

# Case Study

## Westland Farm Meadow

### Background

Westland Farm Meadow, owned by the Woodland Trust, comprises 2.5ha of species-rich grassland just to the east of Bedham in West Sussex. The site is designated Open Access land and The Wey-South Long Distance Path runs along its eastern boundary.

The meadow came to my attention in early 2018 whilst exploring my new 'patch', having recently started work as a Ranger for the South Downs National Park Authority (SDNPA). Given the site's Open Access status, it was clear the meadow wasn't fulfilling its potential for public access and enjoyment. The stock netting around the boundary had mostly fallen over – concealing accompanying barbed wire in the undergrowth; a hazard to wildlife and people – and the two stiles providing access were no longer safe for use.

I made contact with Phil Truluck (Woodland Trust's South East Site Manager) who was keen to work in partnership to enhance the site. A follow-up visit in summer 2020 made it clear that the species-rich meadow was more significant than first thought, and the potential for nature recovery – as well as improvements to public access and enjoyment – was considerable. Work began in 2020, with the relative quiet of the immediate post-pandemic period providing the perfect opportunity to get the project underway.

*A new oak kissing gate at Westland Farm Meadow, West Sussex*



### The project

In June 2020 a baseline ecological survey was conducted by meadow specialist, Dawn Brickwood. The survey report, and accompanying species and soil data, was used to inform next steps. Given the significant variety of species present – as well as the proportion of forbs to grasses (close to the 20/80% ratio of the classic and increasingly rare MG5 unimproved neutral grassland community) – it wasn't considered necessary to undertake any enhancement through seeding or green haying. Instead, an improved management regime was deemed sufficient to gradually enhance the meadow over several years. This was to be made possible by re-fencing the site to allow grazing by cattle, as well as sporadic low-intensity grazing by sheep and continuing with regular hay cuts.

The first phase of the work involved the installation of almost a kilometre of fencing with stock netting and barbed wire, costing £6700 and funded by the SDNPA. In addition, £2245 of SDNPA funding was used to install two 4ft locally sourced oak kissing gates to make the site more accessible to visitors, including those with limited mobility and families with push chairs. As a contribution to the overall costs, the Woodland Trust donated £500 to the project.

The fencing work and kissing gate installation was completed in December 2020. Currently, a grazing plan is being developed collaboratively with the SDNPA, the Woodland Trust and the tenant grazier to ensure more beneficial site management in the future. To support this plan, two volunteer surveyors have been recruited and will start monitoring the site, recording any changes in species diversity and abundance, from June 2021.

“The project has improved public access infrastructure at Westland Farm and enables greater flexibility for conservation grazing at the site, both of which fulfil the Trusts objectives of providing suitable public access to countryside and habitat conservation and enhancement.”

Phil Truluck, Woodland Trust Site Manager

## The outcome

Since completing the project, Westland Farm Meadow is now more accessible to people of different abilities to enjoy, including those using Wey-South Long Distance Path. The improved grazing management regime will make a valuable contribution to nature recovery, creating habitats that are “more, bigger, better and joined up” (Westland Farm Meadow will hopefully become an important link to the nearby and internationally important meadow resource at the Mens Nature Reserve).

Furthermore, the project showcases examples of conservation best-practice. By creating a ‘tunnel’ for the fence-line to pass through, and leaving the encroaching scrub and fallen down trees intact (the meadow is surrounded by ancient semi-natural woodland on all but one side), the site’s ‘soft edges’ were preserved – something the Woodland Trust, with their primary focus on wooded habitats, were keen to demonstrate. In particular, large and partially fallen trees hanging over the fence were also left in situ, and wooden rails installed (with strainers either side) so that, should a tree eventually collapse, only the rails would need replacing and the integrity of the adjacent fence-line would be preserved.

Another positive outcome of the project arose from legitimate concerns raised by local residents, regarding the ability of wildlife to move freely through the landscape after the installation of fencing. This provided an opportunity for all to engage with the project, prompting wide-ranging discussion and knowledge sharing on fencing best-practice. These discussions also led to the recruitment of two enthusiastic, young volunteers who live immediately adjacent to the site (daughters of a local resident who first raised concerns) to undertake ongoing ecological monitoring.

## The future

The concerns raised by local residents regarding animal welfare and movement, prompted extensive dialogue, both within the SDNPA and with external partners, including the Sussex Wildlife Trust, RSPB and Woodland Trust). As a result, there has been useful knowledge sharing between partners and the positive engagement of local residents with the project and its wider benefits. This engagement led to the securing of long term site monitoring which is crucial to identify potential improvements and to assess the success of the project.

By continuing to work closely with the Woodland Trust and the tenant grazier to develop a grazing management plan – as well as ensure the maintenance of the newly installed fence – it is hoped that Westland Farm Meadow will be a thriving, species-rich habitat and a place for the public to access and enjoy for years to come.

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### The South Downs National Park Partnership Management Plan (PMP)

**2020–25** The Partnership Management Plan 2020-2025 brings together and coordinates the aspirations of many different partners who help contribute towards the purposes for which it was designated.

**This project successfully achieved the following PMP outcomes:**

**Outcome 1.1 Protect Landscape Character**

**Outcome 1.3 Create Green Infrastructure**

**Outcome 3.1 Join Up Habitats**

**Outcome 5.2 Improve Accessibility**

<https://www.southdowns.gov.uk/partnership-management-plan/>