

Spring flowers of our meadows, banks and woodlands, some familiar, some not:



I think everyone knows the Primrose – the “Prima Rosa”, the first flower of spring. Delicate yellow blooms on damp clayey banks, grassy meadows and woodland clearings. Common in the countryside but less so near towns because so many plants have been “removed” into gardens. Adopted as the County Flower of Devon where it is especially prolific in the high-banked country lanes. Local papermakers used to present little bunches to their customers to provide ‘a breath of Devon’.

Cowslips adorn our meadows and banks and are nostalgic reminders of the once flower-rich pastures of rural England. Adopted as the County Flower of Northampton, Worcestershire and Surrey, the ‘freckled Cowslip’ appears in Shakespeare’s Henry V as a sign of fertile and well-managed pasture and is the vital ingredient of Cowslip wine. It’s name, and the local variant ‘cowslups’, both mean cowpat – they flowered where a cow had ‘slupped’!



If you stand south of Mildenhall and west of Stowmarket near a bit of ancient woodland, you are probably within walking distance of Suffolk’s county flower the Oxlip. Think apricot scents drifting from a woodland carpet of creamy-yellow flowers; think Suffolk!



This distinctive plant of well-established woods on the East Anglian boulder clay has had more scholarly prose written about it than almost any other wild flower. Like the native bluebell it has suffered from a three-pronged attack – loss of habitat, removal into gardens and hybridisation with related species, usually the primrose. Because the hybrids are most attractive, strongly scented and fertile, in both cases they quickly replace the parents. The true oxlip has flowers on only one side of its stalk.

This leaves us with “Lady’s Fingers”, which are also known as False Oxlips or Paigles. They are found wherever Primroses and Cowslips or Oxlips grow together and are, as you’ve probably guessed, the hybrids – sometimes between all three species!

Vigorous and showy, variable in form and colour and resembling a garden primula, they are best described as “a bunch of primroses on a cowslip stalk”. No one wants them as their County Flower and the purists hate them, but for me they are an

integral part of my child-hood. Together with pink primroses and red cowslips my father and grandfather used to collect them from far and wide across rural East Anglia and transplant them into the woods and meadows of our small family farm in south Norfolk, where some survive to this day.

The “experts” will tell you that coloured primroses and cowslips can only come about through cross-fertilisation with garden species. This may be true in some cases, but I’ve found them a long way from any garden, and my Granddad always told me that a yellow primrose planted upside-down under a cow pat would come up pink!

Either way, there are two pink primrose plants amongst many yellow ones on the grassy mound between the car park and the football field on the HLS Occold site {formerly site of a row of cottages known as ‘The Barracks’}, and many other yellow ones on the boundary banks around the site. Next to the QA building {behind Elm Farm} we have a good clump of cowslips – one plant four years ago, a dozen plants this year, & others around site – but no red ones that I’m aware of!



I’ve talked a lot about “County Flowers”; these were selected by popular vote through the “Plantlife” organisation ([www.plantlife.org.uk](http://www.plantlife.org.uk)). For those of you not from the counties I’ve covered, here are some of yours:

- Norfolk and Essex – the Common Poppy, blood red flowers of cornfields and disturbed ground
- Cambridgeshire – the Pasqueflower, hairy purple anemones on ancient earthworks, in legend it grows on the graves of Viking warriors
- Huntingdonshire – the Water-violet, spikes of delicate lilac blossoms cheering up many a black fen ditch in the old county of Huntingdon