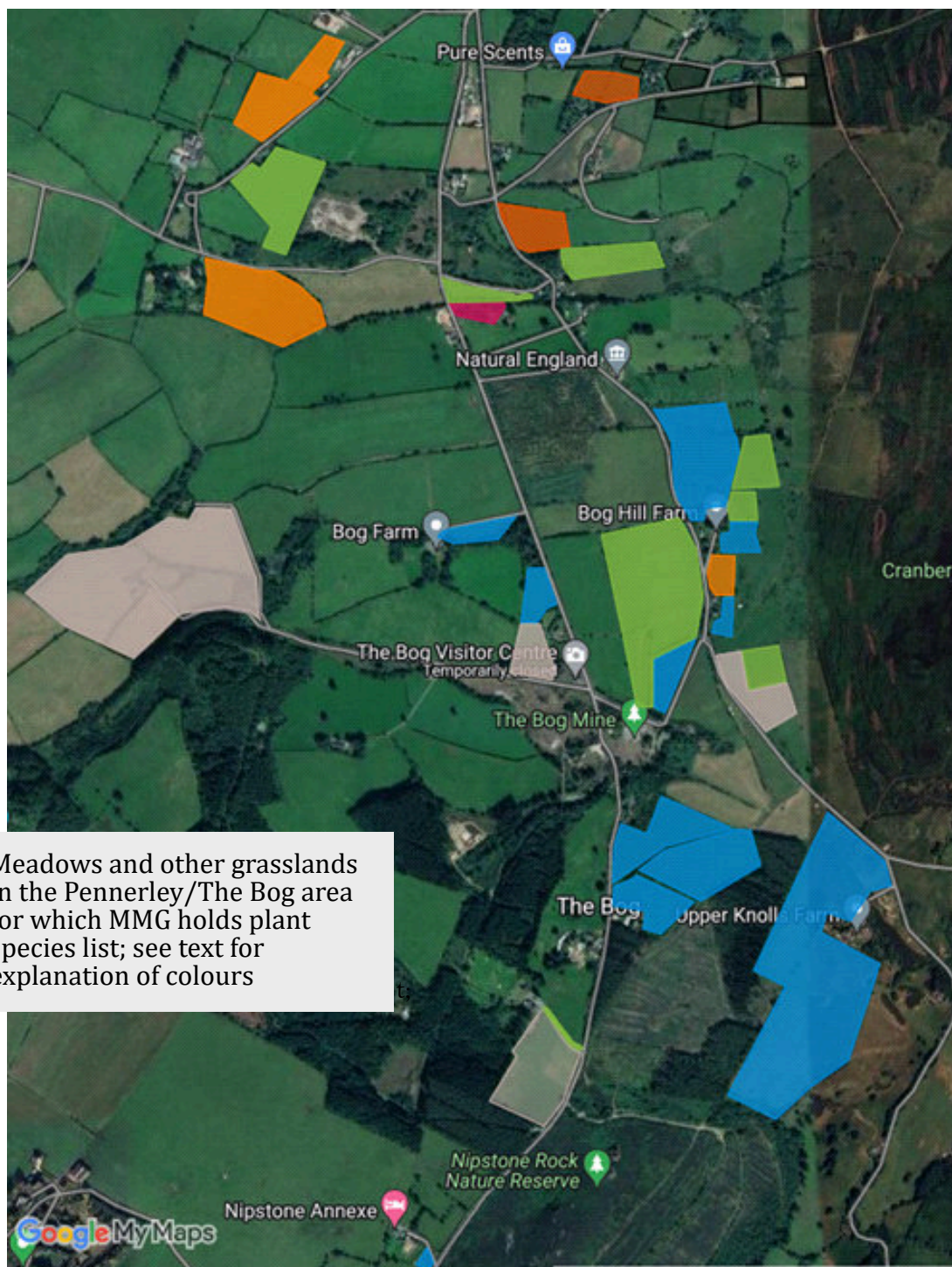
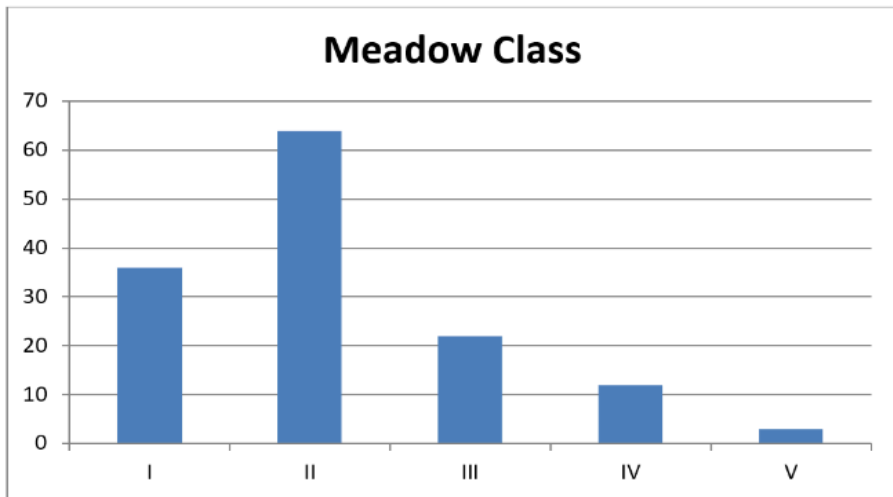
These and the meadows belonging to MMG members in the Pennerley / The Bog area featured in three talks that I have given over the past year, as they show what can be achieved

when a group of local landowners all get the meadow bug (see screenshot). The colours represent the class in MMG's simple ranking system: beige is the least species rich through blue, green, orange and on to red for the most species diverse meadows. There may be other good quality fields but we don't have the survey data to know (e.g. the fields outlined in black at the top of the screenshot).

The points I make in the talks are that the fields in this area are almost providing the connectivity that allows more mobile species to move through the landscape, and that if we can help the less mobile plant species by moving seed or green hay, we can enhance the quality of the currently less good fields.

Overall, for sites for which MMG has data, only 5% are in Class V (most diverse). As the chart shows, almost half (44%) are in class II, about 20% are in Classes 1 (least diverse) and III and 10% in Class IV. The re-surveys have indicated that some sites have not improved (and may even have worsened) despite almost ten years of hay-making management. Clearly, hay-making alone is not sufficient, and I believe collectively we need to be trying harder to enhance our fields, lawns and verges.

**Richard Small**





## Devil's-bit Scabious

Devil's-bit Scabious (*Succisa pratensis*) is a tallish plant found in wet and dry habitats, both alkaline and acidic.

It has blue-ish purple, flattened, rounded flower heads in which all the florets are the same size. Its leaves are undivided, only lightly hairy, long and elliptical. Upper leaves may be sparsely toothed. It flowers from June to October often providing pollen and nectar well into the autumn.

It is a good indicator of unimproved grassland and historically was used amongst other things for skin complaints ('Scabies' coming from the Latin meaning scab or itch). The 'Devil's bit' name comes from the appearance of the roots; they have a chopped-off look, said to have been bitten by the Devil to spite the Virgin Mary! Devil's-bit Scabious is one of three plants that have been selected as Action Plan Species by the Stepping Stones Project. The other two are Mountain Pansy and Cowberry.

One of the key Conservation Actions for all these species is to gather accurate records for their current locations and the condition of the habitat where they have been found.

Earlier this year, the local plant group visited a few sites to look at whether old records were correct.

In October we took delivery of 250gms of seed and 400 plug plants of Devil's-bit Scabious.

If my maths is correct then 250gms seed x 650seeds/gm = 162,500 seeds. So a fair potential!

The plug plants are fairly small with 200 to a tray so my suggestion would be to pot them up into larger pots and plant out in late summer /early autumn in small groups.

Devil's-bit Scabious **seeds** are best sown in autumn or early spring (early spring in our case) outside in seed trays and covered lightly with compost or grit. They are often slow to germinate. The seedlings, which are quick to develop, can be pricked out and grown on, for planting out later in the year. Don't let them dry out!

Many thanks to Severn Trent Water for the grant money to purchase this and Janet Cobb for organising it.

**Rob Rowe**



Photo: Rob Rowe



# Scything 2024



## National peening day

Peening is the act of re-profiling the scythe blade following successive sharpening. It is generally carried out with a shaped anvil and hammer and is a skill in itself; however, once mastered it can make a huge difference to the efficient use of a scythe. The basic scythe course focuses on sharpening and the technique for using the scythe and only touches on the art of peening. This is a shame as without it a scythe will perform less and less efficiently until the owner hangs it up in a shed and finds another method of cutting vegetation. In order to encourage good maintenance of scythes National Peening Day was created by SABI, the Scything Association of Britain and Ireland. It is generally on the first Sunday of April so as to get scythes ready for the coming cutting season and is an opportunity for scythers to get together and learn from each other. At the Stiperstones we hold such a peening event and this year it was very well attended, with a good mix of experienced and novice scythers. In 2025 I will be demonstrating my recently imported scything machine.

## Scything courses

Two introductory scything courses were run at the Stiperstones reserve base this year and as always, they were fully booked, with folk coming from as far afield as Liverpool.

## Bracken control

Bracken cutting is becoming increasingly important now that the chemical Asulox, that used to be used for bracken control, has been taken off the market. At the Stiperstones we have regular volunteer scything sessions (usually in the morning) from late June to late August. Most of the bracken cutting is quite light work, as we are cutting repeat areas on grassland. However now and again we venture into new areas where the bracken is at head height which can be a bit more physically challenging. We are also experimenting with the cutting of bracken growing over the top of heather.

## Scything with a View

Our week-long scything event was held this year at the end of July, which makes it one of the last events in the scything calendar – most scything competitions are held earlier so that the grass is easier to cut. We hold it late as our main target is bracken. We started the week with a scything course and were able to offer some of the hay that was cut to MMG members as green hay for spreading on their land. On the other days we scythed bracken on areas of the hill above Snailbeach, Stiperstones village and at Pennerley.

In addition to bracken scything about a dozen folk helped cut Paul's meadow at Norbury with the

reward of a splendid lunch, and we ventured over one evening to Acton Scott where we cut one of their paddocks where they have been spreading green hay to improve the sward.

We finished up with the usual competition (results below) and barbeque on the Friday afternoon.

### Scything 2025

Next year's scything courses will be held on Sunday 22<sup>nd</sup> June and 27<sup>th</sup> July. The latter will be followed by Scything with a View 2025.

Bookings are being taken now. There is a 10% discount on the normal fee for MMG members.

If anyone who has completed a course would like to help out on the Stiperstones with some scything they should let me know and I can add them to my mailing list.

Finally, the peening day this year is on Sunday 6<sup>th</sup> April 2025.

**Simon Cooter**  
**Senior Reserve Manager**  
**Stiperstones NNR and scythe tutor**



*Photos: all except bottom right: Simon Cooter*

## Shropshire Hills Scything Competition Results 2024

We had 18 entries to the competition. Due to the grass being less than ideal this year we reduced the usual 5m x 5m competition square to 4mx4m.

- Winner of overall men's – Peter Blackwell
- Winner of overall women's – Hannah Holden
- Winner of Veteran men's – Shane O'Reilly
- Winner of veteran women's – Jayne O'Reilly
- Winner of 75cm or less blade – Jim Mcvittie
- Winner of novice scyther – Carole Williams
- Winner of quality cut – Phil Holden



	Name	Class M/F, N(novice), V veteran	Time	Quality (1-9)	Blade length
1	<b>Jayne O'Reilly</b>	F V	7:21	5.5	75
2	<b>Jim Mcvittie</b>	M V	4:50	7.0	75
3	<b>Shane O'Reilly</b>	M V	4:10	6.0	85
4	Tim Walton	M N	7:54	3.5	60
5	Emma Plover	F N	6:24	3.5	65
6	<b>Hannah Holden</b>	F	5:16	8.0	70
7	Ellie Schenk	F N	12:44	5.0	65
8	<b>Phil Holden</b>	M	5:26	8.5	75
9	<b>Peter Blackwell</b>	M	2:43	8.0	95
10	Andy Hyde	M V	7:15	8.0	60
11	Dave Appleby	M	14:24	4.0	65
12	Ted Waldron	M	3:39	5.5	85
13	John <u>Bowbrick</u>	M	7:49	7.5	60
14	Steve Marsh	M	5:01	4.0	75
15	<b>Carole Williams</b>	F V	7:44	4.0	65
16	Mike <u>Towrie</u>	M	4:18	5.5	75
17	Sarah Wallace-Johnson	F	6:38	4.5	65
18	Ivor Thomas	M N	10:25	5.5	65



# Minsterley Meadows



## Minsterley Meadows

Minsterley Meadows consists of two flower-rich hayfields on the eastern outskirts of Minsterley just off the Habberley Lane. Both fields are about the same size, in total about 13.5 acres and are remarkable survivors of a now endangered habitat. They are a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) as designated by Natural England.

Before most other meadow plants grow up, in mid April, you will see the striking appearance of thousands of rare Green-winged Orchids which flower in a beautiful purple haze. This is the largest Green-winged Orchid site in Shropshire (this is a plant listed as threatened on the Red Data List for Great Britain).

The hedges here are thick and full of birdlife and there are several large old oak trees on the boundaries which form a corridor through to Callow Hill woods, hillfort and quarry.

On the 1838 tithe map of Minsterley, these two ancient hay meadows are named "May Piece" and "Aldery Leasowes."

From May through to July it shows itself as a species-rich hay meadow, not only with plants, but also with many invertebrates. In the last few years it has been cut for hay in late summer by a local farmer. Some time ago, but not in recent years, the aftermath was grazed by cattle.

A visit by the Shropshire Botanical Society in July recorded 108 plant species. That included the meadows, plus all the edges and hedges.

Of the meadow plants beside the Green-winged Orchid are more unusual ones such as Quaking Grass, Pignut, Common Spotted Orchid, Rough Hawkbit, Yellow Rattle, Yellow Oat Grass, Hop Trefoil and Fairy Flax.

The grassland fungi in the meadows in October and November were also really good this year with a total of 12 waxcap species seen. Perhaps the most interesting of these being the Slimy waxcap and the aptly named Honey and Cedarwood waxcaps due to their pleasant smell. Also a variety of clubs, spindles and other fungi of which Pale Club and Smoky Spindles are more unusual.

The purchase of the meadows by the Middle Marches Community Land Trust was completed on 8<sup>th</sup> November 2024 and thanks go to all the individuals and other bodies that donated.

Thanks also to the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

**Rob Rowe**



## Book Review: *Restoring the Wild* by Donald Macintyre

MMG has been very fortunate to have Rob Lee (RL Wildflower Seeds) as an expert on all things related to wildflowers and their seeds – cultivation, storage, sowing, germination and growth. Rob has been extremely generous with his time and knowledge, and I am sure there will be future occasions when we tap into his expertise, but a few queries may be headed off by the publication of *Restoring the Wild* by Donald MacIntyre, founder of Emorsgate Seeds.

Subtitled *A guide to the restoration, creation and management of meadow and other wild vegetation*, approximately half of the book is devoted to individual plant species (described as restoration species accounts), each with a short description and notes on seed production. The latter almost seem to be an invitation to set up seed production companies in competition with Emorsgate! An example is the seed production note for Sneezewort: may be grown in short rows and the seed heads harvested by hand or combine harvester.

The author founded Emorsgate in 1980, and was involved in much of the early work on meadow restoration or creation alongside scientists and conservationists. The chapters on Protected, Sensitive and Proscribed Species, Invasive Alien Weeds and Native Weeds and Seed Origin and Provenance are revealing. For example, 23 of 25 species proscribed under the Seed Marketing Regulations 2011 (as amended) are native species which, legally, can only be sold as registered cultivars; the wild types of these species (e.g. Bird's-foot Trefoil and Red Clover) can only be legally sold as part of a 'Preservation Mixture'. This emphasises that locally collected seed or green hay may be important to ensuring the full range of wild type genetics is conserved (although the author concedes that seed of some native species will be sold outside the legal framework of Seed Marketing Regulations 2011).

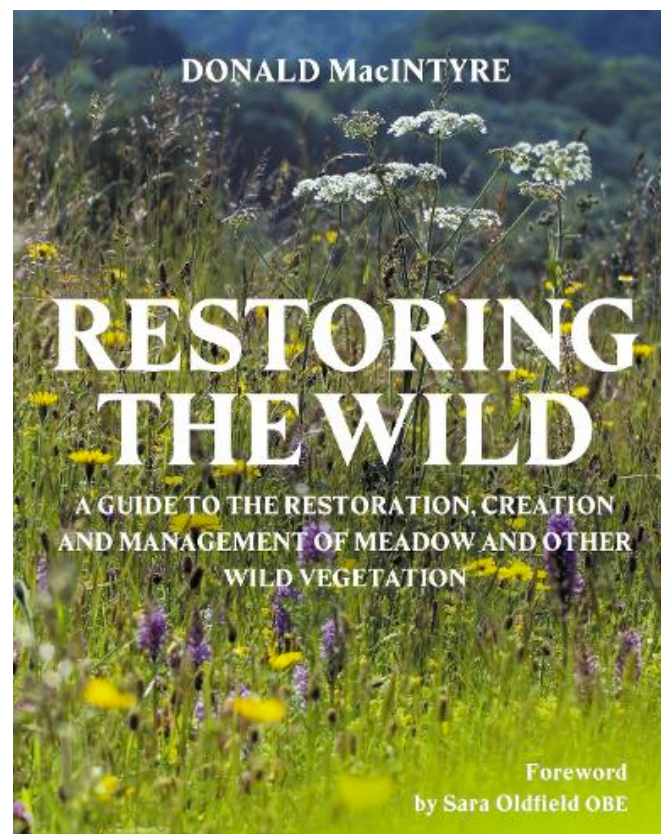
Approximately a quarter of the book is devoted to the methods of restoration, including chapters on Surveying, Planning and Methods, General Method for Meadow Restoration and Creation, and Restoration Species and Mixture Composition. This leads on to Sourcing Seeds, Seed Processing and Seed Care, and Ground Preparation and Seed Sowing. Although this review inevitably focuses on meadows, other habitats (Wetland and Water Edge, Hedgerow and Scrub, Woodland amongst others) are considered in the book.

There is probably too much information in this book for individual MMG members seeking to establish or enhance their own meadows, but for groups such as MMG and anyone setting up a business involving meadow creation/restoration, the book will be an invaluable source of information. I have found myself checking information in the advisory reports MMG provides following a plant survey visit; fortunately, most is correct!

**MacIntyre, D. 2024. *Restoring the Wild*. Crowood Press, Marlborough. RRP £24.00 but currently available from the Emorsgate Seeds website (<https://wildseed.co.uk/>) for £20.00 + £2.95 p&p.**

**[Short video about the book here.](#)**

**Richard Small**





*Photo: Richard Small*

## Events 2025 (draft)

**This is an outline list only. More information will be sent to members via email and be made available on the [website](#) in 2025.**

### **April**

6 April: Scythe peening workshop led by Simon Cooter, Natural England office, Pennerley

### **May**

Annual General Meeting with visit to Minsterley Meadows

### **June**

BCS pedestrian tractor training day

### **June & July**

Visits to members' meadows

### **July**

New members day

Scything with a View led by Simon Cooter, Natural England office, Pennerley

Hay Meadow Festival

### **August**

Seed Harvesting workshop

### **September**

Devil's-bit Scabious - site visit

### **October**

Q & A via Zoom

TBC Seed conference in Oswestry

**Website: [www.marchesmeadowgroup.com](http://www.marchesmeadowgroup.com)**

**Email: [mmgmembership@gmail.com](mailto:mmgmembership@gmail.com)**

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

## Officers

Chair: Peter Carty

Secretary: Richard Small

Membership Secretary: Siobhan Reedy

Treasurer: Andrew May

## 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!