



BULWICK ESTATES

Biodiversity Project – 2023 Review

After years of planning and following decades of past careful land management, Bulwick Estates was delighted to launch its new 1000-acre (400ha) conservation project in January 2023, in partnership with Natural England (NE).

This report summarises what we have been doing during the first, extremely busy, twelve months, in changing land use, bringing new people and animals to the estate and implementing a massive programme of capital works to facilitate the changes.

Grassland creation, restoration & management

This project is focused around restoring, enhancing and managing nearly 800 acres (320ha) of grassland habitats, mainly on degraded land that was previously quarried for ironstone. The plan is to increase both species and structural diversity, mainly in the form of traditional hay meadows and wood pasture.



A bee orchid near Spanhoe Airfield

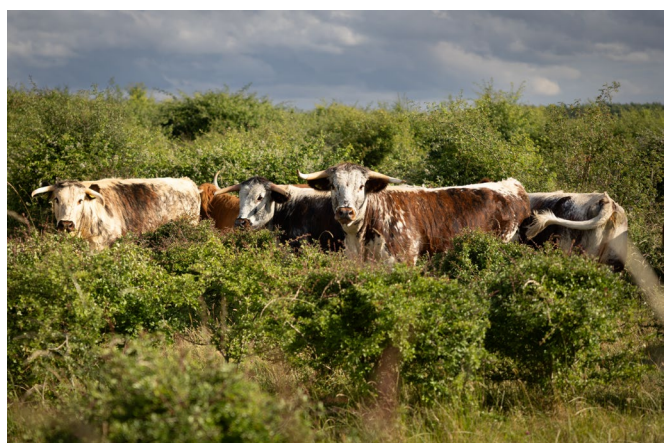
Herbivores are the powerhouse behind this ecological system and, at this early stage, rare-breed cattle (and crosses) are doing the heavy lifting. There are the iconic English Longhorns of our long-established grazier, Gerald Adams, now joined by Highlands, brought to the estate by Angus Clarke.

Some of the Highlands have been grazing back the rough vegetation on Bulwick Meadows SSSI, protecting its rare wetland flora, but they've not been working alone. Angus and a few volunteers also bent their backs, scything areas of sedge and manually dragging out the cuttings to avoid any damage to the sensitive soils.



Sedge cutting on Bulwick Meadows SSSI

Angus rears his cattle in a chemical free, 'agro-ecological' form of regenerative farming. He sells the excellent meat, along with Bulwick Estates' wild venison, through his wife Kirsty's award-winning farm shop (www.waterloocottagefarm.co.uk) and we love to eat this meat in a mutually supportive virtuous circle.



Wood pasture English Longhorn on former quarry land at Spanhoe



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Arable reversion and enhancement

We have converted 230 acres (93ha) of ploughland to new meadows and pastures, to make an estate-wide network of connected habitats. These link both with each other and with ecologically important adjacent areas, such as Forestry England’s ancient Wakerley Great Wood on our north-eastern boundary.



Wood pasture creation in White Buck Field, Wakerley Great Wood behind

Grassland has also been created next to the River Welland, aiming to slow and filter water flowing off the arable land on the steep valley side rising up to the Rockingham Forest plateau.



Lapwing breeding plot overlooking the Welland Valley floodplain

Most of these new areas were sown after the 2023 arable harvest, and we have since faced considerable challenges with prolonged and almost unprecedented wet weather and flooding. In the first half of 2024 we will focus on an extended period of grassland establishment, with targeted re-seeding where needed. Who said working with nature was straightforward?

In addition to turning over arable fields to grass, we have also undertaken conservation works in those arable fields that are being retained. This includes:

- creation of five individual 2.5 acre (1 ha) areas of bare ground, suitable for lapwings to breed;
- 6.6 miles (11km) of conservation headlands and margins to protect, buffer and soften the interface between arable farming and watercourses, ancient woodland and hedgerows;
- 19 miles (30km) of hedgerow entered into a new conservation management regime to sustain habitat and food, especially for wintering birds such as fieldfares and redwings.

Further work to help farmland birds through the winter has included the creation of 60 acres (24ha) of seed-bearing winter-bird-food plots across the estate. This has been supplemented by broadcasting nearly 12 tonnes of wild bird seed through the winter to help struggling farmland birds such as yellowhammers, linnets and skylarks.



Spendlove Contracting sensitive scrub management in Shotley Quarry



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Capital works

The above land-use changes are for long-term conservation gain and to adjust to them, we have needed to undertake a large programme of capital operations.

So far, we have:

- spent 12 weeks with a mini-digger and flail reducing the scrub cover in Shotley Quarry to secure our most species-rich ground flora and invertebrate community;
- erected 4.5 miles (7km) of new cattle fencing, half a mile (0.8km) of sheep fencing, 15 new wooden field gates and 4 new metal bridleway gates;



Fencing by RHAB Fencing Contractors

- installed three large corrals to facilitate cattle management;
- built 150 individual cattle tree-guards for the new wood pasture;
- undertaken tree surgery to sustain 15 important parkland and traditional orchard trees in Bulwick Park, and felled a further 12 trees that were damaging Bulwick Hall’s listed garden wall, helping to re-create the hall and garden’s original setting as a visually discrete feature at the centre of the parkland.



Veteran tree management in Bulwick Park



Tree Management by UK Treework Ltd

Educational access

One challenge on which we are still working hard is educational access for school children. We have made a significant investment in developing an excellent farm-visit offer for local primary schools but, unfortunately, while the visits are free of charge, many schools are struggling with the costs of travelling to us. Interest from schools is growing for 2024, and we are exploring options with local charities and businesses to find funding to help overcome this barrier to the children learning first-hand how wildlife conservation, farming and food production can all go hand in hand.



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Angus Clarke teaching a group of school children

Next Steps in 2024

As we roll into 2024, themes for this year include improving the water supply for cattle across the new grassland together with a possible pond-creation programme to supplement water supply while increasing wetland habitat diversity on the dry, old quarried land.



Allan installing water supply

There will be a second phase of fencing, once the ground dries up, and a big push to complete the remaining cattle tree-guards bringing the total to over 800. These will be planted with native trees next winter, along with two new hedges to flank and enclose two of our new grassland linkages. There will also be further heritage restoration work in Bulwick Park.



John and Sam erecting a cattle tree guard

In a parallel exercise, we are exploring with Natural England (NE) the potential for the re-introduction of lost native plants and animals. As an exciting first step, we are working with NE and our neighbours on a water vole re-introduction project for the River Welland, the Willow Brook, and their tributaries that rise and flow across the estate.

A recent highlight for us has been the return of otters to the estate. Water voles have evolved to live with otters but, by contrast, water vole numbers were devastated by the release of the exotic American mink for which they have little natural defence. So our first task is to ensure we have no mink and this involves, where necessary, humane trapping and culling in partnership with the Waterlife Recovery Trust.

Monitoring

We are extremely grateful for the growing support we are receiving from a network of biological monitoring volunteers, many of whom are experts in their field. They have been giving up their time to help us understand the outcomes of our work, and information they provide will help the project evolve over the coming years. Some of the volunteers are members of conservation organisations detailed in the Appendix at the end of the newsletter.



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Inaugural meeting of the Bulwick Estates Biological Monitoring Group

Woodlands

Conservation work on Bulwick Estates also takes place in its 500 acres (200ha) of woodland, over half of which is ancient. Woodland management is part funded through the Countryside Stewardship scheme in partnership with the Forestry Commission, and 2024 will see us reviewing and re-writing our 10-year woodland management plan, to further integrate farmland and woodland conservation work, while conserving, protecting and enhancing these important habitat areas.



Thinning in Dryleas Wood

Recognition and awards

Although the project is very much in its infancy, it has already started to attract wider interest. In September, we were honoured to host delegates from the IUCN National Committee of Japan, who were undertaking a “Study on UK Agri-environmental Policy and the Role of UK NCOs”.

In November, we enjoyed an exciting day out, with NE and our project consultants, at the Landscape Institute’s (LS) prestigious awards ceremony. The project’s feasibility study, as written by consultants Southern Green, with biological input from MKA Ecology, was recognised as one of four national finalists in the Biodiversity, Conservation and Enhancement category.



Landscape Institute’s Annual Awards Ceremony

Further information

For further information about the Bulwick Estates and its countryside and conservation work, please visit: www.bulwick.com or email rupert@bulwick.com.



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Appendix

Organisations with members involved in biological monitoring

British Bryological Society

Butterfly Conservation

Natural England

Northamptonshire Amphibian and Reptile Group (NorthantsARG)

Northamptonshire Flora Group

Northamptonshire Invertebrate Group

Northampton Moth Group

Rockingham Forest Ringing Group

Rockingham Forest Vision

Waterlife Recovery Trust

Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire and Northamptonshire