Field Notes

Newsletter of the Ernest Cook Trust

AUTUMN 2026 • Celebrating the season

We love British food

Chatting to British Food Fortnight founder, Alexia Robinson

Prize-winning rural enterprise

Our tenants Dan & Jo Belcher on what diversification means for them

HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh

The Royal Visit on Back British Farming day showcasing the best of our Cumbrian land, learning and connections

"It's getting people more connected to their environment and food – and that's what I want, ultimately."

Nicole Moore, aka 'Shooting Girl With An Afro', tells us how 16 years of hunting, foraging and growing her own food has changed her

Swans on the Broadwater, River Coln, on our Fairford Estate

Eating is an agricultural act

From Ed Ikin

Behind every meal lies a much bigger story of soil, seasons, livestock, landscapes, and farmers whose care for the land shapes the food we eat.

‘Eating is an agricultural act’. So said the recently deceased American author and farmer Wendell Berry in a statement that may provoke the question, ‘what else could it be?’ And yet it’s a statement that needs to be made every day, at every mealtime, because, for many, the link between farming and food is tenuous and tangential.

The distance society has formed between food and farming has come within a couple of generations. A nation who once dug for victory has rapidly urbanised, had their shopping habits shaped by supermarkets and turned gardens once used for growing into parking spaces and decking.

The food we buy is packaged in ever-more convenient, abstracted forms, minimising our need to prepare and cook our meals. The language used to sell our food is enigmatic and often impenetrable: is ‘100% natural’ or ‘West Country’ a guarantee of quality? What’s the difference between outdoor reared and outdoor bred?

Working with Ernest Cook Trust’s extraordinary group of tenant farmers reminds me that every meal I eat is an agricultural act. It feels like an insider’s privilege to talk to our producers of milk, ice-cream, pork pies, sausages and ribs of beef to understand how pasture, feed, rotation, technology and healthcare combine to create good food. What resonates so clearly from all my conversations is that food is not an isolated end product or commodity, but the by-product of caring, long-term stewardship of the land.

It is impossible to separate good care of the land from farming, and farming from food but market forces often dictate that we rarely pay for the full cost of this cycle. The low cost of our food compared to other countries is well documented, and apart from a few defined standards such as ‘organic’, we have limited ways to define quality to give consumers confidence to make an informed choice, or justify paying more.

So, in this season celebrating Great British Food, immerse yourself in the full story of your food. Visit a farm shop run by the farmers growing and rearing the produce on the shelves. Buying directly from our farmers is simply the best route to good food, to supporting good farming, and to connecting you to the deeper, richer cycle of production that creates our best, most nutritious produce. Make the eating of every meal an agricultural act and never look back.

Image: Stabiliser cattle mob-grazing at Fairford Park, Gloucestershire Estate

Rural lives, rural landscapes

Autumn is slowing taking hold as we write this newsletter, with a lot of the leaves only just turning. But it's already safe to say that one of our highlights this season was the High Sheriff's Walk we hosted on our Home Estates in September...

It was a surprisingly warm September afternoon, with some ominous rain clouds that gave way to hazy sunshine, when we walked the River Coln with Dame Fiona Reynolds, the High Sheriff of Gloucestershire, and over 30 members of the local community.

We had carefully planned the route in advance, taking in farmland, examples of river and woodland management, as well as an area where we welcome outdoor learning groups on the river. And this gave us the perfect backdrop to discuss the many opportunities on managed land across the country, and for the Trust specifically.

In Fairford, these conversations are coloured by the Cotswold District Council's new Local Plan, which proposes a number of new houses across the district. As the Fairford housing proposal is on Ernest Cook Trust land, we understand that questions about how we balance these opportunities and decisions are very relevant to our local community.

We looped along the River Coln and back across our farmers' land to Quenington Village Hall, where there was a really engaging discussion on housing, biodiversity, water infrastructure, and farming.

On the walk we heard from Sophie Iles, a 7th generation tenant farmer on our Fairford and Hatherop estates, who has graduated this summer and returned home to manage Home Farm and Leafield Farm with her father Jeremy.

Afterwards at the Village Hall, we heard from a number in our group who were local farmers themselves, and they shared similar concerns about financial pressures and an uncertain environmental forecast (to put it mildly). There was a lot of sympathy from all our walkers (and tea drinkers!) and it was great to hear the support for Jeremy Clarkson's impact on the wider perceptions of farming given our ongoing partnership with Diddly Squat Farm Shop.

Back to the walk, and after bypassing farmland we cut away from the footpath and across Trust land to a meander in the River Coln. Here the river health is improving and we crossed over clear fresh water as we wound our way along the banks.

We stopped to hear from Joe, our Conservation & Woodland Manager at the Trust, who shared the highs and lows of estate management - including the exciting introduction of a new Woodland Management Plan to the estate.

Similarly, we've developed a Catchment Management Plan along this stretch of the Coln, and Claire, our Head of Estate Management, told us more about the river management. Our aim is to diversify the flow and we're already seeing an improvement in river health and fish numbers (including Grayling, our Riverkeeper's personal favourite).

All of these stories are key pieces in the tapestry of rural land management. As our Director of Land, Property & Commercial Development, Michael Birnie said, **"the demands we all place upon land continue to grow. We ask it to feed us, house us, power our economy, support wildlife, capture carbon, manage water, provide recreation and preserve our heritage - often all at the same time."**

> "Walking back, we admired the beautiful landscape and abundant hedgerows. The Trust’s goals of multi-functional outcomes, achieved through collaboration with their tenants, were clear to see."
>
> Dame Fiona Reynolds

One of the greatest demands is housing. Concerns about the scale of Cotswold District Council's new Local Plan were shared, with many questions about infrastructure, utilities and impacts on the natural landscape and community. Dame Fiona encouraged proactive engagement with Local Plans, sharing the experiences of other communities in the county facing similar challenges.

Once Cotswold District Council's public consultation on the proposed Local Plan for Fairford is complete, we plan to hold our own public engagement with the local community. Please keep an eye on our socials for further details.



Nature's Notebook

As the seasons turn and we welcome some much needed rain and cooler temperatures, nature is taking a big exhale. Time to enjoy the season's harvests, while preparing for winter.











Meet the Guardians of Redwood

Young people from The Altus School who regularly visit our Redwood Outdoor Learning site on the Slimbridge Estate in Gloucestershire have made these curious Tree Guardians.

Using clay and natural materials from the woodland, these unique gargoyle-esque faces were fashioned directly onto the trunks of their favourite trees.

These woodland installations have echoes of ancient traditions, such as the Viking's 'Warden Tree' thought to protect them from disease and bad harvests, and the 'The Green Man' - often depicted as a human face peering out of foliage, representing the cycle of nature in many cultures.

Whatever the backstory, these particular creations at Redwood are an excellent example of place-based learning, given that the 'Guardians' will keep their good looks for weeks, helping the young people feel emotionally engaged with the wood each time they make a return visit.

(It's also a great idea for children to replicate at home!)

The RSPB's bird feeding advice continues to be **'Feed seasonally, feed safely'** as detailed here:

Until the end of October

- Offer small amounts of mealworms, suet or fat-based foods.
- Natural food is still relatively abundant in autumn, including berries, seeds and insects.
- Don't put out seeds or peanuts yet, because the risk of diseases such as trichomonosis is still high in a mild autumn.

From November

- Resume feeding seeds and peanuts, alongside suet/fat and mealworms.
- This is when supplementary feeding becomes particularly useful - as winter progresses, insects and natural food sources become scarcer, while birds need more energy to cope with cold weather.



A Common Woodpigeon feeding on firethorn berries

Autumn Watch List

Outdoor Learning Leader Ella shares her Top 5 things to notice when you head outdoors this season:



Fungi

The first thing I get excited about in autumn! With 15,000+ species in the UK, there's always more to learn. They come in incredible shapes, sizes and colours, some glow in the dark, and they pop up overnight creating an ever-changing landscape. A couple of favouries found at Redwood recently are **Chicken of the Woods** *(Laetiporus sulphureus)* pictured top, and **Wrinkled Peach** *(Rhodotus palmatus)* pictured opposite. The latter is especially exciting to find, with its striking colour and mysterious blood-like droplets formed through a process called guttation.



Spiderwebs

Autumn is spider-mating season, and morning dew makes their webs look especially magical. Look closely and you might spot them in unexpected places, like inside this acorn cup, discovered by one of our students!



Seedheads

Seedheads don't get enough attention! Look closely and you'll find beautiful natural sculptures, from hedgehog-like **teasels** (pictured) to the delicate **umbels of hogweed.** They have a fascinating history too - teasels on our Slimbridge Estate were once used by nearby monks to card wool.



Colours

Autumn is a fantastic time for colour, from the fiery reds of **cherry** leaves and bright yellows of **elm** and **field maple** to the rich browns of **beech** and **oak.** Why not embrace the season and make leaf art with fallen leaves?



Hibernating animals

As the weather cools, animals prepare for winter, with **dormice, hedgehogs** and **bats** entering hibernation. Before lighting bonfires, always move it or check thoroughly for sheltering wildlife. You can help, too, by creating a log pile or leaving a corner of your garden wild. Here's a happy hedgehog enjoying a winter home made by one of our young people!





When life gives you apples... make cake!

We're blessed with many apple trees in our head office garden, so at this time of year, there's often an apple-based home-baked treat to share. If you're wondering what to do with this seasonal staple, here's the recipe:

Apple Cake

- Beat 125g softened unsalted butter with 150g caster sugar until light and fluffy. Beat in 2 large eggs, then add 1 tsp vanilla extract.
- Stir in 180g plain flour, 1 tsp baking powder and a pinch of salt, then fold in 3–4 peeled, cored and diced apples, to create a thick mixture.
- Spoon into a lined 23cm cake tin.
- Bake in a preheated oven at 180°C (160°C fan) for 35–40 minutes, until golden and a skewer inserted into the centre comes out clean.
- Leave to cool before turning out. Dust with icing sugar.

This works equally well using pears, plums, blackberries, damsons or rhubarb.

Speaking of rhubarb, here's a **Rhubarb & Custard Cake** using rhubarb picked from our Fairford allotment, made by a student on work experience with us. Delicious!



Heavy horse makes light work

Some of you may recognise Harry the horse from his work in our woodland on our Fairford Estate. But recently Harry, along with his owner Dave, our Riverkeeper Mark, and Conservation & Woodland Manager Joe, made light work of some river management.

Modern "riverkeepering" goes back to the 19th century, when fishery managers were employed to look after an estate's waterways.

Today our Riverkeeper Mark has many of the same responsibilities - maintaining access, improving river habitats, controlling predators, managing the river flow and much more.

Although fisheries and river management has evolved since the 19th century riverkeepers, Mark was keen to revisit the heritage tradition of heavy horses dragging the river. This was done to clear aquatic weed growth, grade the riverbed and manage the flow.

Compared to modern techniques, using Harry the horse to harrow the riverbed is a much less invasive and more environmentally sustainable choice. And as Mark said: **"Of course, there are other methods and modern equipment for carrying out this task, but to preserve some of our rural heritage is far more important to me."**

Mark shares more of his reflections on the day on our website blog and we'll let you know what task we set Harry to next!

"The rush of excitement was incredible; to be walking through the river ahead of three-quarters of a ton of working horse was amazing."

Mark, Riverkeeper

British Food Fortnight

Love British Food 25TH ANNIVERSARY 2002-2026

This year, Love British Food celebrates a quarter of a century since the movement began. It's been a champion of British food, farmers and producers for 25 years and the movement is a key player in the debate and action around how our food is sourced. We chat to founder Alexia Robinson about what continues to inspire her about this mission.

So here's the good news – some recent research found that nearly ⅔ of people surveyed said that where their food comes from matters to them. That sentiment is really important.

The bad news is that ⅓ of the people surveyed said they felt more disconnected than ever from their food's origins. So the reality for British food purchase and consumption isn't as encouraging.

And that's why Love British Food, and its annual campaign British Food Fortnight, is as important today as it was when it started 25 years ago.

As founder Alexia Robinson says, **"the reason that I established British Food Fortnight all those years ago remains as pertinent and relevant today. To encourage the public to seek out British food when they are shopping and eating out.**

In turn, this shows British farmers that there is a strong domestic demand for their produce, it gives them the confidence to keep farming and investing in their businesses, and it encourages the next generation to make food production the core part of their farming businesses."

Understandably, this year's fortnight felt particularly special – as it was a chance to reflect on how much has been achieved over the last quarter-century.

Alexia points out that **"the event is unique in being grassroots driven but also embraced by big industry. It is the people in communities around the country who have made British Food Fortnight their own. At the same time, many of the major food service and retail organisations embrace it, recognising its proven ability as a promotion to drive sales of British food."**

Clearly this personal connection to British Food Fortnight – and by extension British food itself – is what's needed to shift that opening statistic. And Alexia feels that the introduction of social media in the 25 years since the Fortnight was launched has the potential to damage that connection:

"Twenty years ago, activity meant doing something meaningful... a like or a post is still no substitute for that! I want more British food on shop shelves and on menus. And people actively promoting it in shops, pubs, restaurants, schools, across the public sector. Social media has a part to play in building awareness, but additional activity, working with people on the ground, is needed to convert a post into action."

Despite this fair concern, she's overwhelmingly happy with how this year's British Food Fortnight went. **"It has been such a happy event. Particularly rewarding that 1,000s of schools have taken part with special British food menus; some of the schools have taken part every year for the last 25 years!**

Our network of change-makers who have been through our on-farm training days brought the event to life with special British Food Fortnight menus.

The National Harvest Service that Her Majesty The Queen supports took place for the 14th year, this time in Cheshire in Nantwich. And we inaugurated the first ever Harvest of the Sea, giving thanks to our fishermen and seamen at a special harvest service in Exeter Cathedral.

To mark the 25th Anniversary, we have published a superb collection of essays by leading thinkers discussing the role of British food in society now. You can listen to these on the Love British Food podcast channel on Spotify - highly recommended!"



March House Farm Shop in Leicestershire - turn to P.10 to find out more about Dan and Jo Belcher in this season's Farm Focus.



Venison burger making at the Staff Team Day in August, with meat shot on our estate, turn to P.14 for more on this event.



Ferneley's Fresh Milk from the Darlingtons on the Little Dalby Estate, where you also enjoy home-made ice-cream at their farm's cafe.

Nicole Moore



We met Nicole (also known as **Shooting Girl With An Afro**) at Future Countryside this summer. She's a wild food storyteller, hunter-gatherer, and conservation-led creator who tells compelling stories about land, food and the countryside, and as a black woman (with an afro, obviously) she occupies a fairly unique position in the world of field sports and wild food narratives.

As our autumn Field Notes has a focus on food and our connections with British food systems, we felt this was the perfect opportunity to hear a different perspective and share Nicole's reflections on our food systems, wild food, and how this links to access to the land.

It's also the perfect time to catch up with Nicole as, when we spoke, she had just recently given a speech in Westminster on rural life and experiences.

Surrounded by other representatives and members of the rural community, Nicole shared that it was a really meaningful experience and conversation: **"I love being in that environment – to have the opportunity where an organisation trusts me to say my piece and to speak on behalf of the countryside, women in the countryside, and urban people that have become more rural."**



The organisation in question was Countryside Alliance, as part of their Campaign for the Countryside and their call for a rural reset, and she was joined at the event by fellow Field Notes interviewees Baroness Minette Batters and Farmer Time founder Tom Martin, along with former PM Lord David Cameron and other familiar faces from across the farming, rural enterprise and land management sectors.

In Nicole's words, the campaign is an attempt to **"make Government realise that the countryside is the heartbeat of the country, it's where our food comes from. So it's trying to reset this relationship and make it more positive and more collaborative."**

Most importantly, she doesn't believe that voices in Westminster should be making decisions about rural life without speaking to and working with **"the people on the ground."**

And Nicole is one of those people on the ground – an influence and responsibility that has slightly taken her by surprise! Having grown up on a suburban council estate, she became interested in field sports and conservation about 16 years ago and what was a hobby became a lifestyle and now a livelihood.

> "Now I have a responsibility ... I didn't think I would be that person, but it was clear that I was, and I was inspiring people in different ways."

She then approached Fieldsports Channel on YouTube about three years ago...

"I approached them and said "I hear that you have no black people on your channel!" I didn't even know what their YouTube channel was – I didn't realise how big they were in the field sports world. And they said "Do you want to be our first black person?" So I thought yeah, fine, let's go!

I did a few films for them and it kind of exploded from there ... So I'd go to the Game Fair and instead of being a random nobody, the only black face in a whole sea of 150,000 people, I started to see more brown faces and I started to get approached by people."

And the people she's inspired have varied from children aged 8 or 9 who discovered Nicole on YouTube, all the way up to 50 year-old men who grew up in the countryside but haven't thought about exploring the world of field sports. There are much older members of the rural community who are happy to see a new face, and of course there are young women who are excited to meet someone who inspires them personally.

"I've had 16-year-old girls who have been black or mixed race, and their parents have come up to me and shared that they're massive fans. And even seeing their faces at these shows is new to me, let alone them being a fan and being inspired to then go and start shooting or hunting in some capacity!"

Nicole is adamant that people should engage with rural life and field sports in whatever capacity suits them. Coming from an urban background, she's well aware that not everyone's connection to the outdoors looks the same – but that they are all valid and worth cultivating.

She recalls growing up on a suburban council estate that backed onto open, unmanaged land. Although it was uncultivated and not always a safe outdoor environment, she believes it was just as fulfilling and meaningful as other outdoor experiences.

"There were a lot of kids that were troubled kids, who were not in tune with stuff going on around them [in nature]. But those of us that were, we were spending from 6am till 9pm every day in the summer holidays, outdoors in the backfield, in the ditch, fishing with little nets that we'd got from the seaside the year before.

And just the whole process – the patience of going to find wood together and getting the right plank or branch to build – all of that is community. It's teaching you field craft. It's teaching you patience. It's teaching you the reward after two hours spent looking for the right thing or trying to catch the fish.

All of that is just as special with 10 kids in an urban area as it is with one kid that's lucky enough to do that on their own with their grandad in the countryside."

> "We were climbing trees. We were eating berries ... We were just discovering and exploring our environment that we found ourselves in."

The big difference for Nicole is that some children are able to continue to grow that connection with nature and expand on it into their young adult lives. Whereas Nicole's experience was that after-school clubs, GCSEs and other commitments drew her away from the land.

Today the land is most definitely a regular part of Nicole's life and she spends her days outdoors foraging, hunting, working with diverse rural communities – and capturing a lot of these stories in her role as a content creator and ambassador.

For Nicole, the purpose of this work is to reach people outside of field sports and inspire their interest in hunting, rural life and food sources.

> "It's getting people more connected to their environment and food – and that's what I want, ultimately."

Food is a big theme for Nicole – it's a personal passion and it's why foraging, shooting, and hunting matters to her so much. It's the reason why her lifestyle-turned-livelihood is grounded in wild food systems.

And it's not all meat-based, because having tried a plant-based diet for a year, Nicole has learnt more about foraging, growing vegetables, and the importance of whole foods. This broad perspective is important to Nicole as she connects with people of all different backgrounds about shooting, hunting and how these different food systems interconnect:

"Someone has to do pest control. That has to happen in some way, shape or form – whether they're using a falcon, or a hawk, or a gun, or a trap, or poison – it has to happen in order for the food that is non-animal food to get to the table or to survive. So what I'm saying is I'm doing it in the best way possible, the most ethical way, and I'm eating it."

She's not just eating venison or game, although her vegan experience was more of a learning curve than a wholly positive experience:

"My God it was an eye-opener. The first month was horrendous because it was just vegan pizzas, vegan sausages, vegan sausage rolls – all processed foods. I was tired all the time, I wasn't getting any Vitamin B – and that's when I started planting flowering herbs and doing lots of research and I started thinking plant-based, not vegan. It just made me start thinking about food from all angles better. And when we decided to not do it anymore, I still incorporated more plant-based meals into my diet more regularly because I can see the benefits."

This is something she wishes more people knew – the benefits of eating whole foods, connecting with the outdoors, and wild food systems.

"First of all, I want people to know how good it's going to make them feel and how happy it's going to make them feel just being there. I want them to understand and feel what that's like.

And I want them to understand more about food, the reality of food, and how good it feels to just go and pick a potato from the ground yourself. How good it feels to recognise things like a sloe berry. How good it feels to see it and to know what you can do with it, whether you end up doing it or not!"

What's funny is that, despite feeling the massive impact her lifestyle has had on her own physical health, when Nicole talks about wild food systems she instinctively speaks about mental health and how connection to land and food makes people feel emotionally.

And as Nicole puts so beautifully, our emotional connection to land and the outdoors, however universal, is also a unique and personal experience:

"It's the gratitude and the awe – feeling awe from being outside in whichever way affects you. Every kid is different. One might feel awe from the birds. One might feel awe from looking up at a giant tree. One might feel awe from watching a deer quietly walking. One might feel awe from watching a bird of prey eating something. One might feel awe from seeing prints in the soil or the first little shoot coming out. Everyone's different, but that feeling that we feel is the same."

Follow Nicole @shootinggirl_with_an_afro

Nicole's book, 'Shooting Girl With An Afro: Memoir of a Black British Huntress' releases 8 Jan 2027 with Austin Macauley Publishers.

Farm Focus · Manor Farm

In this very foody Field Notes newsletter, the Belcher family on our Little Dalby Estate in Leicestershire were an obvious choice for this issue's Farm Focus.

We find Dan, Jo and their team in jubilant mood, fresh from being crowned 'Rural Enterprise Champions' at the prestigious Countryside Alliance Awards at its annual 'Rural Oscars' ceremony in London. Such national recognition came as a surprise, but is a real feather in their cap, having impressed the judges by 'showcasing modern farming through a combination of food production, retail, hospitality, and education, while creating local jobs.'

Celebrations over, it was back to the farm. The Belchers are tenants of Manor Farm (264 acres), and have tenancies with the Trust across a further 547 acres. The family own March House Farm near Great Dalby, which lends its name to the Farm Shop that has become a destination for loyal customers from across the region, and a major focus of their farm business.

Dan is an advocate of regenerative farming and is part of the 'WildFarmed' community – a pioneering regenerative food and farming company, who work alongside farmers and food producers to support the transition to regenerative farming and create a more nature-rich food system. With a mission to 'Get better food, from better farms, onto the high street', WildFarmed help their farming community work with nature to build a better food system from the ground up, through regenerative farming practices that increase biodiversity, improve soil health and reduce carbon. It's an approach that aims to build each farm's natural capital and improve its profit margins.

> "We aim to farm in a way that leaves the land in a better state than when we found it, with the next generation of farmers in mind. WildFarmed understand this logic. Their support helps us produce a good crop for a good price."

With this level of commitment to farming practices, it's no wonder March House Farm Shop - which sells meat and meat products from livestock reared by Dan - has become synonymous with quality, local produce.

The Farm Shop also promotes itself as a Deli, Café and entertainment space, boasting an on-site butchery with a 4-strong team of highly skilled butchers offering premium meats, including the country's best ribeye, so says the website. A quick glance at their Instagram feed shows butcher Phil Thatcher enthusiastically promoting the shop's latest offerings of home-reared quality produce. There's also a post about winning the Battle of the Butchers 2026 Golden Cleaver Award for 'Best Beef Steak', and look out for news of another March House Farm accolade, having recently been nomiated for 'Butcher of the Year' with My Local Awards.

The idea of selling their own meat first materialised in 1999, when Dan's parents, Michael and Heather Belcher, packed a van, drove to London and set-up a market stall at Camden Lock, where their lamb, beef and pork products sold like proverbial hot cakes. More markets followed across north and west London, as did their customers' appreciation for the produce. Buoyed by this success, the Belchers built their own on-site butchery in 2005 selling to local customers directly from the farm. The move to retail, with the creation of March House Farm Shop, came in 2017, and was a big leap for the family. Successful in this venture, a café was added the following year to showcase the produce and continue their development of quality food.





Today, there's a real buzz about the place, with seasonal activities that included 'Slip N Slide' during the extreme heat of summer – the country's longest waterslide at 170m - proving to be a real crowd puller (best viewed on Instagram!) As we head into cooler months, Pumkin Picking and other family events for Bonfire Night and Christmas are all on offer (details on their website). 'Bands in the Barns' is another enterprising use of the farm's spaces, offering balmy summer evenings of live music, dancing and, of course generous offerings of freshly cooked home reared food.

The Belcher family's story is one that underlines the importance of people and place, and how this connection creates a strong foundation for communities to thrive both on and from the land. We congratulate them on their Countryside Alliance Award, and the much-deserved title of 'Rural Enterprise Champions'.

> "Twenty-five years ago, we diversified to save the farm. Now, these diversifications enable us to engage directly with the public far more than we ever could. It's amazing how interested people are in the provenance of their food and the farmers who produce it."

Manor Farm is one of the Ernest Cook Trust's four farms on the Little Dalby Estate in Leicestershire, the largest of our estates and the one which arguably enjoys the best quality land for food production and livestock rearing.

Ernest Cook bought the Little Dalby Estate from the Burns-Hartopp family in 1938. Today it comprises:

- **5,550 acres in total, including**
- **241 acres of woodland**
- **43 residential properties**
- **4 excellent farming businesses**

Find out more about the Belcher's March House Farm Shop and activities here: www.marchhousefarm.co.uk













Funding in flow

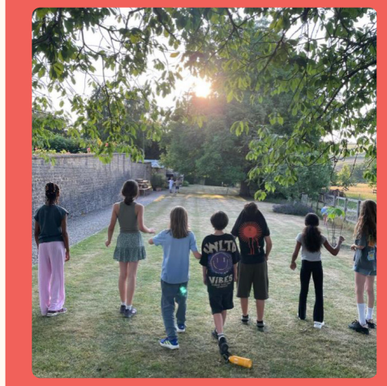
As the new term continues, many of our funded organisations will be out and about this autumn helping children and young people enjoy the benefits of the natural world.

Our **Communities Grant**, which offers funding to charities and non-profit organisations that support young people (11-19 year-olds) to enjoy the outdoors and actively engage with nature, has received a wide range of applications since opening in the summer. Community gardens and youth groups along with charities supporting young people with additional needs, long-term health conditions and those experiencing loss have all benefited. We are delighted that such a wide range of organisations have taken the opportunity to help engage their young people with the outdoors.

One organisation has shared how our support has made a difference. **'Soundabout'** run a 'Sounds Wild' programme which enables young learning-disabled people with complex support needs to enjoy interactive, person-centred music-making in inspiring outdoor settings. They have used the grant to fund travel costs to Avon Wildlife Trust's Grow Wilder site in Bristol and one of the attendees, Michael has been able to combine his love of nature and music together giving an opportunity to deepen his connections further:

"Michael will listen closely, enjoy the environment, and begin mimicking the sounds he hears. He embraces the natural soundscape and expresses it in his own unique ways. Michael is registered blind and cannot use his arms or legs to play instruments, however his hearing is incredibly strong, and the joy he shows when copying sounds is truly wonderful. Having a space where his voice is his instrument gives him a sense of independence and ownership."





School children on a farm residential visit with Cotswold National Landscape



Outdoor Learning Leader, Ro at The Birch Collective's Community Garden in Bristol, with colleague Sarah.

This autumn sees the opening of our **Outdoor Learning Leader Grant** with expressions of interest welcomed through October. This is the first stage in the process to apply for funding for up to £20,000 per year for 3 years for charities and non-profit organisations to employ an Outdoor Learning Leader as important role models helping young people actively engage with the natural environment. The funding is offered to 3 specific geographical areas linked to our estates and further details are available on our website.

Successful applicants are invited to join the Ernest Cook Trust's network of Outdoor Learning Leaders, OPEN (Outdoor Practitioners Educational Network) sharing best practice, benefiting from CPD and exchanging ideas and skills. As part of the network and to deepen relationships with funded organisations, we love to visit and see the outdoor learning in action.

Recently we visited an eco committee from a London primary school that were attending a residential on a working farm organised by **Cotswolds National Landscape,** one of our current Outdoor Learning Leader funded organisations. The highlight was being given a guided tour by the children who had clearly made a close connection to the farm in a remarkably short space of time and were so knowledgeable of their surroundings. The fact that water was coming out of a spring rather than a tap caused great excitement and they wanted to bottle the water to take it home!

The Birch Collective, which is in the final year of the Outdoor Learning Leader grant funded programme, invited us to visit their site in Bristol for 'Fresh-Air Thursday' - a year-round drop-in group, exploring a range of nature, horticulture and craft-based therapeutic interventions. The leaders and young people attending were very welcoming to a special green space hidden away in the city, where thoughts could be shared and skills learned through various nature-based activities.

OWL Nest Schools:

From one residential to whole-school change

A week in nature can change a child. But what if it could also change a school? In our recent Nest Schools Report, we're learning what happens when the impact of an outdoor learning experience continues when children return to school.

The Outdoor Week of Learning (OWL) Collaboration believes that every child should have the opportunity to develop their own sense of place in the natural world, regardless of circumstance. Through carefully curated Outdoor Weeks of Learning for schools facing the greatest barriers, teacher development opportunities and legacy projects, the programme champions nature- and farm-based learning as an integral part of a healthy and enriching education.

Since 2021, and with the generous support of The Dulverton Trust, the programme has reached 6,382 children and young people, over the lifetime of the programme to date, OWL has engaged more than 200 schools and fostered a strong community of practice across 10 Outdoor Learning partners.

OWL Nest is a legacy programme created in 2024 in response to an identified need for more sustained, targeted support for schools who are ready to make a significant commitment to embedding outdoor learning at school, following an OWL residential.

Across England, 23 OWL Nest schools are showing what is possible when outdoor learning becomes part of everyday school life. From gardens and outdoor classrooms to pupil-led environmental projects and curriculum-wide learning outdoors, schools are building on their Outdoor Weeks of Learning to create lasting benefits for children, staff and wider communities.

Now in its second year, the OWL Nest programme provides funding, support and connections with outdoor learning partners to help schools embed outdoor learning beyond a single residential experience. The aim is simple: to help the confidence, curiosity, wellbeing and connection to nature fostered during an OWL residential continue to grow long after children return home.

Across the network, teachers are reporting encouraging changes. Schools describe pupils growing in confidence, developing stronger relationships, becoming more engaged in learning and spending more time outdoors. Many have also seen outdoor spaces become valuable places for supporting wellbeing, emotional regulation and a stronger sense of belonging.

Pupil reflections suggest these benefits continue well beyond the residential itself. Children talked about spending more time outside, feeling happier in nature, trying new things, building independence and strengthening connections with family and friends.

"We have seen children who previously struggled to regulate their emotions begin to develop stronger relationships, engage more positively in learning, and feel a greater sense of belonging."

Early findings also suggest that pupils in Nest schools may be more likely to sustain improvements in nature connection and wellbeing over time compared with those who only participate in a residential experience. While further exploration is needed, the findings point to the value of ongoing support in helping the benefits of outdoor learning take root and endure.

As the programme enters its final year, schools and outdoor learning partners continue to learn together, sharing ideas and building approaches that can be sustained long into the future.

Together, they are demonstrating that outdoor learning can be much more than a memorable and immersive week in nature; it can be a catalyst for lasting change across a whole school community.

Read how OWL Nest funding helps seven Hackney schools on our website Stories.



"The outdoor space has become a thriving and purposeful place for pupils and staff to work together, solve problems and see their efforts turning into something tangible."



Trust News

A snapshot of news across the organisation.
Keep up to date with all our news and activities on our socials.

A warm welcome!

We have several new starters this autumn, helping create that motivating "new term" feeling!

To the Learning team, we welcome **Stevie Edge-McKee**, who joins us as **Head of Learning, Operations & Parnterships (South),** also **Tessa Hibbert** and **Faisal Chaudhuri** joining as **Head of Grants** and **Insights Lead** respectively. We also welcome **Dylan Cumberland** as Land-based Skills Assistant.

Helping to share that impact with you, **Mark Vaughan** joins our Communications team as our first **Digital Content Manager,** telling stories of land and learning across our digital channels.

Congratulations!

We're enormously proud of **Toby Griffin,** who graduated with a BA (Hons) in Environmental Studies this summer, managing his studies alongside his role as one of our Outdoor Learning Leaders.

Scout Camp in the Cotswolds

Spending a week under canvas on one of our Home Estate farms will surely live long in the memory for 15th Oxford Scouts, who enjoyed a week designed to give each young person a place to belong and the skills to thrive.

It's also a great opportunity for our farmers to welcome young people onto their land, where they encounter aspects of nature, wildlife and farming not always accessible to them back at home (...see you again next year!)









Food glorious food

Food was definitely the theme of this year's Team Day in August, when we welcomed staff from across the country to Court Farm to celebrate the land and what it brings us.

Our new strategy is delivered through three goals: Learning, Land, and Connection - providing inspiration for the day. We learnt new skills through pizza making, foraging and gathering, and hand-crafting venison burgers. Land was at the heart of all this, using produce grown at our Fairford Park gardens and polytunnel, and venison sourced from our estates, with Estate Ranger Steve sharing insights into sustainable deer management.

In the evening, we came together over a shared meal, with horse rides, live music and games in the garden, and welcomed families and friends of the Trust.

As the Trust has grown, so has the breadth of our work and the distance between colleagues. It was a real pleasure to reconnect as a wider team, sharing food we had grown and prepared ourselves. That connection to each other and the land is at the heart of the Trust.

Huge thanks to Max, Ash, Jack and the team at Sourdough Revolution for our pizza-making experience, and to Gilo's for hosting the burger van. And special thanks to Dave and Harry the horse for the entertainment, including sleigh rides and tug of war (the horse won!) and to Joe, Chris, Alice and others for very special live music.



On the Podcast: Ed Ikin

We can highly recommend a recent episode of the **ThirdSector Podcast** which features Ed in conversation with host, Emily Burt.

Ed gives a fascinating summary of how the Trust reached this point in its (almost) 75 year history, and how we plan to align long-term grant making to our places. A great listen!

Access via this link: https://pod.fo/e/69f5a4 or wherever you get your podcasts.

(artwork credit: David Robinson)



A typical Wednesday at Low Beckside...

HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh visited Low Beckside Farm in September, as part of a two-day visit to Cumbria. The Duchess spent a morning meeting young people we work wtih and learning how farm education and skills training are helping to inspire future generations and support the sustainability of land-based industries in the county.
Read more about this on our website Stories.



Resilient Glenderamackin

An ambitious project that aims to deliver nature-based solutions to flooding in Cumbria with benefits to farming and local communities is in advanced negotiations with DEFRA.

The project aims to improve biodiversity and reduce the flood risk to Keswick, and includes the whole catchment of the River Glenderamackin, which includes the Trust's Low Beckside Farm in Mungrisdale.

There are many risks faced by the catchment area, from poor water quality and habitat conditions to degraded peatlands and vulnerability to drought. By managing flood risk, this project aims to make the natural landscape, communities and farming sector more resilient.

The project is also one of the biggest blended finance projects being developed in England and a great example of the power of cross-sector collaboration, involving multiple different landowners. We look forward to working with the West Cumbria Rivers Trust and their partners once negotiations with DEFRA are complete.

WEST CUMBRIA RIVERS TRUST

Get your home ready for winter

Our Property Managers share this handy checklist to help prepare for the colder months, whether you're one of our residential tenants or live elsewhere:

- **Check your oil supply.** If you have an oil-fired system, ensure you have enough oil.
- **Check your boiler pressure.** If applicable, check that it's within the manufacturer's recommended range when the system is cold.
- **Test your heating.** Switch on your boiler and run the heating for an hour.
- **Check hot water**. If you have an immersion heater, switch it on to test it works.
- **Check radiators.** Bleed them if needed and make sure they heat up properly.
- **Check radiator valves.** Turn them up and down to check they're working freely.
- **Protect outside pipes.** Insulate outside taps or exposed pipes.
- **Test extractor fans.** Check your kitchen and bathroom fans are working.
- **Test your alarms.** Check smoke and carbon monoxide alarms are working.

The Property team are here to help our residential tenants with any issues.

Upcoming housing projects

We're looking forward to seeking engagement with local communities on small housing projects in the coming weeks.

These include Hatherop village in Gloucestershire, and Somerby village on our Little Dalby Estate in Leicestershire.

Please keep an eye on local notice boards and our social media channels for further details, or reach out to us via:

hello@ernestcooktrust.org.uk

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.

September - we welcomed **HRH The Duchess of Edinburgh** to Low Beckside Farm, to share how farming, land-based skills and learning can support young people's futures in the area.



August - At this year's **Cumbria Farmer Awards** we once again sponsored the Agricultural Student & Rural Skills Award, won by Agribusiness Management student, Megan Powell.

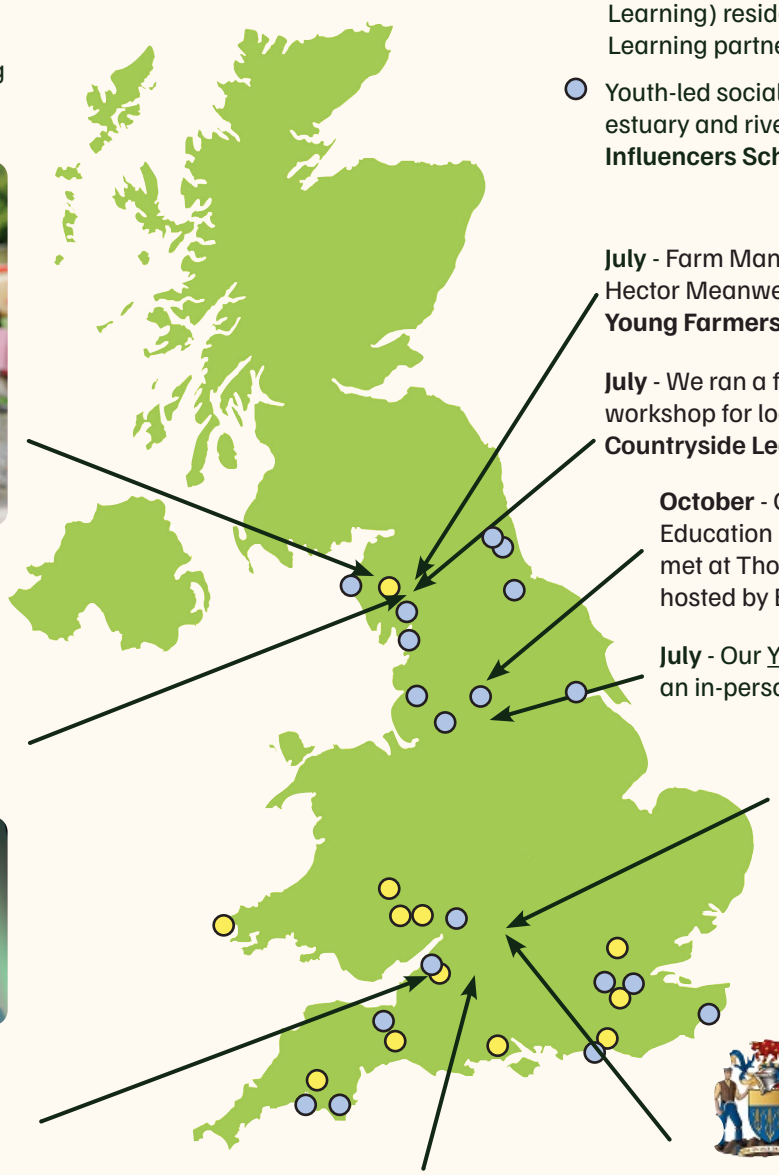


July - staff enjoyed a team day at our **Slimbridge archeological dig**.



Throughout the season

- Schools on **OWL** (Outdoor Week of Learning) residentials at these Outdoor Learning partner locations.
- Youth-led social action projects at coastal, estuary and river locations for the **Blue Influencers Scheme.**



July - Farm Manager at Low Beckside Farm, Hector Meanwell attended the **Penrith Young Farmers** Club 90th celebrations.

July - We ran a farm-based learning workshop for local schools at the **Countryside Learning Day** at Lowther.

October - Our Outdoor Practitioners Education Network (**OPEN** - north) met at Thompson Park, Burnley, hosted by Burnley Leisure & Culture.

July - Our Youth Advisory Board met for an in-person meeting in Manchester.

August - the Outdoor Learning Team (South) hosted **Nicole Fernandex from Three Rivers Park District in Minnesota** for a week-long professional learning visit.

The Worshipful Company of Farmers

October - Members of OPEN (south) met at Westonbirt, The National Arboretum.

Summer - we partnered with FWAG South-West to launch the **River Rangers Award**

September - We welcomed **The Worshipful Company of Farmers** to Court Farm for a discussion about the Trust's farming heritage before our one-time tenant Chris Peachey hosted visits to Donkeywell - his son Tim's farm, and Milton Farm in Fairford with the Patons.

Contact us: **hello@ernestcooktrust.org.uk**

Photography: Lucy Judson Photography, KOR PR, staff, farmers, friends & programme participants