

August Nature Notes

Awst, An Lughnasda, Weodmonath or, to you and me, August! Named, they tell us, in honour of the deified Roman Emperor Augustus.

This is the month of the harvest and the end of hay cutting (well with an exception or two it seems). Lammass Day or loaf-mass day is the festival of the commencement of harvest when the first cut sheaf of corn was taken to the church and blessed. Now, of course, with better science the start of harvest is likely to be somewhat spread.

August the 13th is the feast of St Cassian the patron saint of schoolteachers. Legend has it that he was so disliked by his pupils that they stabbed him to death with iron pen-nibs. Fortunate, perhaps, that his feast day falls within the school summer holidays!

August is quite a good month for some hedgerow gathering and there seems to be an abundance of blackberries this year, there for the picking. The elder berries are coming on nicely and also seem to be producing a good crop - and what a year for fruit! Plum, apple and pear trees are laden. On the ground there are a few edible fungi about. The beech mast is doing well as are the hazel nuts that will, of course, be generally taken by squirrels before they are ripe for us. However, you can eat them in the early green stage: they are milky and slightly fruity in taste but they lack the lovely oily richness of the mature nut. They don't ripen if you pick and keep them so eat as soon as you have them.

I have to confess that many a dog walk has been rather well extended by the sight of a combine harvester at work. There is nothing more relaxing than sitting on the edge of a field being harvested and watching the activities of the combine and the supporting tractors and trailers. The gentle hum of the combine seems to complement the humming and buzzing of the bees and insects. Modern day harvesting is a far cry from days gone by when the fields would have a long line of men working steadily across the crop with scythes, stopping, perhaps, at each end to sharpen the blade and take a quick glug of cold tea from the bottle.

A year or so back at the Herts County Show, they were proudly demonstrating the latest and largest combine harvester available and the first to arrive in this country. Of course, these super large machines need very big fields in which to work and that means fewer hedges for the wildlife. There is a big debate at the moment as to whether the priority for our farm land should be food production, conservation or building. We need more food to feed an ever increasing world population but should it be at the cost of losing our native wildlife? Do we really want houses where we have arable land? A few hundred years ago a squirrel could leave West Wales and hop over to Norfolk without leaving the trees; these days it would be lucky not to get squashed on a motorway!

In some parts of the country there was a harvest tradition of "Crying the Neck." The

last stalks standing were cut and either plaited or simply held as a bunch and paraded around the field and sometimes the village. In the West Country and particularly Cornwall, the reaper would hold the bunch above his head and cry, "I avee, I avee, I avee". The response, "whatavee, whatavee, whatavee?" would be met with "a neck, a neck, a neck." A similar ceremony was performed in parts of East Anglia but does anyone know if it came this far down?

I remember the sunny days of my childhood where the sound of grass being mowed in the local gardens was a muted and gentle rattling and whirring from the pushed mower. Now it seems however small the lawn or patch of grass a motor or electric mower is required and the raucous din sounds throughout village and town on an otherwise peaceful summer's day. My late father pushed his Qualcast cylinder mower up and down his quite large lawn until he was in his 80's; he said that it helped keep him fit. Perhaps a return to such a machine would not only produce a quieter Sunday but also reduce fees to the gym! Now, there's a thought!