

Inspired by a debate at our local village meeting back in 2018 and a glorious summer that encouraged the appearance of many different wildflowers in some of our local field meadows we decided to have a look at the probable origins of:

Wildflower meadows in Ansty

'Wildflower' meadows and grasslands were once a very important part of British agriculture, bursting with colour and the hum of insects, but a staggering decline over the last 6 decades has left this important habitat covering just 1 or 2% of the UK.

These wildflower meadows are not the really colourful ones you might see recently sown in parks and gardens – these can look good and they do attract a wide range of pollinators – but unfortunately it is all short term, largely unsustainable and does not support anything like the native 'wild meadow' flora that has evolved over a long term which means a diverse wild meadow is able to support a fantastic number of animal species. Native wildflower grass meadows developed as a result of very long established 'traditional' farming practices working in a sustainable partnership with nature.

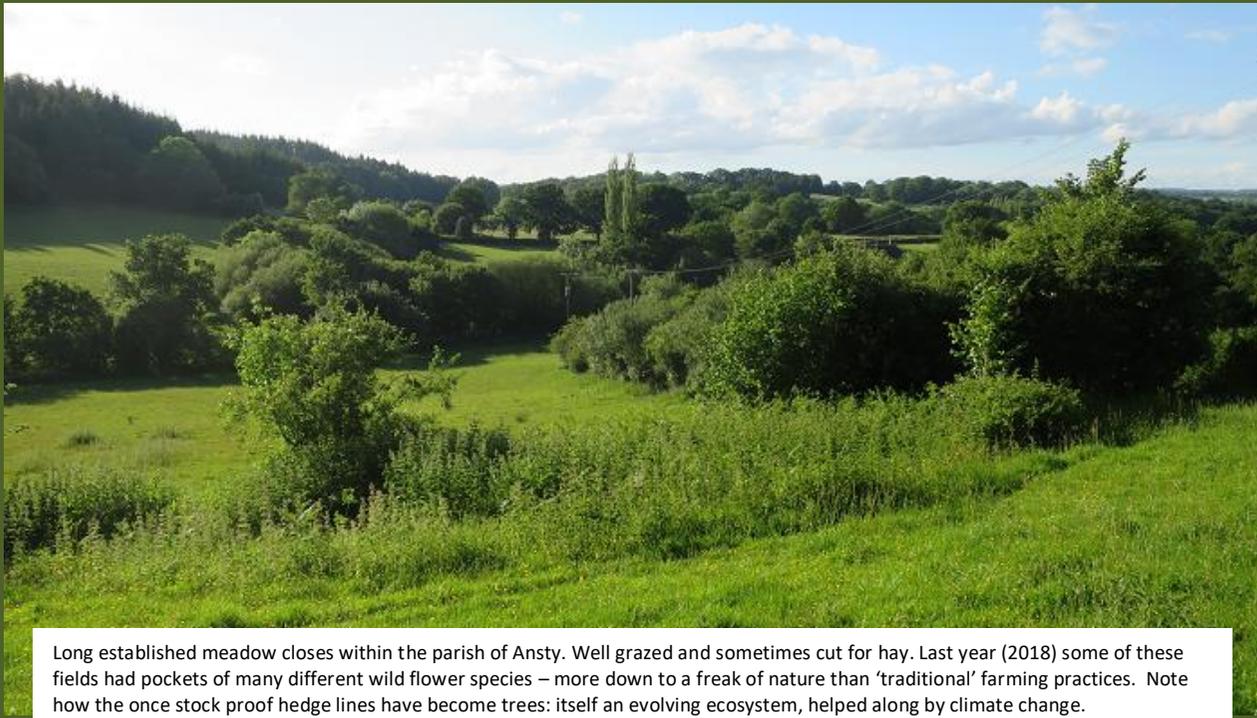
Many of the small local 'meadow fields' or 'closes' in our parish (usually common land formerly enclosed by the Wardour Estate in the 17th and 18th centuries) we see around Ansty Coombe and parts of lowland Ansty are based on clays and greensand.



A small field in Ansty: semi-improved grassland with 4 or 5 grass species with a similar number of different wildflowers.

Essentially they consist largely of 'unimproved grassland' – ideal for wild flowers. Traditionally, wildflower grasslands were managed either for making hay with 'aftermath grazing' or as pasture with low-level grazing throughout much of the year. Sheep grazing is better for wildflower grasslands than cattle.

Many of our small local 'pasture fields' around Ansty Coombe and parts of lowland Ansty consist of relatively 'unimproved grassland' (which is good) and in part they still support wildflower 'meadow' species which in turn support a whole network of insects, birds and animals.



Long established meadow closes within the parish of Ansty. Well grazed and sometimes cut for hay. Last year (2018) some of these fields had pockets of many different wild flower species – more down to a freak of nature than 'traditional' farming practices. Note how the once stock proof hedge lines have become trees: itself an evolving ecosystem, helped along by climate change.

More than anything else the massive changes to farming methods since WW2 (loss of labour; use of huge, heavy machinery, intensive livestock rearing and monoculture style practices; the overuse of artificial fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides as well as the relentless development of land for property have contributed to this catastrophic decline in wild flower meadows. Climate change has also been quite a significant contributor recently too, allowing 'thug weeds' and scrub to invade fields and 'freeze' out the more delicate wild flowers.

Before these huge changes each small farm would have grown a few mixed crops and kept permanent pasture for grazing. Meadows for hay were cut and stored to feed the livestock over winter. It was a sustainable symbiotic 'management' relationship between the farmer, his animals and the natural local environment. It was labour intensive and required a good working knowledge of and strict adherence to the practices borne of a wisdom that had evolved over centuries. Such an approach would ensure the appearance of many wild flower species the following year: good for bees and other pollinators and wildlife in general and good for crop yields too.

The bitter 'Beast from the East'; a wet April and then a glorious summer last year (2018), helped to encourage some magnificent wildflower 'carpets' in several Ansty locations. It was totally unexpected to say the least and magnificent to observe! This year by contrast there seems to be far fewer 'sweeps' of wild flowers – except on parts of our chalk downs but that is another story. This could be down to poor management such as overgrazing or insufficient grazing; 'poaching' (animals churning up wet ground in autumn); hay cutting at the wrong time; or even a relatively mild and humid winter. Who knows?

For further reading on this subject tap/click on the following links:

[Hay meadow and pasture management](#)

[Farm Wildlife: Wildflower rich meadows](#)



Part of a hay meadow elsewhere rich in grass and flower species.

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Sources: [Save our magnificent meadows;](#) [Farm wildlife info.](#)