July: some summer wildflowers

There are lots of yellow and gold flowers in the short grass on the way into church - a few of them are dandelions, but most are a bit

smaller and, frankly, difficult to identify without a close look with a hand lens. I think we have autumn hawkbit (smooth leaves, with finger-like lobes, and a flower head that tapers into the stem), common catsear or flatweed (hairier, less lobed leaves – apparently like a cat's ear - and flower head bell-like to the stem), and mouse eared hawkweed (very hairy, plain leaves and a bowl-like flower head). Hawkweeds and hawkbits get their names from the belief that, as Pliny the Elder put it some 2000 years ago in *Naturalis historia*, 'the hawk tears it open and sprinkles its eyes with the juice, and so dispels

any dimness of sight of which it is apprehensive'. Hmmm... Elsewhere, the taller plant with similar flowers but branched stems and beech-like leaves is nipplewort, which takes its name from its flower buds, and of course the churchyard also contains lots of groundsel. All of these produce nectar used by butterflies, moths and other insects, and on sunny days can be covered in stunning marmalade hoverflies.

A pre-industrial, and sustainable, air freshener, Lady's bedstraw gives off the scent of new-mown hay as it dries and was used in straw mattresses. Its scent is due to coumarin[1], which, while it smells great, tastes rather bitter and is thought to be part of the plant's defences against herbivores. Apparently, the smell also repels fleas – another good reason for including it in your bedding. On the other hand, it doesn't repel moths and it's an important food for several moth caterpillars. There are also stories of it being used instead of rennet to make cheese (its French name is 'caille-lait jaune' – yellow milk curdler), but apparently this doesn't work (or perhaps, as Richard Mabey diplomatically suggests in Flora Britannica, the recipe has been lost). It was, however, traditionally used to provide the extra strong yellow to double Gloucester cheese, and can be used as a dye. And it is still sometimes used as a food and drink flavouring[2].

[1] Coumarin is mildly toxic, especially to rodents, and chemical derivatives such as warfarin – a potent anticoagulant - are commonly used as rodenticides

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The taller, highly scented white flowers are yarrow, a plant with a long cultural history. The word 'yarrow' seems to come from the Old English (Anglo-Saxon) word *gearwe* ('g' is often pronounced like 'y' in Old English – as in daegs eage = day's eye = daisy) and the Old Norse word *gørvi*. *Gearwe means clothing, particularly armour*, but seems also to have been used for the plant itself – perhaps because it was seen as protective? The Norse word remains is modern English as the word 'gear'. Some claim that it's also the origin of the placename Jarrow, where Bede lived and worked, but it seems more likely the place name comes from the Gyrwas[2], referring to marsh dwellers. In herbal medicine it is used particularly to stop bleeding, hence its mediaeval name *herba militaris*. Apparently soldiers would carry it with them into battle, while its scientific name, *Achillea multiflorium* is based on the story that Achilles used yarrow to treat his comrades in Bronze Age battles. But it has even more ancient folkloric associations with luck, beauty, romance and mystic wellbeing far beyond utilitarian medicine. There's even pollen evidence from a Neanderthal grave of somebody being buried on a bed of yarrow mixed with other wildflowers.

It can also add a bitter, aniseed-like peppery oomph to salads – but a little goes a long way so do be careful if you try it.

[2] Some sources suggest Jarrow takes its name from the Gyrwas tribe/mini kingdom of Germanic Angles. But they lived in the Fens, nowhere near Northumbria. So I suspect that Jarrow simply comes from a more general Gyrwas, meaning the people living in any boggy area rather than the Anglian tribe. The Gyrwas tribe proper, however, owned land that included the town of Medeshamstede, where in the C10 (after it had been destroyed by Danes and then liberated by the newly self-styled Anglo-Saxons) an Abby was built, dedicated to St Peter – hence Medeshamstede was renamed Peterborough… and our Diocese…