

# Field Notes

Newsletter of the Ernest Cook Trust  
WINTER 2025/26 • Celebrating the season

## Fairford Leys

20 years on - a model for  
thoughtful land development

## Environmental Stewardship

Rooted in nature, shaping the future

## Soil

Ed takes us on a journey  
to reconnect with the  
ground beneath us

**“People tend to care about things  
they have a connection to”**

We catch up with Julia Aglionby for a deep-dive  
conversation about land and learning

*Cover image is taken at Lea Wood on the Fairford Estate in Gloucestershire,  
using horse-logging for woodland conservation work*

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# Welcome!

## Let's begin with some thoughts on the season from our Chief Executive, Ed Ikin

**"As I started thinking about winter for this edition, I realised that I have two profoundly different relationships with this season..."**

The parts of winter I begrudge come through my human-made interactions: trundling around the M25 in the dark, the mournful glow of computer monitors as light fades, the stifling heaviness of overheated rooms when I'm wearing my thickest jumper.

The parts of winter I embrace are mediated by nature. As a child, I cared for the youngstock (young heifer calves selected to join the dairy herd) before school. The same early starts, the same overwhelming, pitch-heavy darkness we all experience at this time of year, but the stimulus of expectant, curious animals keen to interact, the reward of physical work, clearing out and re-bedding the stalls and the visual affirmation of a job well done. As a horticulturist, winter was the time to move the garden forwards free from the relentlessness of the growing season, to build walls, restore paths and plant trees. The clarity I experienced working on bright winter days was unparalleled.

Winter inside can feel overwhelming. We see endless darkness, we hear pounding rain, we feel cold that (in the case of our old and draughty house) creeps into our bones. Winter outside can feel affirming and stimulating. Seeing the dawn creeping across a landscape as the darkness lifts turns out to be endless variations of light. The chill we felt as we first stepped outside soon dispelled by the vigour of exercise. The landscape pared back and subtle, a stage cleared for winter's star performers: the mistle thrush's rich song, the shocking pink of the female hazel flowers, the purple haze of swelling birch buds.

**So if you can, get outside whenever you can this winter. See the dark and the cold and the rain as the only hurdles between you and extraordinary, life-enriching experiences."**



## Force for Nature • Tori Broadbent

Tori reflects on the experiences past and present that have shaped her commitment to environmental stewardship. From early encounters with nature to the insights gained throughout her career, these influences now guide her work on Environment & Natural Capital with colleagues, farmers and partners to strengthen the Trust's environmental approach.

If I had to trace my love of nature and the land back to a particular moment, I'd probably be transported back to being eight years old and in an old rowing boat on a small lake in Dorset. Not an adult in sight, I was free to explore and experience the thrill and peril of negotiating large oars and navigating reeds and woody debris.

As an adult I look back on this experience and there is every chance what seemed like a lake was actually only a small pond, but for the impact it left on me, this doesn't matter. The watery environment, the space, the peace, the big skies, the birds overhead and the variety of plants all around me offered a stark contrast to my normal life, growing up in London.

This experience, like many others I was fortunate enough to have in the English countryside, stayed with me and fostered a deep and enduring love of nature and the environment. After leaving school, I went to study geography (and not only because I also love maps!) and then on to focus on environmental technology.

These studies marked the start of a twenty-year career in environmental and sustainability roles, which have allowed me to explore how we can reduce environmental impacts alongside delivering practical, commercial and social benefits.

After a season spent caring for my children, I was keen to find a role that allowed me to work more closely with the land and nature. As luck would have it, the Trust was in the process of creating its first role focused on nature and the environment and I was excited at the opportunity to be part of the next step on their environmental journey.

Since joining the organisation in December 2024, I've been kept busy learning all about the Trust's work and land, including spending time with colleagues, farm businesses and many of the Trust's peers and partners. As part of this, I've been exploring opportunities to do more for nature, climate, and the environment in a way that supports farming, learning and our communities.

**Building on some great work already, moving forwards I will be looking at initiatives that allow us to:**

- **Create, connect and enhance habitats – helping increase the variety, abundance and diversity of species and the connections between them, improve soil health and water quality, reduce flood risk and build climate resilience**
- **Reduce energy use and carbon emissions, increase use of renewable energy and store more carbon on our land**
- **Improve the environmental performance of our homes, developments, investments and ways of working**

**"Having recently agreed our approach, I am really excited to see what can be achieved in collaboration with our partners and I feel fortunate to work for an organisation such as the Trust, whose core mission is so interconnected with nature and the environment."**



Outstanding in their field: Tori (far left) with colleagues and external partners on the Little Dalby Estate in Leicestershire, discussing further nature enhancement opportunities

Little Dalby  
in the snow

# A conversation with Julia Aglionby

Julia Aglionby swims in the River Eden every few days – all year round. Given winter temperatures in Cumbria are usually about 2°C this feels quite extraordinary, until she also casually mentions that a few years ago she swam the 85-mile length of the river with some friends. Then you remember that this is someone who runs the Foundation for Common Land, is Commissioner for the Food, Farming & Countryside Commission and is a Professor in Practice at the University of Cumbria, as well as being a trustee of Susan's Farm, the organic pasture for life Care Farm near Carlisle where she has lived for over 25 years – and although it's not her day job, she can still be found hedge planting, feeding, and checking the stock there every week.

So with Julia, you learn to adjust your expectations a bit!

Although she wasn't born here, Julia describes herself as "rooted" to the unique land of the Eden Valley. Today, her home at Susan's Farm covers about 150 acres and farms Longhorn cattle, North of England Mule sheep, geese and hens. The farm is run commercially and they sell their meat directly – in Julia's words, "**we are not a petting zoo**" – but as a Care Farm their objective is to transform people's lives through educational and therapeutic activity on a farm. And at the heart of this transformation is the connection between land and livelihoods.

**"There isn't a right or wrong way to run a farm, but we're encouraging people who come to our farm to actually understand the connection between the activities they're doing, the care of animals, the production of food and the care of the environment".**

And the role that this connection can play is where Julia, Susan's Farm and the Ernest Cook Trust have both similar practices and deeply held shared values. Throughout our conversation with Julia, we kept returning to the need to work together and create some join-up between our systems and our people – especially young people.

**"The opportunities for young people, within the land and nature sector, are very high – and it's not necessarily something that's promoted at school or seen as a career. And that's an area where Susan's Farm and our**

**charitable objects really chime with those of the Ernest Cook Trust."**

There are so many different ways we can connect young people with these opportunities – and in Cumbria especially, we are working with Julia across many of these.

Susan's Farm is the recipient of one of our grants, which funds an Outdoor Learning Leader who works particularly with secondary school children. Julia also has been involved in the development of the Land and Nature Skills Service (LANSS) in Cumbria, which connects people with learning and training opportunities in the land-and nature-based sectors across the county – including our own former apprentice, Jon Fell. And she leads students at Low Beckside Farm, the Cumbrian hill farm which the Trust bought in 2021, in her role at the University of Cumbria. So our connections are many!

Whether Susan's Farm is welcoming primary school children, connecting young people with career opportunities, or helping adult Care Farmers on their site, for Julia the most important thing is to be responsive and dynamic. We have to adapt to what's needed.

An obvious example is how Susan's Farm offers alternative provision – **"for people for whom being in the classroom doesn't necessarily enable them to learn. They don't thrive in that setting. So people come to us on a long-term basis for a day or two a week, or over six weeks for a shorter intervention programme."**



## "The key is to give the people the tools to do the work"

**"Our current farm worker, he started out as an alternative provision student on our farm and now he's come back. He was driving lorries for a time and now he's working for us. So that's really lovely to see that full circle."**

And for some young people post-Covid, that means acknowledging the rise in anxiety and the role of outdoor learning and nature connectedness in answering this crisis. Julia recalls a child who was almost housebound with anxiety, needed several home visits, including with the farm dog who they could see from the window before they were persuaded to come visit the farm. Once there, they flourished.

But there is good reason for this perseverance and commitment to engaging young people with the land. As Julia says: **"I'm always encouraged when I meet people in their late teens and early twenties. I'm really keen that we create positive opportunities in the land and nature sectors."**

A very tangible way that Julia is helping shape a positive sector is through her

professional development courses at the University of Cumbria, where she has been a Professor in Practice for six years. These courses cover a range of skills from farming for net zero or farm business opportunities to collaborative practice for land management and mapping of environmental assets. As Julia says: **"the key is to give people the tools to do the work. It's very easy to have these wonderful ideas and ambitions, but in the end there are actually a lot of nuts and bolts to doing this work. It's a bit like saying 'I'd like a bridge to go from Kyle of Lochalsh to Skye' – it's lovely to have the idea of the bridge, and you can draw a picture, but you do need the engineers!"**

We know that this is not an easy time to bring people into land-based careers – even with tangible and tactical support it remains a bit like swimming upstream! There are a lot of questions to answer in the sector and beyond.

**"As a society, what are our ambitions? What is our vision for society? How do we balance commercial interests with a thriving, cohesive community?"**

One issue at the heart of these big questions for the farming sector, and that is being discussed more and more often in public spaces outside the sector, is around British food and farming – our food culture, systems and challenges. And as the Commissioner for the Food, Farming & Countryside Commission, Julia has plenty of experience tackling this issue.

To use an example from her home county, Cumbria has the second largest production of milk of any county in England, but for a farmer who has spent a lot of time producing high quality milk there are very different end products for the milk: **"Someone might buy a pint of milk, a healthy drink with 4% fat, very nutritious and high in protein. Or the milk might be used to make an ultra-processed food that's actually very damaging to health. What we're trying to say is: reconnect farmers with food and reconnect food systems and citizens with the farming."**

And even closer to home, on Susan's Farm, she points out that primary school children who visit for just a few hours can reconnect with their food sources: **"They learn the linkages between food and farming – they'll see all the livestock and some of them stay and have a meal of Shepherd's Pie or Bolognese made with the meat from the farm. They've seen the cows so that's really joining those dots."**

Zooming back out to a national level, Julia is delighted that the Food, Farming & Countryside Commission has been engaging citizen voices and hosting citizen assemblies to better understand the issues at the heart of this topic: **"Do people care about their food? The answer is overwhelmingly yes. People care very much about their food. Do they feel they have the agency to make those choices for good quality food? Often not. It's either not affordable or not accessible to them."**

Possible answers, or at least conversations, around these issues range from regional food systems within the UK to global food resilience, via the pros and cons of shorter supply chains – all discussions that deserve much more space than we have here! But one thing rings out loud and clear – the need for connection. Whether that's connecting rural and urban spaces across food and farming systems, or reflecting on how regional food systems can connect with local education, universities, apprenticeships and training opportunities. As Julia concludes:

**"People tend to care about things that they have a direct connection to, and I think that's really important."**

Whilst discussing connection over food, we naturally turn to the shared dinner at Somerville College bringing together attendees from the Oxford Farming Conference (OFC) and the Oxford Real Farming Conference (ORFC) in January. Julia is one of a small group of people gathering these groups around a shared table for the second consecutive year.

She describes the dinner as a safe, congenial space – with excellent high quality food of course – to have good conversations. This year we are really pleased to be supporting by sponsoring the event and enabling a number of young people to join the dinner and attend the conferences who wouldn't otherwise find it easy to access these spaces. It's also another great example of that spirit of working together.

**"I helped as a student at the OFC dinner in the 1990s. I've enjoyed speaking at and attending both conferences for quite a few years, and they both bring their strengths. We feel the dinner is an opportunity to listen and learn from each other's views and perspectives."**

So whether we're connecting two farming conferences over a shared dinner table, or helping build more connected career pathways for young people, or bringing children closer to nature and farming on Susan's Farm and at Low Beckside, we keep agreeing that we achieve more through connection.

## "People tend to care about things they have a connection to"

And in a way this brings us back to the River Eden, this time as a metaphor rather than a bracing early morning dip. Because having weaved its way northwards across the county (one of the few English rivers to flow north...) it eventually merges with many other rivers to form the great Solway Firth estuary, one of the largest estuaries in Europe and home to a thriving, diverse marine ecosystem. And isn't that what we've been discussing – **the diversity and potential that is supported when multiple perspectives come together.**

**"I'm always encouraged when I meet people in their late teens and early twenties. I'm really keen that we create positive opportunities in the land and nature sectors"**

Learning (OFC) at Jamie's Farm

# Farm Focus • Low Beckside Farm at Mungrisdale, Cumbria

2026 will mark the 5th anniversary of the Trust's purchase of Low Beckside Farm in Cumbria, a pivotal acquisition that has helped us nurture ever-stronger connections with the Cumbrian community and wider North West region.

Low Beckside is essentially a working farm with an 'Open' sign on the farm gate, inviting visitors to engage in a continuous cycle of land-based working and learning. As a Climate Farm Demo farm that is also in the Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship Scheme, it attracts people of all ages and specialisms, including the odd TV crew. BBC Look North recently interviewed Hector Meanwell, Farm Manager, on our work with the **Resilient Glenderamackin Landscape Recovery Project** – the river running through the farm.

We asked Vicki McDermott, our Head of Learning, Operations & Partnerships in the North to share some activities and events from recent months.

## Growing the Team

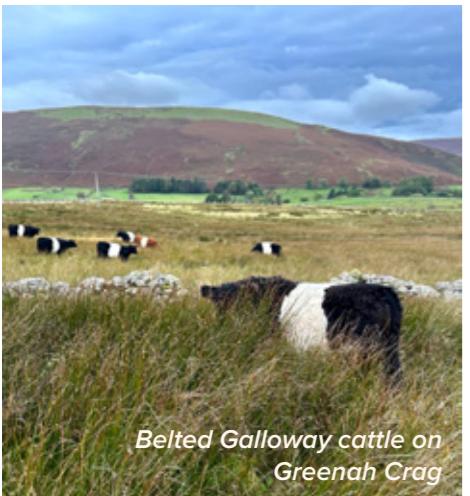
The farm has welcomed new team members, including two new apprentices:

**Chloe, Level 2 Farm Worker Apprentice**, joining from a BTEC Animal Care placement at the farm.

**Paige, Level 3 Livestock Unit Technician Apprentice**, on secondment from the RSPB.

Their arrival strengthens the farm as a hub for hands-on experience and skills development in land-based careers.

***"Low Beckside is more than a farm. It's a place where skills, knowledge, and landscapes flourish together."***



Belted Galloway cattle on Greenah Crag



Ullswater Community College students



Farm Manager Hector with apprentices



## Learning, Training and Skills

Recent months have seen a wide range of learning initiatives:

**Farm Education Pilot Project** with **LEAF** and the **Lake District National Park Authority**, including a dedicated learning day for farmers and teachers.

**CEVAS course** (Countryside Educational Visits Accreditation Scheme) giving farmers practical tools to host safe, high-quality visits - recognised by National Parks England as a **FiPL success story** for DEFRA.

Outdoor Learning Leaders Amy Trepte-Ferguson (Land-based Skills) and Jane Armstrong (Schools) have continued to support young people:

**20 Ullswater Community College students** working towards the Trust's **Employability Award**, with many planning to progress to the Land-based Skills Award in spring

**Hosting school visits** to Low Beckside. Facilitating three **OWL (Outdoor Weeks of Learning) residencies**, including two returning schools and one new school.

## Partnerships & Wider Impact

Low Beckside also continues to connect with higher education and regional initiatives:

**Collaboration with Jane Barker, University of Cumbria**, completing fen creation works at Greenah Crag with student field visits.

Hector was one of three "new generation" speakers at the inaugural **Cumbria Farmer Conference**, a successful event, despite freezing November day!

Nationally, the farm was represented at the **Houses of Parliament** during the **Cumbria Youth Alliance's 25-year anniversary event**. Building on this, we are now working on the **Growing Horizons Project**, supporting young people in Years 9–13 to explore land-based career pathways.

**All of these activities contribute to Low Beckside's wider purpose: inspiring and equipping the next generation to become the future custodians of our vital landscapes.**

# Spark a conversation • Liz MacKenzie Outdoor Learning Development Manager

Spend any time with Liz, and one thing becomes instantly clear - her work is driven by a deep-rooted belief that learning in the outdoors can genuinely change lives - a conviction that has shaped her entire career, stretching back to an A-level Biology field trip that first opened her eyes to how powerful outdoor experiences can be in education.

That moment planted a seed which eventually grew into an Ecology degree, a vocation in outdoor education, and a role at the Ernest Cook Trust.

Almost sixteen years on, Liz remains at the heart of our Learning team, helping to shape and strengthen our work with schools and partners across the country. Ask her what keeps her here and she doesn't hesitate: the variety, the impact, and the people. Her role enables her not only to develop strategy and guide new Outdoor Learning Leaders across the Trust and our wider networks, but also to stay closely connected to students and teachers through on-the-ground delivery. It is this combination - leading and doing - that continues to energise her.

Liz describes her role simply: "**I take children outside to learn, I help teachers feel confident doing the same, and I guide others to find their feet in Outdoor Learning.**" Yet behind this understatement sits a rich, evolving field of practice.

In recent years, Liz has witnessed significant shifts in how schools approach learning beyond the classroom. One of the most exciting developments is the growth of 'in-house' Forest School provision within mainstream primary schools. Although the Trust focuses its Forest School expertise on special schools - where we can support children and young people with complex or individual needs - Liz sees this wider movement as a positive cultural shift. More teachers are becoming confident at embedding Outdoor Learning in their teaching and learning, more children are spending meaningful time outside, and the broader education sector is recognising that nature is not an 'extra', but an essential context for learning.

With this expanding interest comes an equally expanding set of misconceptions, something Liz often finds herself having to gently unpick. In working to define 'Outdoor Learning', the Institute for Outdoor Learning uncovered more than 80,000 interpretations. It's no surprise, Liz laughs, that clarity is still needed. Outdoor Learning is not simply adventurous activity, nor environmental science, nor bushcraft. It draws on all of these, but is none of them alone, she says. **"At its core, Outdoor Learning - for the Trust - is a tool: a way to teach curriculum subjects and to promote personal development and wellbeing through real experience, grounded in place, purpose and connection."**

What assures Liz most that this work matters is the feedback from participants and group leaders. Their comments, she says, "confirm why we do this", proof that time in nature helps young people thrive, whether through confidence, curiosity, resilience, or a renewed sense of belonging.

Perhaps the greatest privilege of working at the Trust, Liz reflects, is the freedom to pursue this mission wholeheartedly. As a self-funding, landowning charity, we can invest directly in the programmes we believe in, without diverting energy into constant fundraising. **"The Trust really believes in what it does," she notes, "that means we can focus on what truly helps children and young people."**

From that first spark in a woodland years ago to her work today helping shape the next generation of Outdoor Learning Leaders, Liz continues to show what's possible when land and lives enrich each other, as both the Trust's mission and her own career so clearly demonstrate.



Forest School at Horseshoe Wood, Gloucestershire



Curriculum-based outdoor learning at Lea Wood, Gloucestershire



Read Liz's 'Day in the Life' blog [here](#)



# Nature's Notebook

We've gathered some 'good to know' information from our Estate team, useful for winter walks - some of which we'll be adding to our footpath signage:

## Winter Bird Feeding

During winter months food for birds is scarce. From December to March we provide supplementary food for the birds to help carry them through the winter 'hungry gap' on our land. This helps birds to survive and thrive through to their breeding seasons in the spring, which supports their breeding potential, as well as feeding predatory species up the food-chain.

Mixed sizes of grain are scattered or provided from hoppers, and seed-bearing plants in field margins provide foraging opportunities and cover. The varying sizes of grain and different methods of delivery favour a wide range of bird species. Look out for mixed flocks of farmland birds in the field margins and hedges, or murmurations of starlings in the evenings.

## Wildlife

Some wildlife can be much more visible in winter months when the trees have lost their leaves and vegetation is less dense. Look out for glimpses of fallow, roe and muntjac deer and hares in the woods and fields, and barn owl and kestrel hunting in field margins.

Wintering waders such as snipe may be seen on the water meadows, and you may be lucky enough to spot seasonal visitors such as redwing and fieldfare eating berries in the hedgerows. Look out for our Estate team's videos and images of their sightings, as we often feature them on our [socials](#).

The perennial teasel seedhead (pictured here) provides food for birds and shelter for insects throughout the winter months. Birds, especially goldfinches, extract the tiny seeds from these spiky, cone-shaped heads, providing a welcome high-energy food source.

If you have them growing in your garden, leaving teasel seed heads standing, rather than pruning, not only provides this vital sustenance but adds some architectural interest to a winter garden, especially beautiful when silhouetted against the winter sun.

## Dog Walkers take note

As responsible landowners and dog lovers here at the Trust, we're keen to remind all dog walkers of a potential but avoidable risk when outdoors with your dog. Did you know that your dog's faeces can be a source of a highly destructive disease to livestock called *Neospora*?

Dogs can carry this infection without showing symptoms, which can then be transmitted to livestock via contaminated grass. This disease causes the abortion of offspring in sheep, cattle, and horses. Please be vigilant by keeping dogs under close control on leads, and picking up dog poo while you're out enjoying a walk.



If you missed our Chief Executive, Ed Ikin's LinkedIn post for World Soil Day in early December, we've included it here. His complex relationship with the dark stuff is a journey that runs alongside his career path - worthy of a second reading if you're already following Ed on his socials:

My relationship with soil is a complex one, full of ups and downs. My career has literally been founded on it, and yet I've treated it with disdain. Science taught me to see it, and feel it, differently and making a prairie completed my epiphany. Let me tell you more.

My horticultural training taught me that soil was an instrument, a passive substrate, awaiting my intervention.

Winters in my first gardening job were spent double digging the herbaceous borders. Clear the plants, dig out one 'spit' (a spades' depth of soil) and then dig out the layer below. Break the soil down into a 'fine crumb' with a fork and rake to perfection. Level, uniform, clean, tidy. Bare, broken, denatured, lifeless. Deep down it felt wrong.

Curiosity, and good company started to change my perspective. Spending time with biodynamic growers prompted me to consider life in two halves: what we see above ground, and what we see below. My endless flogging of the soil seemed to bring limited rewards, with any initial benefits waning after a couple of years. The story of cause and effect felt incomplete.

Kew completed my journey from soil abuser to soil lover. Endlessly generous mycologists taught me about mycorrhizal networks and inextricable relationships between above and below ground biodiversity, between plants and fungi. The exchange of nutrients, the transformation of root efficiency, the pumping of carbon deep into the soil.

Helping to create the American Prairie at Wakehurst taught me more than I imposed on it. The horror with which our US prairie-making partners treated soil disturbance (as the fastest route to weed infestation) completed my understanding.

Anyone who grows should be in service to the soil, NOT the other way around. Visualising it as a

complex, living community of life is the only frame of reference for deciding whether physical or chemical intervention will genuinely improve it.

Minimising soil disturbance in agriculture through low or zero tillage is becoming easier to adopt with more tried-and-tested methods to share, and better equipment available, but it needs to make financial sense. Restoring life to the soil, and creating economically viable yields less reliant on human inputs takes years.

So consider your relationship with soil.

**We'd love to hear your reflections on this subject. Share your thoughts on Ed's LinkedIn post, or via email at: [hello@ernestcooktrust.org.uk](mailto:hello@ernestcooktrust.org.uk)**



Image:  
Milton Farm on the  
Fairford Estate,  
Gloucestershire,  
September 2025

***It's quietly miraculous: healthy soils absorb floods, store carbon, outcompete pests and diseases and super-charge plants. They provide this endlessly regenerating suite of benefits simply in return for not being disturbed. At a time when resources feel constrained, here's a source of potentially endless abundance in return for minimal investment.***

# Twenty Years of Fairford Leys

## A proven model for thoughtful land stewardship

As national conversations intensify around housing need and land availability, the Ernest Cook Trust is marking an important milestone that speaks directly to our values as both a landowning charity and a champion of thriving rural communities.

This year marks 20 years since the creation of Fairford Leys - a pioneering new community built on Trust-owned land on the outskirts of Aylesbury. Its success continues to demonstrate how development, when approached with care and long-term thinking, can support both people and place.

Fairford Leys was conceived in the 1990s on part of the Hartwell Estate in Buckinghamshire, purchased in 1938 by Ernest Cook. As a philanthropist with a deep belief in the power of land to enrich lives, our founder championed rural communities and sought to create lasting connections between people and the natural world. That ethos shaped the Fairford Leys development from the outset.

2,000 homes were ultimately built, alongside the vital amenities that turn housing into a genuine community: a market square, shops and cafés, a church, community centre, primary school, health facilities, and places to work and gather. Renowned architects John Simpson & Partners drew up the masterplan with the objective of fostering a spirit of local community.

Critically, Fairford Leys pioneered the use of a design code - a set of clear, high-quality guidelines for housebuilders and, later, for residents. Those principles remain protected



Fairford Leys in 2009



Today, as pressures mount for new housing across the country, Fairford Leys shows that development can be done differently, using land in a way that supports local people and protects character, while bringing the Trust's vision of land and lives enriching each other into sharper focus.

The 20th anniversary of Fairford Leys offers a reminder of the Trust's long and proven track record of responsible, progressive land stewardship. By recognising the multiple values of our landholdings - their economic, educational, cultural, social and environmental worth - we take a carefully balanced view that ensures well-informed decisions are made around land use.

**Fairford Leys has proved to be a great example of how the Trust works to ensure that people, place and purpose all thrive together.**

today by the parish council, ensuring that the look and feel of the village continues to reflect the original vision. This commitment to design quality has stood the test of time. Property and development specialist Knight Frank used Fairford Leys as an example of positive placemaking in its 2020 report for the Government, 'Building in Beauty'. In a separate report, Knight Frank found that value premiums on the homes were around 15% higher - a clear indication that communities built well remain desirable, sustainable places to live.

For the Trust, the project was also a pivotal moment. The development provided a major investment into our core charitable mission: giving children and young people meaningful outdoor learning experiences and better access to nature. As our Director of Land, Property & Commercial Development, Michael Birnie, reflects:

**"Fairford Leys enabled the Trust to make investments which generated more income so the Trust could deliver more education. We have found, over decades of experience, that thoughtful land and property management, with communities front of mind, can help people and land collectively thrive."**

Fairford Leys was not without its challenges. At the time, the proposal was controversial, and trustees made a conscious decision to prioritise quality and community benefit over achieving the highest sale price. Their commitment has since been validated by planners, designers and residents who now see Fairford Leys as a benchmark for positive placemaking.

## Trust News

A snapshot of news from across the organisation.

Keep up to date with all our news and activities on our socials



In November we welcomed **Associate Professor of Freshwater & Marine Ecology at Somerville College, Oxford, Dr Michelle Jackson**, to our head office. Michelle's work is supported by a long-term research endowment from the Ernest Cook Trust.

Naturally, we headed to the River Coln and learned more about her research, which focusses on understanding and predicting the impact of stressors on marine ecosystems. We're excited to work with Michelle and her team in the future, not just sharing our land to facilitate research, but learning from and amplifying her own expertise.



National Parks England has selected a training course hosted by the Trust to be featured as a **FiPL success story for DEFRA**. The Course, run by CEVAS (Countryside Educational Visits Accreditation Scheme) at Low Beckside Farm in Cumbria gives farmers the practical tools and guidance needed to host safe, high-quality educational visits.

Pete Tatham, our Land-based Skills Manager (South) has set up sessions with **Men's Sheds** in Gloucestershire, inviting members to volunteer as part of an initiative to support the expanding work at our **Skills Workshop** on the Fairford site. We have also purchased a polytunnel for the walled garden to support horticultural training - which is also a handy wet-weather shelter!

There's great news for our **Outdoor Essentials Grant**, with the **Aurora Trust's £44,000 funding over the next 4 years** towards this vital grant stream.

The grant supports eligible UK state schools with: transport to outdoor learning venues, school grounds improvements, outdoor clothing, and teacher training. Since 2019, grants totalling **£1,586,500** have been awarded (figure correct at 09.2025).



Qualitas Energy is working with the Trust to bring forward plans for **Cuckoo Hill Solar Farm** on moderate quality agricultural land on our Little Dalby Estate in Leicestershire.

The proposed 40MW solar farm combines Qualitas Energy's expertise with the Trust's responsible land stewardship, advancing clean energy, community engagement, and long-term care for the countryside.

As well as generating renewable energy, the project would also deliver significant benefits for wildlife through the planting of trees, hedgerows and the creation of new wildlife habitats.

Following the Public Consultation event in November, the proposed design will be submitted for Planning in early 2026.

Extended deadline!  
Care about youth voice & social action?  
...join our Youth Advisory Board  
Help shape a bold youth-led future  
Apply now  
new date:  
Applications close midday 9 January  
Details via link in bio - head to our JOIN US page

Congratulations to **Tess Lincoln** on being appointed to the Farmers Weekly Arable Insights Panel for 2025/26 - a proud moment for the sector and for women helping to shape the future of agriculture.

Farming on our Little Dalby Estate in Leicestershire, Tess and husband Tom are continuing the regenerative practices pioneered by Tony Reynolds, Tess's grandfather. She joins a hand-picked group of UK arable farmers, sharing real-world insights on topics like soil health, nutrition, disease management and the challenges facing the arable sector today.



We're in the process of recruiting new members for our Youth Advisory Board - you may have seen our posts on social media, including our new **Instagram** platform (...follow us!)

We're serious about inviting young people to join us and help shape a bold, youth-led future for our work.

To date, members have mainly been focussed on the development of the **Influencers Schemes** programme, advising on projects and funding decisions.

Our new recruits will help develop both the role of the Youth Advisory Board and the direction of youth voice throughout the Trust's work.

Our continued efforts to integrate youth voice across all the Trust's activities come as the Government publishes its new **National Youth Strategy** (December 2025).

# The map

As a landowner and an educational charity, we cover a lot of ground. Here's a snapshot of some of the places where we're putting the Ernest Cook Trust on the map.

**Autumn** - Countryside Education Visits Accreditation Scheme (CEVAS) training courses have been held at Low Beckside Farm, led by the Trust, Lake District National Park, and LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming). These sessions provide practical skills for farmers to enhance learners' understanding of where their food comes from and how it is produced.

**September** - We held a Stakeholder Consultation Event at Low Beckside Farm as part of the Cumbria Hub Review, attended by around 30 representatives from education, farming and conservation organisations to explore outdoor and land-based opportunity requirements for young people in Cumbria.

**December** - Members of our Outdoor Practitioners Education Network (OPEN) in the north had one of their regular in-person network meetings in Lytham (below), hosted by ParkView4U, who have one of the Trust's funded Outdoor Learning Leader Grants.



**In the new year**, SARA - the Severn Area Rescue Association, will be using our woodland at Redwood in Gloucestershire to train dogs and handlers from their new Search & Rescue Dog Team who will work alongside SARA's 50 land search operatives, providing valuable assistance to the Police.

**November** - We hosted Gloucestershire County Council's Teacher Encounter Day at Court Farm, with support from our Estates team; the aim of the event was to give educators a wider understanding of land-based careers to help steer career conversations.

**October** - Building on the success of our staff Big Picture Day at Loughborough University, Trustees and the Leadership team spent two days consolidating the Trust's strategy and goals at Stanton House, Wiltshire. This was followed in **November** by a Leadership Day on the National Trust's Coleshill Estate.

## UK-wide:

**November** - We hosted an online training event: 'Maximising Outdoor Learning back in the classroom' with Professor Mick Waters for staff and the OWL Collaboration Network (Outdoor Weeks of Learning). Mick is a trusted voice in education with a career that has helped shape Outdoor Learning policy and practice internationally.

## In the next issue

Look out for our **Spring Field Notes** with a new look to reflect our refreshed brand!

Contact us: [hello@ernestcooktrust.org.uk](mailto:hello@ernestcooktrust.org.uk)

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## Throughout the season

 Schools on OWL (Outdoor Week of Learning) residential at these Outdoor Learning partner locations

 Youth-led social action projects at coastal, estuary and river locations for the Blue Influencers Scheme

**Sean Todd**, who had his MSc placement with the Trust, has received first class honours for his dissertation on 'Connecting to nature and human flourishing: Exploring outdoor learning and children's mental health and wellbeing.' Sean was based at the Binks Hub University of Edinburgh.

**January** - The Trust will sponsor a dinner at Somerville College, bringing together guests from both the Oxford Farming Conference (OFC) and Oxford Real Farming Conference (ORFC) and will fund 10 bursary places for young people to experience this environment for the first time.

**November** - The Property Committee enjoyed a visit to Hartwell Estate early November, taking the opportunity to return to Fairford Leys (see page 10) to consider 'Place Making', and the Trust's approach to existing and new opportunities.

**November** - Suzie Paton represented the Trust at the Association of Charitable Funders conference at County Hall, Westminster. The theme was Future-ready Foundations and included significant discussion and debate on the use of AI.

**November** - Victoria McDermott (Head of Learning Operations & Partnerships), Alison Offord (Research & Impact Lead) and Robyn Riddoch (Youth Leadership Programmes Manager) attended an event at the House of Commons to celebrate 25 years of the Cumbria Youth Alliance.

**November** - Liz Mackenzie (Outdoor Learning Development Manager) was a guest speaker at the Council for Learning Outside the Classroom webinar, sharing her knowledge on adapting to schools' needs, and insights on delivering educational outreach programmes to schools and community groups.

