

Millie Bank: Past, Present and Future

Past

BC: A wooded valley with mainly sessile oaks; little pressure from people, as those living in the area were probably mainly hunter-gatherers.

Roman Times: There were Romans in the area, but their main priority was establishing and maintaining Hadrian's Wall, so Millie Bank was probably not important to them.

Dark Ages: People were living in the area, and would probably take accessible wood for fuel and building, but lacked the know-how and tools to do much.

Norman Times: The castle and church have Norman origins, so some trees might have been felled to provide roof timbers, but the bank would still be mainly tree-covered.

Middle Ages: Increased population in the village (connected with the church and the College) would have put some pressure on accessible woodland, but, given the love of hunting of deer, clearance of wooded areas wasn't a common event.

Nelson: With the expansion of the Empire, timber for ship building became a priority, but K'o was probably spared given its distance from ship building centres.

Industrial Revolution: Raven Beck was a hive of activity. Although the driving force was water power, wood would have been needed for building and heating, so Millie Bank would have come in for some hammer. In addition, ponies were the main form of transport in this area at the time, and they needed somewhere to graze. It is quite likely that Millie Bank rapidly evolved from woodland to pasture during the Industrial Revolution. It could do this because it was surrounded by fields which still had loads of wild flowers growing in them, so seeds would spread very easily.

20th Century: As industry along Raven Beck diminished, Millie Bank probably had a period of respite until the move to intensive agriculture following WW2. Sheep were probably grazing on it most of the year, keeping it 'well-manicured', but not allowing flora to have much of a presence. This trend continued until the 1990s, when light pony grazing took place. Initially, there was little change on the bank, but, increasingly, flora came back given the relatively light grazing, and the less destructive grazing pattern of ponies. Many plants can survive intensive grazing for up to forty or fifty years, but not for much longer than this.

Present

Millie Bank is a rare example of an Eden Valley pasture. Very nearly all other grassland areas have been 'improved' by the copious addition of nitrogen-based fertilisers (death to most native flora), and/or ploughed and sown with ryegrass to produce silage. Currently, it is

an extremely species-rich area, with well over 100 species of flowering plants, rushes, reeds, sedges and trees - far, far in excess of nearly all other fields in the vicinity. It hasn't yet reached 'nature reserve/SSI' status, but isn't far from it. If it were offered to any conservation organisation, it would be gratefully received, although it probably wouldn't be bought by them. Although the miserable weather of 2012 didn't please the flora, 2013 was a much better year. When KEG started to take an interest in Millie Bank, it was obvious that there were problems with the field. Creeping thistle, dock and nettles were well established throughout; hawthorn and gorse scrub was getting a good hold, and the eastern end had become completely overgrown by meadowsweet and brambles (and this area was open grassland as recently as 25 years ago). Work by KEG has reduced the spread of these 'negative indicator' plants significantly, but has had no impact on the gradual deterioration of the sward. Pastures are ever-evolving areas. They are meant to be grazed and trampled by animals, and, in the absence of grazing, dead organic material builds up at ground level, forming a dense mat which inhibits the growth of anything but the more deep-rooted and determined flora: i.e. thistles, nettles and dock! Doing what we have done has delayed the inevitable, but however hard we work, Millie Bank will slowly decline into not-very-exciting, species-poor unimproved grassland.

Future

There are several choices:

- **Do nothing:** As noted above, this would lead to a gradual decline in flora/biodiversity over the next 10 to 20 or so years. If this happened, Millie Bank would still be more 'interesting' than your average field, but would lose many of its current species.
- **Do Something:** Continuing work to control the spread of nettles, thistles and dock would delay the deterioration of the pasture, but not for ever.
- **Have an Annual Haymaking Session:** Determined volunteers could scythe the area every Autumn. Doing this would reduce the amount of rotting organic matter that would otherwise 'clog' the pasture, but even this wouldn't do what grazing animals' hooves do, and that is to break up the ground and trample in wild flower seeds. However, it needs to be said that whatever we might do to try to improve the area, there is little or no chance of new species moving in, as there is now little or nothing of any botanical interest growing in any field within the parish. If Millie Bank does deteriorate, then that's it - there is no way back.
- **Reintroduce Grazing:** This is the solution for the maintenance of a species-rich pasture. Ideally, Winter grazing of small numbers of cattle, horses or sheep (in that order of preference) would stop the spread of scrub and reduce the build-up of dead organic matter. Of course, there can't be any grazing of animals until the area is made secure.

- Secure the Area: It would be relatively easy for a contractor to fence Millie Bank. Ryelock fencing would mean that any grazing animal could be contained; post and rail/wire (a cheaper option) would rule out sheep, but contain horses and/or cattle.

Grazing: Millie Bank is a small area, and, even if it were fenced, it would not be an attractive area for a serious farmer, not least because of the constant toing and froing of people and dogs. Conservation graziers (of horses and/or old breeds of cattle) might be more interested, but finding them - and relying on their co-operation - might not be easy.

Nigel and Lois Harbron

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