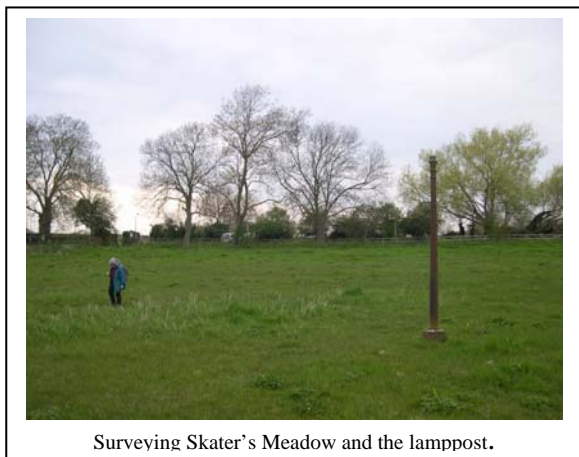


Grantchester Meadows

A report on the CNHS Survey project for 2006

For its 2006 survey project the Cambridge Natural History Society visited the meadows along the Cam between Newnham and Grantchester. These have a long history, though some have suffered from neglect and others from improvement. Altogether we found over 370 species of vascular plants, but failed to find 36 previously reported. This report gives some of the highlights from the monthly visits to the area. The complete listing over the flora is available on the CNHS web page at <http://www.cnhs.org.uk>.



Surveying Skater's Meadow and the lamppost.

The first meadow that you encounter when you take the footpath from Cambridge to Grantchester is Skater's Meadow (once known as Scudamore's Meadow), although this and the adjacent meadow are colloquially known as the Lamppost meadows as each has a lamp-post at its centre. These are relics from 1920-1940 when, in the winter, the meadows used to be flooded with water pumped from the Cam and used for skating. There is an attendant's hut at the corner of the first field, where the fee of six pence for an evening's skating was collected. The lamppost was the stimulus for the imagination of Cambridge author C S Lewis who transported it to the Kingdom of Narnia. Today Skater's Meadow is in the care of the Wildlife Trusts. It is a good example of the type of grassland that was once common along the river. It has been managed in a traditional manner for the last 50 years at least, since it was purchased by the well known (at least to students) professor of geology, W B

Harland. Once the meadow has dried out there is normally a summer hay cut (although not in 2006), then it is grazed until the end of the year. No fertilizer or herbicide has been used. Without doubt this makes it floristically the most interesting of all the meadows, though not necessarily the most diverse.

The adjacent meadow has received rather more variable treatment, and was not grazed in 2005. By 2006 it had a substantial coverage of sedge species, however it was opened up to grazing by the cattle in 2006 and had been completely levelled by the end of the year. Perhaps because of this variation in management we recorded slightly more species here than in Skater's Meadow, though many were ruderal. Neither of these two meadows are open for public access.

The track past the lamppost meadows emerges into open meadows stretching towards Grantchester. The first series of open fields separated by ditches are owned by King's College, which has suspended plans to build on them, giving them over to public access. They are only cut once a year, and consequently have become very rank. A relict stream crosses part of the first meadow and continues into the lamppost meadows.

Continuing along the footpath, there is a series of much improved meadows, which have a substantial drop down towards the Cam, indicating the western edge of the floodplain. The Cam here is at 7m above OD, whilst the highest part of the meadows is at 16m. The general features can be seen on the Enclosure Maps around 1800, and there are still traces of the medieval ridge and furrow of the former Audley's Close, adjacent to Grantchester Road. By the river is Little Fenn, a water-meadow that was recorded on Skinner's map of 1666. The meadow sequence ends with more water-meadows, mostly of much improved grassland, though the final one has clearly had slightly different treatment. The last feature of the main survey area is a relatively recent wood, although the medieval field boundaries remain.



Early marsh orchid *Dactylorhiza incarnata*, with Marsh marigold *Caltha palustris*, a buttercup *Ranunculus* sp, flower heads of Common spike rush *Eleocharis palustris* and stems of Water horsetail *Equisetum fluviatile* in Skater's Meadow.

The tracks from the roads to the meadow areas were also included in the survey, and these provided a further variety of habitats. Indeed more species were recorded along them than in any of the other areas.



The edge of the Cam flood plain near Grantchester

Although not in the original survey area, Byron's Pool LNR, which comprises a wood, meadow, several ponds and the river, is close by. It was visited on the final formal visit to the meadows, primarily for its fungi. The area is named after the poet, Lord Byron (1788 – 1824), who is said to have bathed in the old weir pond when he was an undergraduate at Trinity. There used to be a mill at this point, owned by Merton College, Oxford, however all that remains are traces of the two fish ponds, where eels and other fish caught in the mill pond were stored until sent to the college for feasts. Formerly part of the Trumpington Hall estate, the wood was acquired by the Council in 1949 and declared a local nature reserve in 2005. Flooding used to be frequent in winter, but following improvements to the weir this is now rare. Today the meadow is managed by rotational cutting, whilst previously it would have been a wet meadow similar to Skater's. A few follow-up visits here were

made, however due to the late start this area was not as well surveyed as the meadows.

The footpaths across the meadows are becoming increasingly used by the ever growing population of Cambridge, and can become very muddy in wet weather. Other visible signs of pressure on the area include frequent remains of barbeque sites and vandalism of fencing to provide fuel for them.

A series of planning visits were made in October and November 2005 by Jonathan Shanklin, primarily to decide on how to sub-divide the area. The CNHS monthly excursions to sample the flora and some of the fauna throughout the year commenced in March 2006. Jonathan Shanklin also carried out several additional visits, either to check on areas that it wasn't possible to include on the programmed excursion, or to check on the presence or absence of species that had been seen in the majority of the other sub-divided areas. Charles Turner and Jonathan Shanklin were the main leaders for the excursions, but we had a few other experts along from time to time, whose help was much appreciated. Regular participants in the surveys included Kate de Courcy, Monica Frisch, Steve Hartley, Simon Mentha, Jonathan Shanklin, Charles Turner and "George".



Investigating the flora of the Cam

The first formal visit in March was on an initially bright afternoon that turned to drizzly rain. The weather since the start of the year had been generally cold and dry, and spring had not advanced much since January. Perhaps the most interesting find was **Ransoms** *Allium ursinum*, growing in the wood. This is something of a Cambridge rarity, and may have been planted.

Further afternoon walks took place in April and May, with the first evening walk at the end of May. On each occasion the group concluded that Skater's Meadow was the most interesting, finding species such as **Marsh marigold** *Caltha palustris*, **Ragged robin** *Lychnis flos-cuculi*, **Tubular water dropwort** *Oenanthe fistulosa*, **Creeping jenny** *Lysimachia nummularia* and **Spike rush** *Eleocharis palustris*.

The memorial service for Max Walters, held at Grantchester church on June 3, provided an excellent excuse to follow in his footsteps, and Mark Hill, Alan Leslie, Jonathan Shanklin and Charles Turner walked back along the river to Skater's Meadow. On the way we re-found **Plicate sweet grass** *Glyceria notata* and **Round-fruited rush** *Juncus compressus*, which had been reported by Max over 50 years ago.

Our July excursion was on the river by punt in sweltering heat, which allowed access to a few otherwise inaccessible parts of the area. We found several water plants including **Shining pondweed** *Potamogeton lucens*, **Fennel pondweed** *Potamogeton pectinatus* and **Perfoliate pondweed** *Potamogeton perfoliatus*, and this year the presence of Charles

allowed us to confirm the identifications. There were a large number of **banded demoiselles** *Calopteryx splendens*, and several **hawker dragonflies** *Aeshna* sp.

At midsummer the group started with a quicker than usual look round Skaters Meadow and reconfirmed the presence of both **Fen bedstraw** *Galium uliginosum* and **Marsh bedstraw** *Galium palustre*. Monica Frisch found **Pepper saxifrage** *Silaum silaus* in the 2nd Lamppost Meadow, last reported on Grantchester Meadows in 1824! This was the only visit when we seriously surveyed for insects, though there were no real surprises for grassland. The sweep net kept filling up with the **mirid bug** *Notostira elongata*, both males and females. We found a single **16-spot ladybird** (*Tytthaspis 16-punctata*), a relatively common grassland species and a couple of **7 spot ladybirds**. A cluster of iridescent green beetles on docks were identified as *Gastrophysa viridula* alongside several ladybird larvae and there were numerous cricket nymphs and flies turning up in the sweep net. Charles found a **hairy snail** *Trichia hispida*, which is actually quite a common species.



The earth star *Geastrum fornicatum*

We discovered a few unexpected additions on the August walk with **Vervain** *Verbena officinalis* found growing in the top meadow near Grantchester Road and **Enchanter's nightshade** *Circaea lutetiana* found in the wood. We then meandered down the river, to the Lamppost meadows, finding **frogs** *Rana temporaria* and a **Grass snake** *Natrix natrix* on the way. Following a comment that there were interesting plants growing by the new footbridge over the Cam joining Coe Fen to Lammas Land, Jonathan Shanklin found a further six species for our Coe Fen list, including **Indehiscent amaranth** *Amaranthus bouchonii*, **Maple-leaved goosefoot** *Chenopodium hybridum*, **Thorn apple** *Datura stramonium* and **Shaggy soldier** *Galinsoga quadriradiata*.

The weather was mostly dry and warm over the next month, however heavy rain on the Friday before the September walk left muddy patches near the bridges. We found a few plants to add to the list, but generally few were still in flower. Surprisingly we did find **Marsh marigold** *Caltha palustris* and **Bulbous buttercup** *Ranunculus bulbosus* in bloom. Fungi were also sparse, though we did find **Snowy inkcap** *Coprinus niveus*, **Shaggy bracket** *Inonotus hispidus* and **Yellow fieldcap** *Bolbitius vitellinus*.

As part of the CNHS fungal foray weekend in mid October a large group, which included several youngsters (who proved most adept at finding fungi), were led by John Holden, Helene Davies and Lucy Evans. Although this final survey concentrated on fungi, a few plants were also added to the list. After lunch at the Red Lion we progressed to the meadows and wood near Grantchester. Finds ranged from tiny **Fairy's bonnets** *Coprinus disseminatus* to a large **Horse mushroom** *Agaricus arvensis* nearly as big as the child who found it. Moving on to Byron's Pool, Toby Carter found a fungus beetle *Endomychus coccineus*. Several new fungi for this area were found and we also found the rare **Earth stars** *Geastrum coronatum* and *Geastrum fornicatum*.

There were one or two surprising absences from the species found. In particular **Germander speedwell** *Veronica chamaedrys* was not found in the meadows despite extensive searching, although it was present at Byron's Pool. Other common plants not found included **Fat hen** *Chenopodium album*, **Holly** *Ilex aquifolium*, **Common poppy** *Papaver rhoeas* and **White campion** *Silene latifolia*. Nor did we find some of the more interesting species reported in Gigi Crompton's Cambridgeshire flora, such as **Marsh arrow-grass** *Triglochin palustris* or **Strawberry clover** *Trifolium fragiferum*. The arrow-grass may well still be present in Skater's Meadow as it was reported as present in 1998, however the later has almost certainly gone from the now improved Grantchester meadows where it was reported in 1937.

Only one species for the area is listed in Part 1 (Rare species) of Gigi Crompton's Cambridgeshire flora at <http://mnlg.com/gc>. **Long-stalked pondweed** *Potamogeton praelongus* was reported in 1959 as being 'in quantity' on the River Cam at Grantchester, whilst in 1940 it had been reported as 'Locally abundant in River Cam above Cambridge as far as Byron's Pool'. Sadly we did not detect it this year. We recorded one species that is noted as being nationally scarce by the JNCC – **Large-leaved lime** *Tilia platyphyllos*, which was present in the hedge by the path in the King's section of the meadows. Its status here is perhaps a little uncertain and it may well have been a hedgerow planting.

The CNHS study area for 2007 is Coldham's Common, and it is planned to follow this with Ditton meadows in 2008. Dates for the monthly surveys in 2007, and flora lists for many of the wildlife sites near Cambridge are on the Society web page at <http://www.cnhs.org.uk>.

Jonathan Shanklin