

# The History and Plant Ecology of Hinksey Meadow

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I know what white, what purple fritillaries  
The grassy harvest of the river-fields,  
Above by Ensham, down by Sandford, yields  
And what sedged brooks are Thames's tributaries,...

Matthew Arnold (1866) *Thyrsis* (lines 107-110)

## Summary

The Oxfordshire Flora Group has counted fritillary plants (*Fritillaria meleagris*) on Hinksey Meadow (13 ha), owned and managed by the Oxford Preservation Trust, since 2003. A survey of the rest of the vegetation confirms that this is an historic flood meadow with 7 ha of a species-rich and diverse MG4a plant community. This makes an important contribution to the total area of this community in the UK. The baseline data in this paper will allow changes to the management or disturbance, such as the Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme, to be closely monitored.

## Introduction

This paper describes the vegetation of Hinksey Meadow at North Hinksey (33 acres, 13 ha, SP 494058) which appears to have a particularly species rich, diverse and characteristic flood meadow flora. It is owned by the Oxford Preservation Trust (OPT), is open to the public, and used for botanical excursions (Figure 1). The meadow is a Thames Valley Environmental Record Centre (TVERC) Local Wildlife Site (Osney Mead, 40Y04), part of the Upper Thames Environmentally Sensitive Area, and gained a Country Land & Business Association Wildlife Sites award 2001. The Jubilee Scrape was inserted in 2002, following the meandering palaeochannel which marks the original boundary of Medieval Oxford's Franchises of Liberty (Local authority boundary until 1991); in early history it was part of the boundary between Mercia and Wessex, and later the boundary between Oxfordshire and Berkshire.

Only about 2000 hectares of characteristic semi-natural floodplain meadows (MG4) remain in Britain, but the Oxford Area has Pixey & Yarnton Meads (SSSI), Iffley Meadows (SSSI), New Marston Meadows (SSSI), Magdalen Meadows and Somerford Mead. On Hinksey Meadow the re-introduction of a rigorous management regime has allowed the regeneration of 7 ha of a particularly species-rich plant community variant (MG4a in the National Vegetational Classification) of which only 192 ha had previously been recorded in the UK (Wallace & Prosser 2017).

This meadow is between the Seacourt Stream and the Bulstake Stream. It flooded in summer 2007, 2009, late 2012 (Figure 2) and for two months in January-February 2014. Above Jurassic clay is about 1.6 m of Pleistocene gravel deposits, (Oxford Archaeology 2011) overtopped by 0.3-1.6 m of alluvial silt (Oxford Archaeology 2017). The water table is augmented by considerable lateral underground water movement; the Seacourt Stream drains the gravel aquifer along its full length with ground water flowing westwards (MacDonald et al. 2007, EA 2010). The Seacourt Stream used to be the main route of the Thames. Recent archaeological excavations

for the Oxford Flood Alleviation Scheme (FAS) suggest that over the past 2,500 years the flood plain was served by numerous braided streams which continually altered course (Strafford, pers. comm. 2017).

Its management since 2013 has been traditional and ideal – a hay cut in July and aftermath grazing by cattle under Higher Level Scheme agreement. The limited population of Fritillaries (*Fritillaria meleagris*) has been assessed since 2003 (Table 1).

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## History

Hinksey Meadow has probably been a hay meadow for much of the last thousand years, associated with Botley Mill, part of St Thomas' Parish in Oxford (Chance 1979). Its earliest mention is when, variously called King's Mead, Northleye, or Botley Mead, it was granted by Henry I to Abingdon Abbey between 1102 and 1110. Documents of 1162, 1249 (Chance 1979) and 1715, 1741 (Oxfordshire Local Studies Unit) suggest that it was hay meadow with aftermath grazing for a long time. It was taken over by Christ Church College, Oxford after the dissolution of the monasteries. Nutrient-rich hay meadows were valuable for both hay and grazing and their leases changed hands for considerable sums (Oxford Local Studies Unit).

The part of the meadow north-west of the Jubilee scrape was in Berkshire. Thus its historic management may have been different from the rest (North Hinksey Manorial descent). It is called 'Little Cindersea Meadow' on an 1842 map (1842 map). The rest was called 'Great Meadow'. This major part of the current Meadow was common in 1842 and 'therefore manorial land, passing to the Lords Harcourt in the 1770s (Munby pers. comm., after Hanson 1996). There is also an 1848 map. This is difficult to interpret but that is probably where the OPT name 'Hincksey Meadow' comes from.

After enclosure (1853) the flood meadows in the area were divided amongst private landowners. Willow Walk (area G in figure 4), along the SE boundary, was developed by the Harcourts around 1880 and was opened to the public in the 1920s as a route from North Hinksey to Osney Mead. The OPT purchased the meadow, which it calls Hinksey Meadow, in 1997 (from Brigadier Montague-Jones). It has more or less the same boundaries as in 1870 (Ordnance survey, 1<sup>st</sup> edition). In 2011 the Environment Agency installed six culverts each 1.4 m in diameter beneath Willow Walk to take flood water southwards. Despite its fluctuating fortunes, on the basis of this evidence it would be justified to refer to Hinksey Meadow as an ancient flood meadow or ancient hay meadow.

In view of its antiquity it seems likely that the importance of the vegetation on Hinksey Meadow has been underestimated. I surveyed it to establish which of the new four categories of MG4 classification it belongs to.

## Management Past and Present

After the annual hay cut the meadow was grazed by horses from the Old Manor House Riding School, North Hinksey, from the 1960s to about 2012. Until the

meadow was purchased by OPT it was cut for hay and aftermath grazed by horses (Donnelly pers. comm. June 2016). After OPT purchased the meadow in 1997 horses grazed it at low density, all year round, except when it was flooded. In most years after the Jubilee Scrape was deepened in 2002, the north-west part of the meadow was fenced south of the scrape to prevent the incursion of horses. The vegetation to the north-west of the scrape became ranker and poorer in species.

The July hay cut was re-instituted around 2006. In autumn 2007 (the hay was left on the surface), the hay cut was late in 2010 and three months late in 2011. In 2012-13

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the fence across the meadow was removed and the perimeter was fenced. In 2013 optimal management began; a hay cut in July or early August has been followed by aftermath grazing by 10-15 Aberdeen Angus cross cattle owned by Charles Gee of Medley Manor Farm, who also carries out the hay cut (Gee pers. comm. 2016). The cattle range over the whole Meadow area.

The full article can be accessed here: <https://anhso.org.uk/special-interest-groups/fritillary/fritillary-7/>  
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