

## **National Trust report : Bathwick Fields**

In Bath, the National Trust manage over 500 acres of land around the Bath Skyline including the four fields at Bathwick. The land adjoining Bathwick Hill was acquired by the National Trust in the mid 1980's and in total covers around 20 Acres (equivalent to about 8 rugby pitches). One of the fields has been planted up as an Orchard with the other 3 fields left as hay meadows/grazing pastures. Due to the gradient of the fields and the underlying soil being unsuitable for arable farming they are probably much the same as they have been for many centuries. Wildflower rich meadows such as this are a declining habitat in the UK so we manage the fields carefully to retain their diverse plant and insect interest as well as trying to improve them where we can.

Richen's Orchard is grazed with sheep after the summer flowering season and this year we've introduced more sheep for a shorter period to reduce the risk of dog attacks which have troubled us for the last couple of years. Thankfully our sheep had a very peaceful year and seemed very relaxed locked away in the orchard for 8 weeks. We avoid having cattle in the orchard as the trees are vulnerable to the weight of cattle scratching themselves and pushing against and damaging the trees. The other fields are grazed for a short period in early spring to push back some of the ranker grasses and then left through Spring and Summer to flower and seed before we cut the hay. By removing the hay, we take away a lot of the nutrient in the organic plant matter that would otherwise add nutrient into the soil and this helps the scarcer wildflowers that can't compete with the dominant grasses to thrive. In this way we'll gradually see more wildflowers in the meadows with a balance of complimentary grasses. We've also added small amounts of seed gathered from species rich fields nearby at Smallcombe Vale and this helps to accelerate the growing abundance of wildflowers in the Bathwick fields.

We aftermath graze the fields in Autumn once the hay has gone with young beef cattle to keep the sward height low and to add a little bit of disturbance to the soil which allows dormant seeds to get drawn up to the surface.

The land we manage would have once formed part of Bathwick Farm which stood across from Darlington Cottage down on Sydney buildings and which operated as the Darlington dairy in the late 19th and in to the 20th century which suggests that it was dairy cattle that occupied the fields in those days.

Further back the fields were known as Withey Tree Furlong when they appear in the survey of the Manor of Bathwick in 1735. A withey Tree is a willow tree generally used for thatching or weaving but willow trees generally favour wet ground so perhaps there was a willow plantation around some of the springs and water courses in the fields in the past when they may have been much wetter.

During lockdowns over the last year, the fields, like most outdoor space across the country, have acted as a safe space for people to enjoy their daily exercise with great views back to Bath and ample room to socially distance. We've left gates open to reduce the risk of contamination from touching kissing gates and we've

signposted the arrival of the cattle and the fields they are grazing to allow dog walkers to avoid them.

We have a team of volunteers known as our Walk Rangers who walk our land on a daily/weekly basis and who keep an eye out for damaged fences and gates, distressed livestock and who provide advice and directions to visitors. The Walk Rangers also collect litter on their rounds and do a wonderful job to keep the fields in good condition for those coming to enjoy the views back to Bath. Our Walk Rangers wear red National Trust polo shirts and fleeces so if you see one of them feel free to say hello.

Our highlight for 2020 was a visit from Channel 4's George Clark who filmed in Bathwick Fields for Episode 3 of "George Clark's National Trust unlocked" which can be found on the Channel 4 on demand player.

Joe McSorley

National Trust Area Ranger (Bath Portfolio)