

Wey Meadow SSSI

Wey Meadow is Unit 5 of the Thursley, Hankley & Frensham Commons SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) and as such is regulated by Natural England.

The Wey Meadow is a former water meadow, which would have been deliberately flooded in early spring to a shallow depth. The water was brought into the meadow via sluices from the River Wey and along narrow channels dug in the field, in order to introduce some nutrient in the form of silt from the river. The shallow layer of water protected the soil from frosts, which meant that the grass grew more quickly. The water was then drained down and the grass was available to graze earlier than otherwise.

This method of ensuring fresh supplies of grazing at the end of the winter — when farmers were often at their wits' end to find fodder before the new crop arrived — is thought to have been the brainchild of Rowland Vaughan, a 16th century landowner in Herefordshire's Golden Valley (although it is also believed that it had been in use elsewhere in Europe — Holland and Flanders, for example — since the 13th century).

The story goes that the winter had been dry and cold when Vaughan was out walking one day in March and noticed that a strip of grass, about a pace wide, was more lush than the surrounding area. He investigated and found that a mole had driven a horizontal hole through the bank of a brook, allowing water to flow from the hole and down the slope.

It occurred to Vaughan that if an accident could caused the strip of grass to grow, how much better it would be if he could introduce water deliberately. He dug a system of sluices and trenches which enabled “drownings” to take place that produced extra hay crops, provided silt for spreading on the fields and increased the value of his wife's farm, Newcourt, from £40 to over £300 a year.

Vaughan described the work in his book, *Most Approved and Long Experienced Water Workes containing The manner of Winter and Summer drowning*, published in 1610.

He also introduced the sluices and trenches to the farm he had inherited from his father, Turnastone Court, and the works — including the “Trench Royal”, 16 feet wide by 8 feet deep (4.9 x 2.4 metres) for the first half mile and 10 feet x 4 feet (3 x 1.2 metres) thereafter — are still visible, though this is only because The Countryside Restoration Trust bought the farm for £1.27 million in 2003, to stop the fields, not ploughed for 400 years, being turned into a potato patch.



Southern Marsh Orchid growing in Wey Meadow SSSI

Today, Wey Meadow is no longer flooded but remains of the water channels can be seen. Being still a wet meadow, it supports a rich and rare wetland flora, including Southern Marsh Orchid and Devil's Bit Scabious. It is also home to the Fen Raft Spider. It is for the rich diversity of its wildflowers and its rare habitat that it is a statutory SSSI.

After the flowers have bloomed in spring and early summer, the meadow is grazed by a small number of cattle in mid to late summer to prevent vegetation becoming too tall and coarse, which would crowd out the assemblage of wildflowers.

In early 2012, Natural England granted permission for one of the water channels to be partially re-flooded, so that the aquatic life of the meadow could be studied. Before digging could commence, a survey of the flowers growing on the chosen site needed to be undertaken to ensure that none of the rarer wildflowers would be disturbed.

The plant and insect life of the meadow is recorded by the monitoring group of the Countryside Restoration Trust volunteers at Pierrepont Farm. Wey Meadow is one of six transects on the farm they survey thrice-yearly to record bird numbers.

If you would like to become involved in the work of the Pierrepont volunteers, please visit www.crtinsurrey.org.uk/volunteer/

Given its SSSI status there is, regrettably, no public access to Wey Meadow at the present time.

This sign was first published in 2012.

Pierrepont Farm

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