

Ancient Grassland

Working Definition

“a semi-natural plant community maintained as grassland since 1840, on a site with no history of arable management or agricultural improvement since 1840 in any of the currently available land-use datasets.”

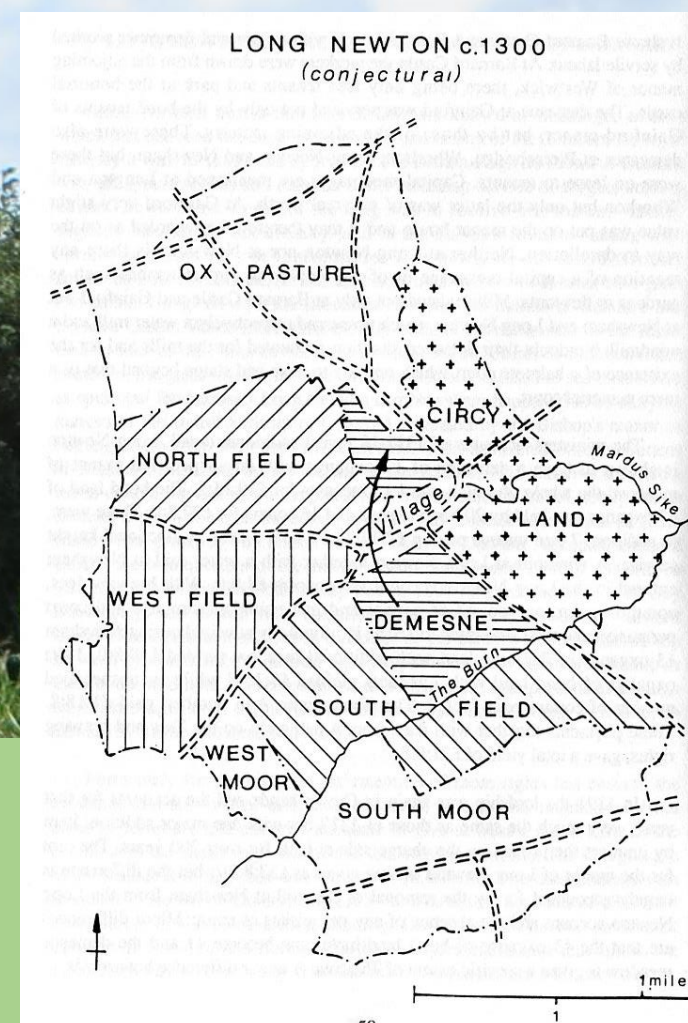
Created from information in the paper [“The natural regeneration of calcareous grassland at a landscape scale: 150 years of plant community re-assembly on Salisbury Plain, UK” by Redhead et. al. 2013](#)

Ancient grasslands are an important part of our cultural heritage, giving us an insight into what and where our ancestors farmed in our local areas.

Research has been limited, their extent has not been nationally or locally mapped, and awareness within the conservation community and the public is very poor.

It is an irreplaceable natural habitat, can contain herbaceous plants (i.e. genetic individuals) as old as ancient trees, it holds our broadest genetic reservoir for grassland plants and so under conservation’s precautionary principle they should be the only, or at least the majority, seed source for new species-rich grassland creation in any given local area.

on Road Verges

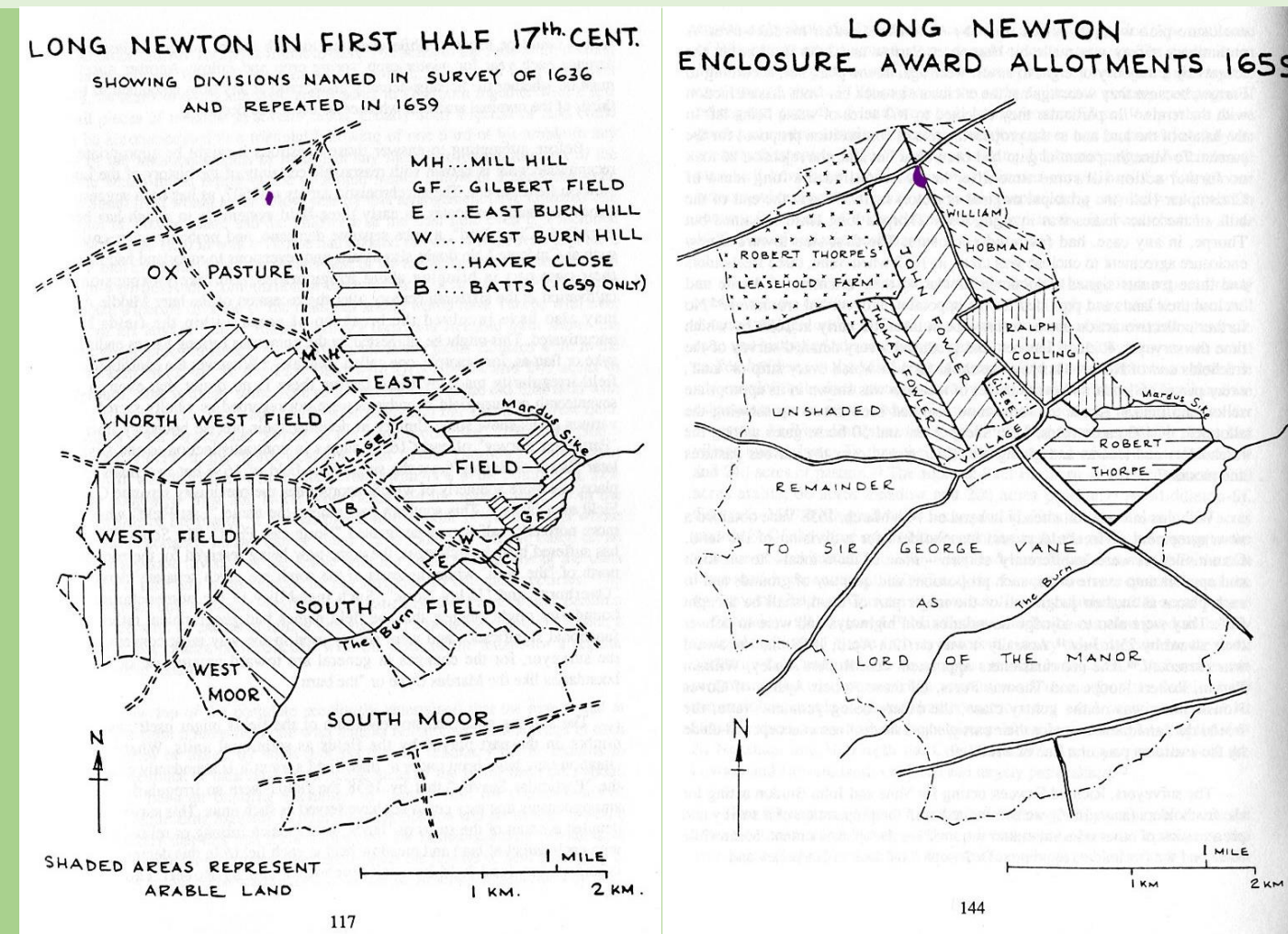


Case Study in the Parish of Long Newton

Saw-wort, pepper-saxifrage, and betony grow together on the small piece of road verge shown above. Detailed maps of the Parish drawn up at the time of Enclosure enable us to trace that piece of land (purple dot) back to medieval grazing pasture. Late summer-flowering grassland plants would thrive under the then prevailing management as grazing pressure was reduced in late summer/early autumn when stock grazed on regrowth from recently harvested arable fields. Maps from The Durham Crown Lordships by David S Reid, 1990

And where to find it

- Verges raised above adjacent farmland or separated by a ditch, so no nutrient-rich water run-off
- Wide verges of Enclosure roads especially at edges of the Parish
- Steeply sloping verges not yet scrub covered/annually cut
- Urban/sub-urban verges & front lawns near old farmhouse sites
- Drovers’ roads or walled/hedged roads up to summer grazing moors
- Rarely as MG4/M27 on road verges next to a hedge abutting a river



Indicator Species

MG5 from the [Natural England Technical Information Note TIN147](#).

Common species (not a complete list!)

Betony	<i>Betonica officinalis</i>
Devil's-bit Scabious	<i>Succisa pratensis</i>
Dyer's Greenweed	<i>Genista tinctoria</i>
Saw-wort	<i>Serratula tinctoria</i>
Wood Anemone	<i>Anemone nemorosa</i>
Pignut*	<i>Conopodium majus*</i>
Bitter-vetch	<i>Lathyrus linifolius</i>
Meadow Saxifrage	<i>Saxifraga granulata</i>
Burnet-saxifrage	<i>Pimpinella saxifraga</i>
Pepper-saxifrage	<i>Silaum silaus</i>
Spring-sedge	<i>Carex carophyllea</i>
Great Burnet**	<i>Sanguisorba officinalis**</i>

*Pignut can cope with some ploughing

** Great burnet is not mentioned in TIN147 but can be present in northern areas

MG4 I think would be similar to MG5; this habitat important also for early-flowering ecotypes, particularly of Common Knapweed *Centaurea nigra* Great Burnet *Sanguisorba officinalis* Devil's-bit Scabious *Succisa pratensis* that seem to be present in some sites

Calcareous grassland has had more research and so there are established lists in the scientific literature, e.g. [Wagner et. al. 2019](#)

Acid grassland seems to have had less attention & I've not found any lists yet

I'm slowly writing a book

'Finding England's Ancient Grassland'

to raise awareness & encourage greater academic research

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