

Creating a Nature Recovery Network in Eynsham – report from © Catriona Bass, 16 September 2019



Gathering seed from Long Mead Floodplain Hay Meadow to sow at Park Meadow. Long Mead has well over 150 different of flowers and grasses (more than 40 in each square meter).

If you are wondering what the earth stripes are that have appeared at Park Meadow (next to the sports field), they are part of a new 7-acre wildflower meadow - a great gift to Eynsham and to local wildlife from [Neve's Bees](#) (Julie and Ross Macken). It is the first meadow in Long Mead's farmer-led Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project and is a collaboration between Long Mead and [BBOWT](#). But it is Neve's Bees who have funded it and have had the courage to plough up their grass for the project. Using flower seed from Long Mead's ancient hay meadow, the soil preparation, sowing and rolling were expertly carried out by Eynsham's Graham Podbery and Simon Webb from Evenlode Farm. Great support was provided by BBOWT's Kate Prudden and Lisa Lane.

In a couple of years, the village will have 7 more acres to add to Robin Saunders' wildflower meadow in Station Road, David Rivalin's meadow and other private wildflower patches. Listen out for the bees – and myriad other species whose loss has led to the decline of our best loved birds and animals and created problems for pollinating our food crops.

During the twenty years that we have been farming Long Mead, we have noticed a dramatic decline in familiar species. We no longer have hares or sparrows or nesting curlew or crested grebes – even the rabbits have disappeared. And we have no idea what has been lost in the range of hay meadow invertebrate species, which are yet to be comprehensively studied. Long Mead itself is a fragment of a vanishing habitat. In the UK, only 4 square miles of this type of floodplain hay meadow remains – an area the size of Heathrow

Creating a Nature Recovery Network in Eynsham – report from © Catriona Bass, 16 September 2019

Airport. Yet, with climate change, it is critical for flood control, carbon storage, food security, as well as for biodiversity.

In May, the UN offered a dire warning about environmental decline worldwide: *“The health of ecosystems on which we and all other species depend is deteriorating more rapidly than ever. We are eroding the very foundations of our economies, livelihoods, food security, health and quality of life... It is not too late to make a difference, but only if we start now at every level from local to global. Through ‘transformative change’, nature can still be conserved, restored and used sustainably.”*

Last year, in response to biodiversity decline, we launched two nature recovery initiatives – the Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project and Long Mead Biodiversity Research Project. The research project brings together the long-term knowledge of local farmers with that of academics to understand these meadow habitats and how they might be re-introduced into commercial agriculture, e.g. through targeted subsidies that recognise their added value to society, or through research that shows, for example, the benefits of meadow hay as a food supplement. Meadow hay doesn’t have the energy values of modern silage, which makes it uneconomical. However, the herbs of old meadows made them once known as ‘hospital fields’, where sick livestock would be grazed. If science can lend weight to folklore, meadow hay might regain its commercial value, not as a general feed but as a food supplement, especially as concern for chemical use and the demand for organic food increases.

Our second initiative, The Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project, aims to create, over time, a ‘nature recovery network’ that connects up existing hay meadows along the Thames between Oxford and the National Nature Reserve at Chimney. Of the fragments of floodplain hay meadow that remain in the UK, a large proportion lie along this stretch of the Thames and are designated wildlife sites. Working in partnership with other local farmers, including [FAI Farms](#) at Wytham, [Swinford Meadows](#), Church Farm at South Leigh and others, the project aims to restore the intervening hay meadows or to re-create them where they have been lost entirely.

Creating a Nature Recovery Network in Eynsham – report from © Catriona Bass, 16 September 2019



Wildflowers have been returned to almost all these meadows, making this stretch of the Thames unique. We have here a local nature recovery network but also great carbon storage, flood control, commercial crops of hay and grazing (containing mineral and vitamin rich herbs) as well as beautiful meadows for us to walk in.

Critical to both projects, is the long-term practical knowledge of farmers, which has been somewhat overlooked in the environmental debate to date. If nature recovery is to be more than tiny isolated museums of biodiversity, farmers' input is essential. The project imagines a future where species-rich hay meadows can once again be an integral part of commercial agriculture, where the River Thames floods to create a beautiful and fully functioning rural environment rather than to damage our urban homes. It imagines a future where citizens and visitors in Oxfordshire can enjoy the Upper Thames river valley with fields of wildflowers, butterflies, birds and other wildlife, experiencing the health and well-being benefits that earlier generations took for granted.

If anyone is up for following Ross and Julie's example to create a wildflower meadow please get in touch - longmead.countywildlifesite@gmail.com or come and see us at the [GreenTEA](#) Autumn Festival on 19 October. From June 2020, we will be running Back Garden Wildflower Workshops on Long Mead. Schools are particularly welcome to engage in the Long Mead projects or other outdoor learning activities. Visits are free and can be tailored to fit the National Curriculum. Subsidised transport is available via the County Council's Comet buses. Through our care-farming activities, with our partners FarmAbility, Wytham, and Eynsham's L.O.V.E. (Local Organic Volunteering Economies) run by Raul Ospina Bonill, adults with learning disabilities and autism can play an important role in the Thames Valley Wildflower Meadow Restoration Project. For fabulous organic beeswax products visit Neve's Bees nevesbees.co.uk