



The Hidden History of Burrington Ham



Natural History

The natural character of the Ham has changed over the years. Early observations from writers such as F A Knight in the early part of the 19th century observe:

Nowhere else in the countryside do trees in autumn wear mellower or more striking tones of red and russet . . . In late summer sheets of yellow stonecrop, great masses of golden ragwort lend to its grey steep and grassy slopes the added charm of their rich and abundant colouring.

Trees he describes include elms which died back due to Dutch Elm disease in the 70s. Also dwarf yew trees and stunted storm beaten wayfaring trees anchored on rock ledges. He believed that Burrington Combe had once wooded but that the trees had been cut down for fuel for the lead and calamine furnaces. (F A Knight, 'The Heart of Mendip' 1915).

Victorian botanists record the diverse flora, including the long stalked cranesbill (J W White. Flora of Bristol 1898). Dorothy Hodge remembers bee orchids on the Ham and rosebay willow herbs marching along the banks of the lane back in the 1950s.



Left: Early Purple orchid. Right: Tormentil.



More recently local residents, Alan Green and Dudley Porch, describe the change from open grassland to a mainly wooded Ham. Alan would picnic and play in the 1940s up on the Ham and enjoy uninterrupted views from Long Rock to the village, counting every house in Burrington. The large resident rabbit population were responsible for maintaining this extensive open grassland habitat. Dudley describes how when driving home at night along the Ham Link, the lane adjacent to the Ham, 'We would see the Ham moving – it was sheer volume of rabbits moving away as the car headlights shone towards the Ham.'

Emmet Butts (ant hills) on Burrington Combe.

In the late 50s, the myxomatosis virus decimated the country's rabbit population. Since then the Ham has succeeded to a mainly woodland and scrub habitat and consequently those cherished views have been lost. Alan also recalls Oliver Brown, a farmer from many years ago collecting bracken from the Ham for winter bedding for his animals. Near Long Rock in the grassland areas are many ant hills. In the west country they are known as emmet butts. It is said that the volume of butts in an area can tell you how long the ground has been undisturbed grassland. A large part of Black Down and Burrington Ham was designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) in 1952. This means it is one of the country's best wildlife and geological sites. This site has been designated a SSSI because of the rich calcareous (limestone) grassland especially on the steep sides of Burrington Combe. The requirement of the SSSI is for the land owner to enter into a management agreement with Natural England. This involves delivering a management plan to ensure the special wildlife and geological value is maintained. Today bracken is cleared mechanically. Devon Ruby cattle as well as ponies graze on the Ham whilst goats have been reintroduced to the Combe. Wildlife surveys and monitoring have been and are regularly made by natural history groups and are lodged with the Bristol Regional Environmental Records and Somerset Environmental Records Offices.



Devon Ruby cattle grazing in Burrington Combe.