

PRESERVING A DISAPPEARING ENVIRONMENT – WHEN GA AIRFIELDS DON'T KNOW WHAT THEY'VE GOT

More often than not, General Aviation airfields, irrespective of them being formal aerodromes, informal private strips or simple farm strips are not aware that what they are the guardians of may well be something that is disappearing at an alarming rate from our countryside surroundings.

Since the end of the second world war over 95% of what was known as a traditional hay meadow has disappeared from the rural British landscape as a result of modern farming methods, land drainage, industrial development and the increased need to build ever more and more homes out in the country for 'townies' to achieve the rural idyll they have always dreamt of. The loss of the traditional hay meadow has had a dramatic effect on the survival of our pollinators, namely bees, without which we will not have the fruits, vegetables and other associated foodstuffs that we all crave.

Bodmin Airfield in Cornwall has recognised what they have, a traditional hay meadow that is not only rich in flora and fauna, but also quite possibly one of the largest traditional hay meadows in the Southwest of England. It is an outcome completely arrived at by accident, rather than by design. The reason for this is that for the past few decades it has had no herbicides, pesticides or harmful fertilisers spread across it, and other than the runways and taxiways, the outfield is only cut once a year with the cuttings all baled and removed from the site by a local farmer for use as silage and fodder for his cattle.

To add to the ethos of duty of care towards our community, something that we hold dear at Bodmin, we also carry out a thorough removal of ragwort from our airfield every year. The reason we do this is that we are surrounded on all four sides by sheep farms, cattle farms, common grazing lands and mapped bridlepaths. Ragwort has the potential to be lethal to sheep, cattle and horses if ingested, and there is even a law that expects landowners to ensure that ragwort does not pass to neighbouring land and create issues for other landowners. We therefore follow the guidance and recommendations, and the result is better community relations and our farmers receive hay that is ragwort free.

It is this sequence of historical and annual events that has given the airfield the look that it has. Just over two years ago Ian Benallick, who is the Botanical Recorder for Cornwall and co-author of the red book for Cornish Wild Flowers, was walking past the airfield when he spotted an Orchid in the airfield verge. He rang the Bodmin Airfield Manager, Jay Gates, to ask if he could come inside the airfield and conduct a quick survey of the airfield, which of course we were delighted to arrange for him. His 'quick' two hour survey turned up an astonishing list of over 150 species of wild flowers, grasses and ferns and which included an estimate of over 3,000 orchids of three distinct species in the outfield. It was at this point that he told us that what we were the stewards for was slightly more important than merely a pleasant GA airfield on the side of Bodmin Moor. This discovery has led to us building relationships with many interested organisations and academics to allow them to look at ways to protect the airfield, learn from it and for us to let others benefit from what we have.

It is this new knowledge that has made us realise that General Aviation, and airfields, may unwittingly be sitting on land that is more important to the nation than you would have previously thought. From being a scourge of NIMBY complainers, and those who think aviation is harmful to the environment, it may well be that you have something to cherish, protect and share with your local community and

something that bathes your airfield in a good light to those who live around you. Obviously, an airfield that follows the CAA anti-bird 'long grass' policy and conducts regular cuts of the outfield throughout the year will find they do not have a traditional hay meadow in their outfield, for those small aerodromes and farm strips where crops are grown in the outfield will find the same, and airfields that have irregular cuts but do not remove their cut grass will also find they may not have a meadow either. Our untouched outfield also means we have a large and healthy Skylark population, living and breeding, in the outfield.

Yet, Bodmin cannot possibly be alone in this discovery, and there must be numbers of GA airfields throughout the land who carry out the same land management regime that we do without realising they have something that is nationally special and environmentally important. The surveys that have carried out here have resulted in a list of almost 170 species of flora, and our soil samples have shown that we are what the National Vegetation Classification lists as an MG5 Grassland landscape, i.e. a traditional hay meadow, of which there is now less than 6,000 hectares remaining in the whole of England. It would appear that Bodmin may have the largest traditional hay meadow in the whole Southwest of England. The effect on our pollinators on the loss of this critically important landscape is devastating, hence the national drive to plant bee bombs in your gardens and for the councils to seed the road verges with wild flowers. Of course it is not only bees that we need to protect, as pollinators also include wasps, hover flies, beetles, flies, moths and butterflies. If your airfield turns out to be MG5 land, you are unknowingly helping to arrest this decline, and it would not hurt your GA reputation if your community was made aware of your positive input to a national debate on saving our treasured pollinators.



Marsh Orchid and Heath Spotted Orchid



Collecting Yellow Rattle seeds for FWAGSW

We have built up a relationship with our local University Ecology department whose NERC researchers are conducting studies of the land, and who are sending students to us to conduct pollinator surveys. We have developed a great relationship with the local Farmers Wildlife Advisory Group (FWAGSW) who assist farmers who wish to change their land from non-organic to organic and create natural hay meadows for pollinators, and thus help them with their own crops. So far we have donated two swathes of our cut hay to local farming estates to allow them the process of improving their own environments, and this is only the beginning. The FWAGSW people tell us our airfield has enough grass to fulfill their whole county programme if we were able to donate it to them. We have also donated seeds from our airfield to conservationists, as these seeds represent the important species that accelerate the change of an ordinary grass field to that of a traditional hay meadow.

On top of this is the fact that MG5 grassland may mean the airfield is able to seek land stewardship grants to allow the airfield to manage the grassland and protect the environment. In some cases, Natural England may afford greater protection to your airfield that stops any future opportunity for property developers to eye your land for building purposes. And, of course, you have an educational asset not just for university students and researchers, but also for local schools, botanical clubs and other community interested parties. Your community will help you protect what you may have.

Darren Fern, the Cornwall Flying Club chairman, summed it all up when he said “Bodmin Airfield has been working with Exeter University and other environmental groups over the past couple of years. We have an outstanding example of a native English hay meadow, and the seeds from the grasses are highly sought after by farmers wishing to return their fields to their natural state. We have over 3000 orchids of various species. We have the resource because for the past 40 odd years, we’ve never used fertiliser, we’ve removed invasive and non-native plants, and all we have done is cut the grass runways, leaving nature to look after the rest of the site. By encouraging links with the University, CLA and Natural England etc., we have become a beacon of conservation in the country. Botanists from all over the country now ask to visit our site.”

He went on to say “I’m sure every other airfield in the country has similar ‘out-field’ areas that will have the same natural diversity and environmentally valuable resources that exist BECAUSE we are an airfield, and not despite it being an airfield. There is an opportunity for all airfields to be recognised as being environmental heroes, and not the villains, for a change. I encourage all airfield owners to contact their local university ecology departments and farming organisations, so that we can share our resource and be viewed in a positive light. We have a great opportunity to safeguard our airfields. Use it.”

Jay Gates

August 2021