

Hay time at Lower Winskill

Hay time is a busy and unpredictable time because all depends on the weather. "Make hay while the sun shines" is an old saying, but will the sun shine long enough?

It takes at least three and ideally four days of dry sunny weather to make hay. The traditional hay meadows at Lower Winskill have mostly light soils which are free draining and the ground dries quickly and stays firm even in wet weather. So as to encourage the seeding of wild flowers, the grass can not be cut before the middle of July. As soon as a spell of fine weather is forecast after that time hay time begins.

The grass is cut by a tractor drawn mowing machine which leaves the cut grass in swathes. Before tractors came into general use shortly after the Second World War, mowing was done by hand using sharp metal scythes. Mowing with a scythe is very hard work; a machine today might mow in a quarter of an hour or so what a man with a scythe might mow in a day, and a long day at that from dawn to dusk. If the weather looks showery the grass is left in the swathes where it lays in such a way as to shed water. As soon as the weather looks settled, the swathes are spread by a tractor drawn machine.

Spreading the grass hastens the drying process. The sun and wind quicken the drying. The cut grass is turned two or three times by a tractor drawn machine to make sure the grass dries evenly and there are no moist 'green' clumps in it. There had been horse drawn hay turning machines, but hay time was generally very labour intensive before tractor powered hay making machinery came into use. Once spread and partly dried the grass can spoil if the weather quickly changes and rain falls. Partly dried grass loses 'goodness' if it is rained on, and good hay to feed to sheep over winter is best got without any rain on it.

Towards the end of the third day, if the weather has been hot and dry, but more usually on the fourth day, the grass might have dried enough to be hay. It is then put into rows by machine ready for the baler. As soon as the hay is ready it is essential to get baled and under cover before it might be spoilt by rain. Before the introduction of tractor powered hay balers, all this as well as

getting the hay in was basically done by hand. Hay fields used to be thronged with helpers, people in the local villages all came to lend a hand at hay time. It is very different today. The work is mostly done by machines, and few people in the local villages have any inkling what hay time is. The old links between hay making and community have gone, the big picnics out in the hay field with wicker laundry baskets of baking and urns of tea long vanished.

Once the hay is baled, the bales are lifted by hand onto a trailer and stacked high as possible to reduce the number of loads. Speed is the essence. The hay must be got in dry otherwise it will spoil irreversibly. If the hay spoils because the weather breaks down, it can make it seem like a difficult winter lies ahead. On a cold winter's day, feeding good hay to sheep outside is a great deal better and much more satisfying than having to give them spoilt hay!



A traditional hay meadow in July, the Higher Stackbottom meadow at Lower Winskill; the seed heads of the grasses and the yellow rattle are turning a golden brown.

Come fine weather the grass is ready to mow!



The Stackbottom and Far End meadows at Lower Winskill; traditional hay meadows mown by machine.

The cut grass lies in swaths making swirling patterns in the early morning light. Once the dew dries and the weather looks set fair the grass swaths will be quickly spread by machine to hasten the drying process.



Close up of a mown swathe.

The mowing machine leaves the grass laying the same way and like this the swathe will shed rain. Once spread, however, the partly dried grass is at risk from spoiling if it gets rained on. The pea flower like seed heads are yellow rattle, a characteristic flowering plant in traditional hay meadows.



An uncut bank in the Far End meadow at Lower Winskill.

The steeper banks and corners of the traditional hay meadows at Lower Winskill are left uncut. These provide areas of food and shelter for small mammals and insects after main part of the field has been mown. The sunnier banks which are left uncut are good for butterflies. The uncut banks and edges also give late flowering plants a chance to seed such as these blue harebells.



Rowing up the hay in the Over Ing meadow at Lower Winskill.

The cut grass has dried enough to turn into hay and the tractor is pulling a machine which is making the hay into rows ready for the baler. The Over Ing meadow is first documented in the 1590s, but it was probably an old meadow even then.



Hay rowed up ready for the baler, The Nether Ing meadow, Lower Winskill.



Close up of hay rowed up by machine and ready for the baler. As the grass dries and turns into hay it changes colour, but good hay still looks green and smells 'sweet'. If the grass is rained on as it dries, the hay loses its green colour and its 'sweet' smell. In turning the grass to dry it, the seeds of wild flowers get shaken out and fall onto the ground where they will germinate next year. The seed pods of hay rattle seen here are probably nearly all empty.



Baling hay, the Far End meadow at Lower Winskill.



Baling hay under a darkening sky, Nether Ing meadow, Lower Winskill.



Rowing up hay and baling with a 'big' baler, Far End meadow, Lower Winskill.



A 'big' hay baler, Lower Stackbottom meadow, Lower Winskill.



Hay time can still be fun, at least for the young ones! Miriam and Gabriel playing cricket in the Bottom Close meadow, Lower Winskill.



An uncut bank in the Bottom Close meadow, Lower Winskill. Banks like these would have been formerly mown with metal scythes, but are now left as wild life areas.



Lifting hay bales onto the trailer, Higher Stackbottom meadow, Lower Winskill.



Lifting hay bales onto the trailer, Higher Stackbottom meadow, Lower Winskill. Thank heavens for good neighbours! This is Alan and his family helping me at hay time.