

## The View from The Keep

For anyone who hasn't discovered it already The Keep is the field adjacent to the Alec's Field recreation ground that abuts the Allotments. It was gifted to the Parish along with Alec's Field and the Allotments for the purposes of 'sport and recreation'.

Since 2017 the field has been slowly transformed into a wildflower meadow. It's been a bit of a slog, thanks to the vigorous rank grass that had established itself in previous years, but we slowly beginning to see the fruits of our labours. A path now winds through the meadow, enabling you to wander among the wildflowers without disturbing them. Spot the anthills created by yellow meadow ants, a keystone species that help greatly by spreading seeds around.

The fruit trees we planted near the allotments are beginning to mature. There are two apple trees, and two plums. Neither of the plum trees has yet shown any sign of bearing fruit, perhaps the fruiting buds have been nibbled by pigeons. One of the apple trees died and was replaced with another sapling in 2022. The other apple tree is now bearing plenty of fruit ... help yourself to a couple when they are ripe.

There are times of the year when the Keep can look untidy, as the grasses die back and the wildflower seed heads turn brown. Whilst it may seem like a good idea to tidy the place up by mowing early, many wildflowers are annuals so they must be allowed to mature and drop their seeds before the plants are cut down.

Management of the Keep involves suppressing the coarse grass by cutting it in spring and autumn, and introducing wildflowers - especially yellow rattle (see notes below)

Cutting the grasses This is done twice a year, with the arisings being removed in order to reduce the fertility of the soil so as to weaken grass growth.

The first 'cut' is in spring, when two of the conservation grazing ponies from the Alners Gorse butterfly reserve are put onto the field for 2 weeks. An electric fence separates them from the public footpath, and keeps dogs out ! The arisings take the form of piles of pony poop, which have to be removed every day and are placed in a heap close to the footpath. This provides an excellent source of fertiliser and soil improver for those allotment holders who are quick off the mark and get to it first with their buckets and wheelbarrows

The second cut is in autumn, after the wildflowers have had a chance to drop their seeds. The cut is with brush cutters, and the grass arisings are raked off by hand and heaped by the hedges where they provide excellent habitat for creatures such as insects and slow worms as they decompose.

## **Yellow rattle**



This plant has been introduced, as it is a parasitic wildflower that gains nutrients by penetrating the roots of adjacent grasses. This stunts the growth of the grasses, which then allows wildflower plants to take hold and greatly increases the biodiversity of the area. It is particularly noticeable that in the northern part of the Keep the yellow rattle is now well established, and as a result the grass is visibly very much less vigorous. We can look forward to an ever-increasing abundance of wildflowers year on year.

Wildflowers that are beginning to establish themselves include:

## **Birds-foot trefoil**



*A member of the pea family that takes its name from the seed pods which resemble a bird's foot. Flowers May to Sept. Valuable source of nectar and also a food plant for the caterpillars of various butterflies and moths including the beautiful six-spot burnet moth. Said to have sedative medicinal properties useful for treating insomnia, depression, nervousness and anxiety.*

## Bugle



*A member of the mint/dead nettle family. Low growing with 20cm purple flower spikes. Good for ground cover, flowering between April & June. Much loved by pollinators especially bees. It has a long history of medicinal uses including as an anti-inflammatory, an anti-oxidant, and to treat stress, anxiety, bleeding, bruising ... and hangovers !*

## Broad-leaved willow herb



*Small pink flowers May to Sept. Valuable food plant for various butterflies and moths... including the stunning giant hawk moths*

## Knapweed



*A hardy perennial that's a member of the daisy family. Pinky purple thistle-like flowers that are attractive to many pollinators including bees, butterflies and hoverflies. Flowers June to Sept. It's a rich source of pollen, and its seeds are an important food source for various birds including bullfinches and goldfinches.*

## Devils-bit scabious



*Another hardy perennial much loved by pollinators. The deep blue to violet flowering heads appear between July & Oct, and resemble pin cushions. Its medicinal uses include the treatment of respiratory conditions and inflammation, and as a blood purifier. Folklore says it is called 'Devils-bit' because the Devil, resentful of the plant's medicinal properties, bit off part of the plant's roots to stunt its growth.*



## Meadowsweet



*A member of the rose family though you wouldn't know it from its frothy creamy white flowers that appear between June and October. It loves moist soil so you'll see it growing close to the drainage ditch that crosses the Keep.*

## Oxeye Daisies



*The largest native member of the daisy family, flowering between May and September. One of the most important plants for pollinators, it can spread itself either by seed or rhizomes (underground runners). The leaves are edible and add a peppery/lemon taste to salads. The flowers have been used to treat asthma and anxiety, as well as eye conditions like conjunctivitis. The leaves and roots have also been used to treat colds and coughs.*

The fenced off area in the middle of the Keep has been planted with flowering shrubs to form a pollinator-friendly feature. They are now well established, and the fence surrounding them is slowly being demolished as the grazing ponies rub their backsides against it !

Two young oaks have been planted close to the footpath, one to mark the Queen's 70<sup>th</sup> Jubilee and the other to mark the coronation of King Charles.

Thanks to <https://diversegardens.co.uk/> for some of the images shown