

THE LIVING PAST

A colleague who writes nature articles for the local Welsh Life magazine alongside my forays into traditional Welsh buildings recently invited me for afternoon tea at his small cottage with a view to seeking my opinion on his apparently rather fine double seater privy. Knowing that I had been asked by the editor of the Life magazine to pen an article on privies and ty bachs my friend considered it was vitally important for me to see and try out this wonderful creation 'in the flesh'.

Before I could even plan my visit he began to eulogise and expound upon the flora and fauna which was literally on my doorstep - in the field, wood, orchard and even our local churchyard. Conversation was, to say the least, diverse - from lizards to lichens, cowslips to cuckoos, badgers to barn owls, mosses to muntjac and stinking irises to - nothing on earth! It became quite clear that my friend not only had a keen and knowledgeable interest in ornithology and flora but also had an intimate understanding of our village churchyard. He enthusiastically encouraged me to visit and undertake an intensive hands and knees search for a rarity - an orange cowslip!

'How often do they cut the grass?' he asked, sounding almost despairing.

'It's vitally important if this plant is to survive that they mow at the proper time'.

As luck would have it our eldest son had shown a deep interest in unearthing details of past occupants of our

ancient farmhouse and frequently made visits to the churchyard to research each and every headstone - much to the amusement of many of his school friends. Several painstaking inspections around the lichen and moss covered gravestones revealed absolutely nothing - that is of the orange cowslip - and so, until the following spring, I could only assume the grass had been cut at the wrong time and these rarities may well have succumbed to an all too keen gardener!

We so often take churchyards for granted. True, they may be the last resting place for a friend, acquaintance or relation but they do represent a wonderful haven for abundant wildlife and flora - untouched, if the grass cutting schedule is rigorously maintained. A leisurely walk makes it abundantly obvious that the modern, smooth polished marble used today by monumental masons gives no assistance whatsoever to the myriad of mosses and lichens which frequently thrive in such unhindered conditions. As my friend so aptly put it

'They've nothing to hold onto'.

Quite true - and we are the losers. In days gone by local sandstone and Welsh slate - the vernacular materials - were always used and gave lichens and mosses a place to cling to and grow without interruption. It also created a local craft industry that almost, without exception, has now vanished just like the village cobbler, carpenter and blacksmith, and dare I say it - the undertaker.

Today's churchyards, if still in use, reflect only too well the spread of 'foreign'; materials to the detriment of the vernacular dialect in an age when local materials, skills and knowledge apparently mean very little. But still these gritty little plants retain their tenacious hold on the older

gravestones and with luck on the stonework of the church - as long as the Parochial Church Council hasn't let loose the local builder. Often totally out of touch with historic churches and their micro environment they frequently wreak havoc on the ancient lime mortars, peeling limewash and their 'friends' - the lichens and mosses - by sweeping it all away in favour of a clinical and lifeless alternative where no creatures or plants could hope to survive. The perpetrator is no less than Portland Cement! Few of us appreciate that the presence of these tiny plants is a barometer of our country's and in fact the world's health. A recent television programme highlighted this very fact by spending a considerable amount of time inspecting a churchyard in the wonderful county of Pembrokeshire. The expert declared that there were over 40 different species of lichens and mosses in the churchyard, mostly on the ancient gravestones, and gave the micro community the very highest marks for the quality of it's air. Confirmation, if it were needed, that it was a most healthy place to reside in! As I am not an expert I could not presume to prognosticate upon the air quality around our farmhouse and it's land but from the coverings of lichens on our old oak trees we cannot be far behind the churchyard in Pembrokeshire!

We have made a deliberate policy on our very small farm of leaving selected areas as long grass only cutting when absolutely necessary once all the grasses and wildflowers have had a chance to set seed. The transformation over some years has been truly remarkable with snakes, lizards and all manner of small rodents abounding and providing a wonderful feeding ground for buzzards and red kites and other eager animals

attempting to keep nature in balance. Although much of our pasture land has been described as herb rich by the local Farm Stewardship Scheme Officer it could never attain the exalted status of a traditional hay meadow, a feature of the countryside which is now on the 'endangered species list'. The excessively steep valley side of our land alone would preclude any machinery working safely to cut the gently waving grasses and flowers to promote the beginnings of the ultimate goal. Just as the grass in the churchyard and hay meadow have to be coaxed and gently tended over many years so many are persuaded and encouraged by colourful and convincing advertising that they can successfully 'sow' a hay meadow from a packet of wildflower seeds which will give them delight and pleasure for years to come. Disillusionment only too often sets in as the delight is frequently short lived or doesn't arrive at all despite all the wonderful promises on the packaging. They have been cruelly misled!

As one old Cotswold farmer once told me

'You can't make a hay meadow - you've have to create it, boy!'

And as he so rightly pointed out it can take up to 20 years or more. Creation doesn't work fast! The few hay meadows that do survive are quite literally hundreds of years old and are the end product of caring country folk who had the skill, knowledge and will to maintain them as an essential part of the farm and good husbandry. There is no doubt it is a skill lost but to a few.

Despite the paucity of hay meadows, in May the meadow grasses and accompanying wildflowers across our fields bow gracefully in the gentle breezes whilst the

air is full and heavy with myriad fragrances. Ewes and their lambs bask in the warmth, reclining amongst the bright new greensward whilst Marmaduke, the old farm cat, sets out once more, almost unseen amidst the tall grass, to the furthest outpost of his territory. Marmaduke no longer resides on the farm but two doors away since the previous occupants of our property discovered he did not take kindly to being uprooted and moved to Worcestershire and continually tried to return to his old haunts some 150 miles distant. Now almost next door to his 'old home' he still 'rules OK' and defiantly considers our farm is still his against all comers. He regularly passes the backdoor of the farm with a treasured prize of a vole or a mouse which more often than not has come from our orchard or even our Top Meadow some half a mile away!

Marmaduke has a colleague, or maybe he is the sworn enemy - the churchyard cat, Mog - a fluffed up black and white creature that appears to have been subjected to regular visits to the tumble dryer! Certainly out of the same mould, Mog is tenacious, fearsome and master of all he surveys as he perches on one of the ancient gravestones - no doubt he has rich pickings amongst the cowslips, mosses and lichens.

He is but just another player in the living churchyard. Those voles and mice should watch out!

Footnote: The old stone walls and lime mortar of our farmhouse host Rusty Back Ferns (*Asplenium ceterach*) - a splendid addition that gives the old building a truly well worn rural feel.

It is sad to report that Marmaduke is no more and Mog also seems to have disappeared – their replacements are not a patch on them!

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