

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust

Spring 2022



As if by Magic

After nearly half a year of standing skeletal on the hills overlooking the Vale, something miraculous happens in our plum orchards. Suddenly in April *as if by magic* the trees come to life; from stark, bare branches, milky-white blossom bursts, shouting out “Spring is here”. At Hipton Hill Orchards we have a pre-cursor to this, a few Cherry Plum trees brighten the orchards ahead of the main event and every year I know it’s coming but every year it catches me out. I can only imagine what the scene would have been like a hundred years ago when plum orchards stretched from the Littletons to Wood Norton in an almost continuous band around the hills above Evesham. This is thought to be the largest single block of plum orchards ever seen in England.



Magic. Plum Blossom, Hipton Hill

Orchard trees lock in Carbon as does the grassland under the canopy and so help in the fight against climate change. If managed sensitively, the trees provide homes for a myriad of invertebrates, birds and small mammals, and the grassland can bloom with wildflowers providing a real boost for biodiversity. The orchards provide ideal conditions for grazing sheep and of course the trees provide us with fruit. The whole scene also gives pleasure to a great many people, but sadly despite all their worth many of these orchards have now gone. Recent research carried out by the National Trust has revealed the area of orchards in England and Wales has halved since the early 1900s. VLHT continues to manage 70 acres of plum orchard at Hipton Hill, ten acres of cider apple orchard at Stocken and a further nine acres of old apple and pear orchard at Naunton Beauchamp. We also manage two acres of plum orchard under the Evesham Custom at Hampton, and we have nearly finished planting a new five-acre orchard at North Littleton. We also plant fruit trees where appropriate around the edges of some of our other sites.

Please consider volunteering for VLHT or find out about becoming a trustee or make a donation towards our work (see below) and help us to *keep the magic alive*. Thank you for your support.

New ways to support the Trust

Supporting VLHT just got a whole lot easier. We now have a donations page on ‘Give-as-you-live’. A button on our website takes you straight to the page where you can choose to make a one-off donation or a regular sum.



We are also set up on Amazon Smile, so you can support VLHT while you shop at no cost to yourself. I know some people prefer not to shop online but for those of you who do, it’s simple to sign up and it works exactly like your ordinary Amazon account. So, check out Amazon Smile and set Vale Landscape Heritage Trust as your chosen charity.



You can of course still request a paper form from us to set up a standing order. Thank you.

Measuring Oaks at Littleton Meadows



Our biggest Oak at
Littleton Pastures

In early April a placement student from Exeter University joined us for a week. As well as helping with fence repairs and installing guards round orchard trees, Henry carried out some habitat survey work and measured the trunks of our old Oak trees at Littleton Meadows. These are among the few Oaks that grow in that part of the Vale. They would have grown in open pastureland but are now crowded by tall Hawthorn scrub. Our volunteers helped to clear round the Oaks in winter as part of the scrub management programme and this allowed Henry to measure the girth of the old trees. Taking a measurement from about 1.5m from the ground the biggest tree had a girth of 4.2 metres. This is by no means one of the larger English Oaks (Nottinghamshire's Major Oak has a girth over 10 metres) but is certainly one of the biggest trees on our patch. With a crude calculation (an oak's trunk grows very approximately 1.8cm diameter per year) we estimate it will have been growing for about 220 years. Certainly worth spending a bit more time clearing the scrub from round these old Oaks so they can continue to spread their branches for another 220 years!

More about the Oxton Ditch

(These notes have been compiled from information sent to me by Mike Izod)

The Oxton Ditch was dug out by hand for animals to take water from both sides and those in riverside meadows were discouraged from trying to take water from the deep river. The source of Oxton Ditch is at Fladbury Mill, from where a pipe carries water under the road and exposes itself on the left side as you enter Mill Bank Meadows. The water does not flow very quickly now-a-days as the pipe has become somewhat silted over the years, and riverside erosion control measures may have restricted the flow further. So the springs which feed into the Ditch are even more important for keeping the water flowing. The pond, about 400 yards downstream, was created by Byrd Brothers (land owners) years ago for their horses to have water, rather than to break hedgerows to obtain it from the Ditch. Oxton Ditch flows for approximately 1.7 miles before re-entering the Avon below Lower Moor (that's a lot of hand-digging!). Because the water enters above the weir and empties below, it has a natural flow. There were sluices, one about twenty yards from the mouth of the Ditch back inland, and another point in the middle of the next field. These were dropped-in during low river levels to hold water back.

The Ditch has been dredged over the years and banks from dredging operations along with the establishment of Crack Willows has removed the connection between ditch and fields in many places, especially adjacent to Mill Bank Meadows. This has completely changed the character of the Oxton Ditch here but it still helps to regulate water levels on the meadows and is an important corridor for wildlife including Otters and kingfishers.

Place-names in the Vale

(Excerpts from an article now available on our website which includes all of the references.)

<https://valetrust.weebly.com/about.html>

By Sarah Wager

The Vale of Evesham is a mediaeval district-name; Vale is thought to come from a Norman-French word derived from the Latin *vallis* (valley). It is in Latin – *Vallis Eueshamie* – the name appears in the history of Evesham Abbey by Thomas of Marlborough, Dean of the Vale from 1206. Evesham's name reflects both the topography and the natural history of the area.

The place-name Evesham is Old English (a Germanic language often called Anglo-Saxon). It was originally *Hethomme*, with the later addition of a personal name *Eof* or *Eov* (*Eov-Hethomme*), a herdsman who had a vision of the Virgin Mary shortly after the land was granted to St. Egwine early in the eighth century. *Hethomme* means 'at the hamm' and the original name is Old English hamm, 'land hemmed in by water or marsh; wet land hemmed in by higher ground, river-meadow'. Evesham and the nearby Birlingham, Pensham and Offenham, all refer to land in bends of the river Avon.

Vale Landscape Heritage Trust (VLHT) is a registered charity, number 1080109. We work to protect and preserve the environment in and around the Vale of Evesham and Pershore. We work with volunteers, finders, farmers and the government to secure the future of, so far, over 300 acres.

Other early versions of Evesham include *Cronuchomme*, *Cronochomme*, *Cronuchamme*, in which hamm is qualified by the Old English for ‘crane’, or, possibly, ‘heron’. Rivers generally have a relatively high proportion of surviving British or even pre-British names. Avon, found not only in the Warwickshire/Worcestershire Avon but also in some other rivers in England, is British and simply means ‘river’.

Pershore is another Old English (OE) name combining topography and natural history. The main element of the name is OE *ōra*, usually translated as ‘bank’ but whose precise sense emerges as ‘flat-topped ridge with a convex shoulder’; at Pershore there is a fine example of an *ōra*, which shows on early prints as a striking background to the town as viewed from the river. The qualifier is believed to be an OE precursor of dialect *persh* “osier”, and while “osier bank” is a sensible etymology, “osier bank overlooked by an *ōra*-shaped ridge” is much more specific’.

Cleeve (Prior), another early attested name, is from the Old English *clif*; many *clif* names refer to settlements by water (another example is the nearby Marcliff).

A different kind of slope or ridge is marked by the place-name Lench, translated as ‘extensive hill-slope’. The central feature of the area is a band of lower lias limestone. The massif is referred to as *Lencdun* in the OE boundaries of Twyford. The word is related to *hlinc* (‘bank, ledge’).

The word *dūn* exemplifies the way in which speakers of OE had precise terms for different kinds or shapes of hill; it ‘is consistently used in settlement-names for a low hill with a fairly level and fairly extensive summit’. The word is also found in Ramsden, near Pershore. In contrast, *beorg* or *berg*, found in Allesborough near Pershore, has been defined as a ‘rounded hill or tumulus’.

Twyford appears in the early history of Evesham; the name means ‘double’ ford, in this case a ford across two branches of the Avon near Offenham. Other ford-names in the Vale include Defford – ‘deep’ ford and Besford, which has a personal name as the first element. Harvington was originally *hereford* with *tūn* added, meaning ‘army ford’.

Tūn has been described as ‘by far the commonest’ element in English place-names. It appears to have a variety of meanings – ‘an enclosure, a farmstead, an estate, a village’. Many names ending in *tūn* have as their qualifying element a personal name including Aldington, Bishampton, Bricklehampton, Eckington and Peopleton. Charlton includes the name of a group of people; *ceorla-tūn* has been translated as ‘the settlement of the *ceorlas*’, *ceorl* meaning ‘man, peasant, churl’. Place-name scholars have identified ‘an implied contrast between settlements in the hands of the peasants who worked the land and those in the hands of landlords’ and have suggested that Charlton became a common place-name (there are around 100 in England including variants such as Carlton) when social and economic change led to the fragmentation of large estates.

A very common place-name element, sometimes contrasted with *tūn* in its distribution, is *lēah*, a word which in place-names has become *-ley* or *-ly*, sometimes *-leigh*. It is strongly associated with woodland, but, although it has been suggested that it sometimes meant wood or wood pasture, a more recent discussion has affirmed the meaning of a light open space, presumably contrasting with surrounding woodland. It appears in the name Tiddesley (Wood), in which it is compounded with a personal name, and also in Elmley (Castle) the first element of which is the tree ‘elm’.

The Vale, especially in its buildings and agriculture, is very different today from the time when its place-names were formed, but enough remains in its geology, topography and natural history to help explain how some of those names came to be given.



Many of our projects are funded by Severn Waste Services through the Landfill Communities Fund. Without SWS, VLHT could not own, or protect, anywhere near as many acres.



Nature's Gold

We tend to think of buttercups as summer flowers, with great swathes of Meadow and Bulbous Buttercups brightening our meadows, or in the case of Creeping Buttercup causing trouble in formal flower beds. But there are many different buttercups, some of them are the earliest flowers we see each year. As winter fades I look forward to seeing little flecks of gold appearing on hedge-banks and around unsprayed fields. These bright, cheerful harbingers of spring with their glossy, heart-shaped leaves are Lesser Celandines. These are the first 'buttercups' of the year and a sure sign that the days are getting longer. They are not just a treat for our eyes but are an early source of nectar for pollinating insects. Lesser Celandines produce seed but also spread by means of bulbils which were considered to have the appearance of haemorrhoids and so were used to 'treat' the ailment giving rise to the alternative name of Pile-wort.



Meadow Buttercup flower



Lesser Celandine flowers



Marsh Marigold flowers



Celery leaved buttercup

There is a Greater Celandine but just to confuse the issue, that species is not a buttercup but is a member of the Poppy family! Our biggest buttercup the Marsh Marigold or King-cups flowers from mid-April and looks very similar to the Lesser Celandine but is much larger and is restricted to waterside and wetland habitats such as at Lower Moor. This plant would have been a common sight in riverside meadows before drainage for agriculture.

Another wetland buttercup is the Celery-leaved Buttercup. This is an annual whose seeds can persist in the soil for decades, only germinating when conditions are just right. Following the work at Mill Bank to re-establish the pond, Celery-leaved Buttercups popped up in the bare ground surrounding the pond. They will have set seed and the new generation will lie patiently waiting for the damp ground to be disturbed again sometime in the future.

Not all buttercups are yellow. In woodlands in early spring a glorious mat of white, star-like flowers opens up before the tree canopy shades them out. These are Wood Anemones and are restricted to old woodlands and hedge banks in our area. In complete contrast to the Celery-leaved Buttercup, the Wood Anemone's seeds do not persist for very long (if they are fertile at all) and instead the plants spread very slowly from their roots. So large patches of this species are sure indicators of an ancient habitat.

The prize for the strangest of all the buttercups must surely go to the Mouse-tail. This tiny, early-flowering annual plant looks nothing like a buttercup Its preferred habitat is gateways in floodplains that have been poached by cattle. As its seeds ripen, the seedhead extends, resembling a mouse's scaly tail. We are lucky to have this rare plant growing in gateways at Haines Meadows and Lower Moor but it is worth looking in gateways and around drinking troughs anywhere in floodplains between April and late May and you might be lucky enough to find this special little buttercup.



Wood Anemone



Mouse-tail and 20p coin
Haines Meadows

Stocken Fieldfares update

Peter Holmes

Despite there being no significant cold spell over the winter I ringed 110 Fieldfares in Stocken Orchard, and one return from the previous winter was also caught. The apples that were piled up, left over from harvesting will have helped attract the birds, but imagine what it would have been like with a cold spell. Maybe next winter.

Birds of Lower Moor & Haines Meadows January to March 2022

Rob Prudden

The **Dark-Bellied Brent Goose** seen in late December 2021 remained around the meadows until 11th January. Due to relatively mild conditions and little flooding, waterfowl numbers remained static throughout with maxima of 85 **Wigeon**, 140 **Teal**, 10 **Shoveler** & up to 26 **Gadwall**. The first **Shelducks** arrived on the early date of 19th January & had risen to five by 7th February, a single pair were then present till the end of March. Three female **Goosanders** were along the river from the beginning of the year through till mid-March. The wintering **Lapwing** flock tended to be elusive spending most days on nearby arable land, but a more than respectable 496 were on the river meadows in mid-January. The only **Golden Plover** record was of 18 birds on just a single date in January. **Snipe** were present throughout in small numbers, along with two **Water Rails**. Up to 12 **Chiffchaffs** wintered around the small reedbed alongside the car park and on bright days during January had already started to sing bringing a feeling of spring. After high winds in 2021 had toppled a favoured roost tree alongside the river just south of the site, **Cormorants** adopted a tall Ash tree alongside the island, with up to 25 birds roosting in its upper branches throughout January & February. The lower part of the tree and its surrounding area is thickly covered with dark Ivy which had been splattered white by the loafing birds, looking decidedly like a wintery snow scene. Hunting **Barn Owls** were seen at dusk & dawn on several dates. A pair of **Curlew** arrived on 3rd March & were then seen again on ten dates by the end of the month. A pair of **Oystercatchers** were present from the 7th-31st March presumably looking to breed at the nearby leisure park. A pair of **Avocets** turned up on 12th March, then being joined by two other pairs from 19th-31st. Three migrant **Little Ringed Plovers** spent the day on site on 20th March. **Red Kites** become ever more common and were seen over the area on seven dates. During the early part of the year few scarcities are anticipated, this was certainly the case this year with the only birds of note being a **Cetti's Warbler** along the Lench Ditch for a week from 9th January, **Egyptian Goose** & **Green Sandpiper** on 23rd March followed by a Little Egret on 28th. During a warm spell at the end of March it was good to hear up to five **Skylarks** singing high up above what will hopefully become their breeding territories.

It has also been good to see that up to four Brown Hares are now resident and seen regularly.



Gadwall Drake in flight



Shelduck at rest



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