

Field Notes

Newsletter of the Ernest Cook Trust
SUMMER 2026 • Celebrating the season

Open Farm Sunday

Celebrating 20 years of farming's open day

The power of place

Why is place-based learning so exciting
and impactful?

Summer holiday ideas

Nature and activities to inspire everyone to get
outdoors this summer

**"It's so good for farmer mental health and that is beyond
my wildest dreams to be making that difference."**

Founder of Farmer Time, Tom Martin, shares the unexpected
impact of connecting classrooms with farmers...



Growing where we're rooted

From Ed Ikin

"By choosing place, partnership and purpose, we can help others realise their ambitions."

If you and your organisation are filled with ambition, at times feeling like you want to change the world, where do you set your sights? Organisational visions and missions are often filled with extraordinary trajectories, steeped in national change: the end of a societal ill, the start of a new way of being/ thinking that fundamentally changes the nation.

This is just the fuel some organisations need and often the motive force needed to change how governments act, but it shouldn't become a default for all mission-driven organisations. In March we decided, through our new strategy, to focus on what can do well: effect significant change in the localities where our estates are based.

Our renewed focus on our places combines our land, our grants, our networking and our learning to be a long-term positive influence in the communities around us.

Even at this local scale, we cannot, and should not, do it all. Our desire to be influential is not about column inches, clicks, impact scores or reflected glory. We just want to be useful.

Much of the last three months has been spent talking to potential partners around our places, understanding the role they play in the lives of young people, how they connect to each other, what their capacity is and how much they could grow with our support.

Can we connect an academy trust with alternative provision to a local care farm? Can we offer work experience opportunities to graduates of that care farm with newly discovered life skills? Can we support our tenant farmers to work with local apprentices or college students, to ensure everyone has the experience they need?

To actively choose locality over nationwide, to convene rather than dictate, to connect others rather than doing it all ourselves, may feel like a modest choice, one that lacks ambition, but that's not how it feels.

To truly understand the best role you can play as a charity, and to play that role with honesty, adaptability and altruism can allow others to realise their ambitions. That's our choice, and we're excited to see where it leads.

Sighting this Hummingbird Hawk Moth at our HQ was particularly satisfying, as they're typically seen in coastal southern England in the summer.

Migrating from Southern Europe, this day-flying moth hovers in mid-air to feed on nectar with a long proboscis, while beating its wings in an audible hum. The uncanny resemblance to a hummingbird gives this intriguing pollinator its name. Our fluttering friend had a clear preference for purple flowers and was working our lavenders particularly hard!



The power of place

Whatever the season, learning is made even more impactful when it's connected to real places, communities and landscapes. At the Trust we're awakening the power of place in our work, right across the country.

Last autumn, sitting around plastic trestle tables at our team away day, we were all trying to articulate what our future goals for the Ernest Cook Trust would be. We were in groups that cut across the whole organisation and included all different teams, but there was one word around which we converged... Place.

For all of us, that word holds meaning and significance. For our Outdoor Learning Leader, Alice, it has a special resonance. She shares her reflections on the power of place:

"For me, studying for a masters in Outdoor and Environmental Education before getting a job at the Trust, the discovery of 'place-based education' provided the language I had lacked in my years as a class teacher.

Back then, I'd been inspired by the concept of being "apprenticed to a place" and set about getting to know every inch of the city primary school in which I worked.

I hoped that by paying attention to the 'land', in this case the school grounds, we could turn our site - weary from being trod by hundreds of pairs of feet each day - into somewhere that was obviously, visibly, loved and cherished, worthy of our children and their families. I hoped that deepening familiarity with all the aspects of our place might help to 'ground' the new children that arrived fresh from other countries and continents, uprooted and having to start from scratch.

Now, considering the relevance of place to our work at the Trust, I feel a fizz of excitement in my stomach. It makes sense that we should focus on place: if our vision is to see a future where land and lives enrich each other, places are where this happens – where nature and culture coalesce.

Things I love about place-based education:

1. Place-based education takes seriously the idea that education is about more than information - it is also about formation.

What are children learning incidentally through the educational practices they undertake day-in, day-out? If formal learning only happens sitting down indoors, what is being said implicitly about the value of the whole body rather than only the brain? In a country with overlapping mental health and obesity crises, place-based education takes seriously children's holistic development.

2. Place-based education has the potential to lead to highly effective teaching and learning since it is inherently 'real world', rather than abstract.

This means it can facilitate enquiry-based learning that might raise more questions than answers, as well as problem solving, political engagement, and seeking out experts in the local community. Through place-based education, children's innate need for belonging can also be met, highlighted by the recent government Policy Paper as a prerequisite for achievement.



3. There is a contrast between "sentimental and escapist" approaches to nature, and those that are practical, and include "loyalty to and affection for...wildlife"

It is the latter that develops when one pays attention to the specific species of plants and animals, as well as the specific people, that make up our places – not a sanitised, idealistic understanding of 'nature' that ignores the all-too-real challenges of those whose livelihoods depend on it.

"I do not know whether it is possible to love the planet or not, but I do know that it is possible to love the places we can see, touch, smell and experience"

David Orr, environmentalist

Place has continued to grow in significance, providing a thread that weaves through the work of the different sectors that make up our organisation.

As Outdoor Learning Leaders at the Ernest Cook Trust, we have always used the overlap between the land's offering and the needs of the students as our starting point, and so in one sense, our work has always been 'place-based'. But I am excited to see the difference that this new emphasis will make on our practice. There are still lots of questions to think about as we develop our thinking on this topic!"

Nature's Notebook

We are now well into summer and nature is thriving. Here's a snapshot of what we're seeing on the ground across our estates.



Oxeye daisies can grow to nearly a metre tall, with big singular flowers. Found in many different kinds of soils, they suit flower borders, cottage gardens, wildflower meadows and cutting beds alike.

These resilient flowers are native to the British Isles and in the past have been used for making infusions, treating coughs or asthma, and even in spells and romantic predictions. In fact it's the oxeye daisy that is linked to the "he loves me he loves me not" game of picking petals. Fun fact - each petal of an oxeye daisy is in fact its own flower, because they have composite flower heads made of yellow disc florets and petals.

In summer, the 'frothy' flowers of **lady's bedstraw** can carpet meadows, grasslands, chalk downlands, heaths and sand dunes with yellow, filling the air with a sweet, honey-like scent. Dried, this flower has the scent of new-mown hay, and its name is probably derived from the tradition of stuffing straw mattresses with it, (particularly those of women about to give birth!) Historically, lady's bedstraw was also used to curdle milk for cheese-making - a convenient vegetarian replacement for rennet, which is made from the stomach lining of cows. Today, it provides nectar for bees and butterflies, and serves as food for the caterpillar of certain moths.

Common water-crowfoot sounds more like a type of birdlife found on the river, but it is in fact the common name of the *Ranunculus Aquatilis*. These floating white flowers with lobed leaves can be found in ponds, ditches and streams in early summer.

They're part of the buttercup family, and the water-crowfoot group have many different (hard to distinguish) types. As well as brightening up slower watercourses with its floral display, water-crowfoot acts as an indicator of a river's health. And its tangled stems can offer protection and shelter to young fish from predators or extreme temperatures.

Conservation success: a season of fledglings

Last season we shared some images of the nests around our estates, but summer is obviously when these little fledglings are ready to fly the nest.

Our Estate Ranger, Steve Jones, captured this lapwing in flight on our Home Estates - a welcome sight given how susceptible lapwing ground nests are to predation by foxes, badgers, crows, buzzards and red kites. Once hatched, lapwing chicks then have to feed themselves. This fledged lapwing is testament to the conservation practices of both our Estate team and our farmers, who work closely to maximise lapwing success, monitoring their movements and nesting habits.

The young kestrels were reared in one of our barn owl boxes, installed on the Home Estates to combat habitat loss due to ash die-back, which these magnificent birds have used for nesting.



Summer holiday inspiration

As the schools break-up for summer, a lot of parents, grandparents and carers are looking for fun activities to fill those six weeks. At the Trust we obviously believe that the best place to spend the summer holidays is in the outdoors! So here are some suggestions for engaging children and young people with nature throughout the summer months...

Flower pressing and collecting

This is a great activity for all children because it can be easily adapted into arts and crafts that are suitable for different ages. Always be mindful of where you're picking flowers, make sure you have permission and that they're not harmful. The 1-in-20 rule suggests that if there are 20 or more of the flower in one area then it's usually OK to pick one.

Building wildlife homes

Whether it's an insect hotel made from hollow canes and a bucket or a hedgehog house built from a few bricks and a layer of wood, there are loads of different homes for small wild animals you can make with basic materials. Many animals thrive through summer, but come the cooler autumn and winter months, they'll welcome the shelters you've made for them.

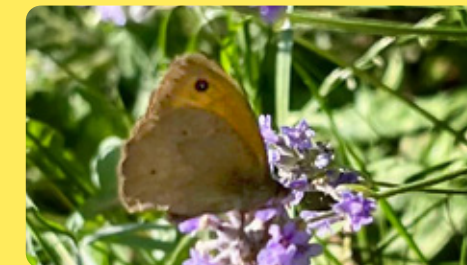
Rockpooling

If you live near or are visiting the coast this summer, rockpooling only really needs a keen eye to observe some truly fascinating wildlife, without disturbing them in their habitat. From crabs and limpets to anemones and starfish, you'll be surprised at what you discover! Move slowly and carefully, don't scare them away, and use an online guide to help with identification.

Indoor activities

On days when you need some time indoors, you can still connect with nature. Halve a raw potato, carve different animal footprints, add paint then use to print animal tracks... Paint foraged leaves and print butterflies with them... Collect fallen leaves, pressed flowers, and feathers to decorate jars to make lanterns, use as ears on a mask, or anything else your imagination conjures!

Become a citizen scientist!



From 17 July - 9 August, you can take part in The Big Butterfly Count, one of the world's largest citizen science surveys.

Butterflies are highly sensitive to environmental changes, making them key indicators of the health of our wider ecosystem. Your data helps conservationists track species trends, understand the impacts of climate change, and protect these essential pollinators. Search 'Big Butterfly Count 2026' online for full details.

These online resources are free: <https://www.wildlifetrusts.org/actions>
<https://muddyfaces.co.uk/activities/art-creating/pressing-flowers>

Force for nature · Chris Nash, Gardener & Estate Worker

This summer, Chris celebrates 40 years' of service with the Ernest Cook Trust. It's a milestone we're both proud and honoured to celebrate as he has brought decades of hard work, expertise and kindness to our team. We asked him how he would describe his time at the Trust,



"fair to midling..."

...was his quick-witted response! But after a little more digging, Chris reflected that over the years he's enjoyed the huge variety of people he's met, especially his fellow colleagues. Chief Executive, Ed Ikin, paid tribute to Chris's skill and knowledge, describing the natural connection he has with his craft, and paying him the ultimate compliment, "If ever I want an honest opinion, there's only one place I go!" - high horticultural praise indeed! We look forward to Chris's continued care of the nature that thrives thanks to his skills, as he enters an impressive fifth decade with the Trust.



Read more about this story on the [blog](#).

Chris expertly planting a tree in the grounds of Court Farm to mark his 40 years, with our Chair, Mary Riall, trustees and colleagues

Finding common ground

What does common ground mean to you? As a land-owning organisation, the answer is perhaps a little more complicated for us at the Ernest Cook Trust, but even when we consider the nuance of common land and access, we all reach a similar place:

Shared understanding...
Shared interests...
Things we have in common.

This was the theme of the 2026 Power of Youth Day with the #iwill Movement that we celebrated in June, and it's a great reminder of what drives our Youth Advisory Board (YAB), as they help shape a bold youth-led future for the Trust. Nothing captures the spirit of this future better than our first in-person residential for our Youth Advisory Board in April. Bringing together young people and staff from the Trust, the gathering created space for honest conversations, fresh perspectives and ambitious thinking about how youth voice should influence our work going forward.

The residential took place immediately after our Blue Influencers Scheme conference at the same outdoor centre in Derbyshire. Some of our YAB members attended both events, taking the opportunity to connect with young people from youth organisations from across England, through workshops and sessions on youth-led environmental social action.



For the rest of the weekend, six of our newest youth advocates got together and got hands-on with regenerative farming practices and rewilding activities, before getting into rich discussions about finding common ground across multiple values of land and different perspectives in rural issues.

In the words of Mia, one of our newest cohort to join the YAB... **"Sunday afternoon brought out the big guns on how we build a relationship with both nature and farmers that has community cohesion, local economic support, ecosystem restoration and political advocacy all into one...just a small discussion topic."**

The right to grow, the right to roam and the right to access nature, all were central to our scoping out what the YAB can contribute to the Trust."

These tricky, nuanced conversations are part of our commitment to integrating youth voice across all the Trust's activities.

We know that young people need to be invited into the right spaces in order to build relationships, shape conversations and influence decisions made by organisations. And part of our responsibility is to ensure they feel comfortable and empowered to contribute to the decision-making processes that will affect their lives as much, if not more than, anyone else.

As our Youth Leadership Programmes Manager, Robyn, says **"We know that nature, green spaces and land can cultivate a sense of connection and of community. In a divided world, we can find our commonalities and create new spaces for open and curious conversations by using a love of nature as a shared starting point. As we look ahead to our next three years of work, the Youth Advisory Board will be crucial in leading some of those conversations and working with us to create more responsive and equitable programmes and practises."**

Read more about this on the [blog](#).



"This weekend has been a lovely opportunity to meet like-minded young people with so much variety of lived experience and bonds to nature... I think this is a real opportunity to reinvigorate the significance of how we are all so different and yet nature is always our home."

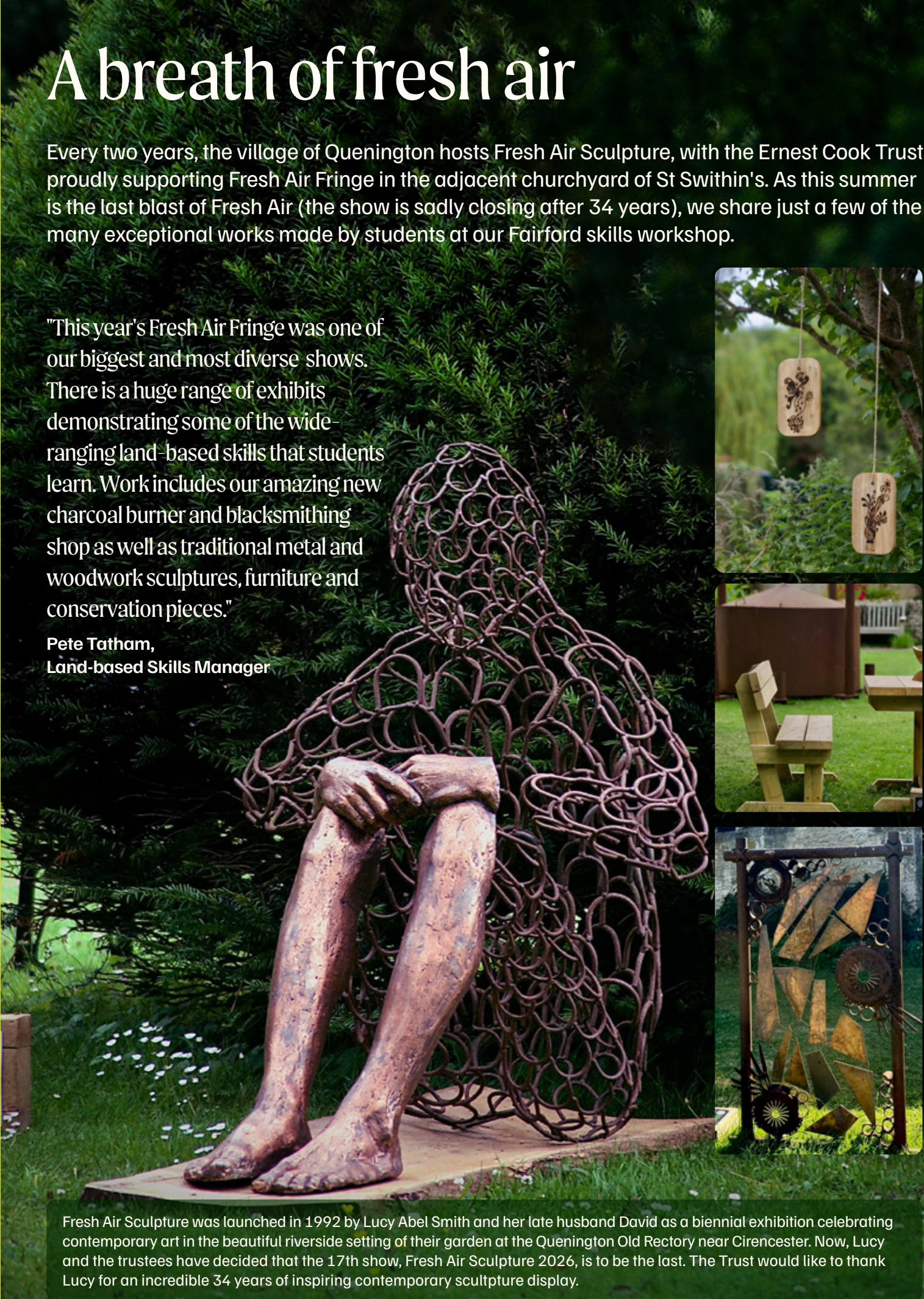


A breath of fresh air

Every two years, the village of Quenington hosts Fresh Air Sculpture, with the Ernest Cook Trust proudly supporting Fresh Air Fringe in the adjacent churchyard of St Swithin's. As this summer is the last blast of Fresh Air (the show is sadly closing after 34 years), we share just a few of the many exceptional works made by students at our Fairford skills workshop.

"This year's Fresh Air Fringe was one of our biggest and most diverse shows. There is a huge range of exhibits demonstrating some of the wide-ranging land-based skills that students learn. Work includes our amazing new charcoal burner and blacksmithing shop as well as traditional metal and woodwork sculptures, furniture and conservation pieces."

Pete Tatham,
Land-based Skills Manager



Fresh Air Sculpture was launched in 1992 by Lucy Abel Smith and her late husband David as a biennial exhibition celebrating contemporary art in the beautiful riverside setting of their garden at the Quenington Old Rectory near Cirencester. Now, Lucy and the trustees have decided that the 17th show, Fresh Air Sculpture 2026, is to be the last. The Trust would like to thank Lucy for an incredible 34 years of inspiring contemporary sculpture display.

Tom Martin

We know that on-farm visits can be transformational for young people, but this season we caught up with the founder of Farmer Time to hear about the online calls that can inspire the first step along this pathway to confidence, connection and experiences outdoors.

A conference in Singapore is an unlikely origin story for the hugely popular British farming success story that is Farmer Time... but 9 years ago, founder Tom Martin was at the Royal Agricultural Society of the Commonwealth Conference in Singapore when he heard a story from the Iowa State Fair in America that sparked an idea.

“They were talking about connecting children from a media centre at the fairground to farmers in their field, and I got halfway through that presentation and then started dreaming...” What Tom dreamt up was a way to connect young people across the country (his country) to British farmers. **“Because we’ve got all the technology in our pockets – children don’t need to go to a media centre in a state fair, farmers can connect with them in their classroom.”**

From there, the grassroots took hold and Farmer Time grew very organically. **“I just posted on my “Farmer Tom” Facebook profile to see if anyone was interested, thinking I’d get a couple of responses, and there were a couple of hundred!”**

And there was interest across the board. **“From parents saying, this would be great for my kids. From farmers saying, I’d like to be involved with doing something like this. And from teachers, saying where do I sign up?!”**

The pilot programme started between Tom on his farm in Cambridgeshire and a school on the south coast. Although the school was in a relatively challenging semi-urban area, and an area with completely different agriculture and soil to his heavy clay loam, the bond was immediate and it worked brilliantly.

Partnering with LEAF from the beginning was hugely instrumental in Farmer Time’s success, and Tom shared how having a “captain of our industry” like Caroline Drummond behind the venture helped make it so successful. Then in 2022, Farmer Time was able to register as an independent charity and it now has its own small but mighty board of trustees – and is still going from strength to strength.

Today, Farmer Time has somewhere between 400 and 500 live pairings of farmer and school at any one time. **“If we lowball guess at 25 kids per class, that’s well over 10,000 kids we’re engaging across the UK”** says Tom.

Although the reach is wide, Farmer Time shares the values of the Ernest Cook Trust that deep and sustained relationships are at the heart of transformational learning.

Each of these 500 pairings are based on one-to-one relationships between a specific farmer and one class of children, in a relational, sustained and ongoing programme.

“I was always keen to be really involved in Farmer Time... I wanted to put my shoulder to the plough as well.”



As Tom’s first connection with a school on the south coast showed, the farmer and school don’t need to be nearby to benefit from this relationship either. Tom admits that this wrong-footed him at first, but he understands from speaking to all the teachers he’s encountered that they really value compare and contrast as an educational approach.

They once presented to a secondary school in Jersey, where the school originally wanted to pair every class with a Jersey farmer. Whilst Tom agrees that this would have some really positive impacts, he suggested looking at the potato and dairy sectors that dominate Jersey and pairing each class with a different potato or dairy farmer from Scotland, East Anglia, Wales, or Northern Ireland.

This ethos of comparison is so vital as we seek to connect children and young people with British farmers, food systems and landscapes. **“Look at a school in Cambridge, surrounded by peat soil and probably below sea level, and compare that with a farmer in the uplands, you’re not just helping children to interpret what they see out the window – it’s helping them to interpret wider things within the UK. That could be job opportunities, it could just be geography, or different food types.”**

Wherever the farmer or the school, these connections and conversations enrich children’s learning in a surprising number of ways. Farmer Time sessions can be curriculum-aligned, so they support a class’s Biology, Physics, Maths, or PSHE lessons. And even if it’s not planned, the relationship between farmer and class filters into their different skills, lessons and learning.

Recently a teacher friend of Tom’s had a class that proactively planned and budgeted for Tom’s fencing (without him actually asking for their financial advice!)... **“He called me and said, “Hi Tom, I’m here with my class and you know that field that you wanted to fence? We’ve worked out how much barbed wire you’ll need and how many fencing posts.” He put them on speaker and they told me how many fencing posts, and then said they’d worked out how much it was going to cost!”**

All of this is reminiscent of Mick Waters’ reflections in our spring Field Notes issue about the value of real-world experiences to support education and bring learning to life. And it’s why Tom finds KS2 (Years 3 – 6 or children aged 7 to 11) best suited to Farmer Time, because they have the same teacher across their subjects, which allows their farmer learnings to cross pollinate as many subjects as possible.

It’s a breadth and reach that even Tom didn’t expect. **“I’ve been amazed at the reach of farming. We started off connecting people with where their food comes from and now we’re talking about careers. We talk about sustainability in the environment. There’s such a breadth and complexity in terms of how many subjects and areas of interest that farming is appropriate to.”**

“I’ve learnt that we’re scientists. We think we’re farmers, but really we collect data, we do our research, we come up with a hypothesis, we put it into practice, we control variables, we record data and analyse it, and then we come up with a new hypothesis! We’re scientists in all but name.”



Ideas to try on Farmer Time!

Inspired to sign up and connect with a classroom of children? Here are some of the ideas that Tom loves:

- Hat frisbee - just throw your hat or cap across the land and then walk over to uncover the biodiversity lurking in one small space
- Dig for Britian - even just digging a hole and counting the worms is something school children can replicate at home, at school or in the wild
- Do the maths - inspired by Tom’s fencing, any real-life use of maths and physics makes learning engaging and fun
- Bloody good fun - not too traumatic, because it’s actually digging up a bean plant to check the root nodules and measure legume hemoglobin!

Farmer Time works with classes from Year 2 all the way up to Agriculture College (Tom hosts calls with Leeds University), and whatever their age, students grow in confidence through their conversations with their farmer.

“One of the unintended benefits is children growing in confidence. Asking questions of someone that’s not their teacher. But also becoming more familiar with the countryside, more inclined to want to go there or interact with it. And also more inclined to pick a rural business or to do some work experience later in their school career.”

It’s not just children growing in confidence – Tom shares that this is

the greatest impact he sees on farmers and teachers too. For teachers it’s about confidence to organise on-farm visits. Although Farmer Time is exclusively online, Tom describes it as the gateway to in-person visits.

And for the farmers, it’s the confidence in sharing their work, their land and their livelihoods with a group of children. **“I get an email or message once a week or so from a farmer saying “I was really nervous, I didn’t know how it was going to be or if the questions would be too hard” and immediately it has become the highlight of their week. Just an hour later they’re already thinking about the next call. Once you get over what feels like a hill, which is actually just a hillock, a molehill, you’re in, you’re off and you’re away!”**

This translates into real personal impact for the farmers involved. **“I thought we needed to do this because we’re promoting our industry and protecting our future. And to a great extent we are. But I also have farmers who get emotional when they tell me how much they love it and what a difference it’s making. How much they’re looking forward to it. When they’re on their own on the farm, and you know you get pretty hard times or long days, they will see something that amazes them and they think “I must tell the children about this”. They wouldn’t use the word mental health but... it’s so good for farmer mental health and that is beyond my wildest dreams to be making that difference.”**

So from a conference presentation that started the dream, to going wildly beyond them, Farmer Time is a story of surprise, learning and growth. For young people, teachers, farmers and Tom himself.

What’s next?

For Tom, the next step is getting the government to dream big too, asking them to recognise and reflect the depth and value of educational outcomes of Farmer Time so it can contribute to farmers’ educational access payments.

If you’re interested in taking the next step and becoming one of the 500 farmers paired with a school in the UK, just email info@farmertime.uk.



Farm Focus • Church Farm

There's a bit of a theme running through this summer newsletter – a thread of connection. And connection to people and to place is at the heart of Church Farm, Barnsley.

First there's the question of place, because the Russells are deeply rooted in the land here. Austin's family have farmed at Church Farm for three generations, going back to his grandfather Joe who took on the tenancy in 1954. This was just two years after the Trust was founded, so the family's connection to the land has grown and deepened as the Trust has evolved.

Today, Austin runs the farm, while Eloise runs their other business, The T Barn, which offers (among many other things) off-grid camping and glamping experiences. She describes it as a chance to "get away from the buzz of normal daily existence and immerse [yourself] in nature". Everything about the experience, from firepit hampers to rainfall showers, is designed to grow that connection to the outdoors. (They also offer shepherds' huts and cabins through their sister-company Unfold, for those that like their connection with a little more running water).

The Russells don't underestimate the appeal of this place. Barnsley itself is rather special, attracting tourists from around the world. Set in the heart of the Cotswolds, this picturesque village sits on the old Roman route from Cirencester to Oxford, and the famously glorious countryside is made only more appealing by an excellent local pub!

It's a great success story for a farm that is still also a working arable and dairy farm, winning the Farming with Nature award in 2022, and working as a milk supplier for a leading British supermarket.

For Eloise, embarking on the diversified businesses meant a welcome end to commuting, enabling her to work within the village community. It's also true that the farm alone does not necessarily provide sufficient income to comfortably support their family - so these rural enterprises are hard-working businesses that provide a vital income.

The family's commitment to the farm runs deep. As does their desire to welcome people onto the farm to strengthen their connections to nature, food production, and farming.

Eloise regularly welcomes visitors for farm tours and the chance to walk the farm trail – meeting the cows and their calves, the chickens, and the farmer himself! Often these are part of a stay, included as complimentary opportunity to learn about the land and farming, but the Russells also welcome students and other groups to Church Farm throughout the year.

To book a farm tour, call **077177 56935**.

There is also one day a year when people and place come together in earnest (forgive the pun – we don't do them often!) For many years, Austin and Eloise have taken part in Open Farm Sunday (more details on the page opposite). This nationwide scheme offers an extraordinary chance for people and place to connect through real-life experiences on British farms – learning about our food systems, land management and rural life. Given that Church Farm is an award-winning business that contributes to environmental improvements and centres animal welfare in its model, not to mention part of the supply chain for a leading British supermarket, it's an ideal showcase to engage communities with these issues.

Church Farm is a personal story of connection – through Austin's family history, his roots in the farm, and Eloise's wide-reaching ways to connect people and communities with the land. We're so happy to be part of our tenants' stories as they grow and cultivate these bonds between people, place and purpose.

Find more information about The T Barn here: www.tbarn.co.uk



Cabins, shepherds huts, and rainfall showers form part of the camping and glamping offer



Why do farmers take part in Open Farm Sunday?

80% to improve community relations

86% to promote a positive image of farming

83% to inform visitors about sustainable farming practices



"Open Farm Sunday is a highlight for us. It's incredibly rewarding to see the joy that comes from connecting with nature, food production, and farming." Everyone leaves with a deeper understanding of what it means to be a farmer, today.



Open Farm Sunday's roots...

Open Farm Sunday celebrated 20 years this summer. It is the annual farming open day, when farmers across the country open their businesses, land and homes to the general public.

As well as supporting the brilliant mission of cultivating meaningful connections between farmers and their communities, the Trust has another reason to support Open Farm Sunday, as it was founded by one of our trustees!

Ian Pigott grew up on the family farm, but in his years working in the City he came to realise and feel the huge disconnect between the reality that he understood as a farmer's son and how it was portrayed in the media or understood by his peers. He set off to see how education and access to farms could bridge this misconception, and happened upon a concept called Green Sunday in Denmark.

Ian was already working with Caroline Drummond, Guy Smith and others at LEAF and he broached the idea of a group of farmers opening up their farms on a given day in the summer. Whether it was just a good news story or a learning opportunity, Ian knew that it could unite groups across the farming sector regardless of output, size or type.

And over the last 20 years Open Farm Sunday has gone from strength to strength, and it has been embedded in the British culture - whether that's being name checked by DEFRA and the King, or appearing annually in the Archers!

Part of the appeal is the transparency that Open Farm Sunday can offer, showing non-farming communities what really happens behind the scenes on British farms and showing why farmers are still the most important part of the biodiversity delivery in the UK.

To date, 3.2 million children have visited a farm through Open Farm Sunday, which can have a transformational effect on young people and their connection with the outdoors, farming and nature.

Ian is a huge advocate for on-farm learning, laying career pathways into farming and supporting outdoor learning, whilst continuing to run and diversify the family farm that has always remained at the heart of his work.



Funding focus

Every grant that we award tells a story. This one, from **Nidderdale Secondary School in North Yorkshire**, who received a **£1,000 Outdoor Essentials Grant** earlier this year, perfectly demonstrates the Trust's long-held belief that grant-giving is about so much more than the money.

When Ed gave his 'Goodbye' speech for our outgoing Director of Learning, Grants & Partnerships, Suzie Paton in May, he reflected on what grant-giving really means:

"A grant is not just a transfer of money. It's a bond of trust, a statement of belief and a commitment to growth and improvement."

While his words resonated with those present, a couple of weeks later, we received an email message that perfectly illustrated his point.

Nidderdale High School in North Yorkshire had been awarded a £1,000 Outdoor Essentials Grant to begin transforming its school grounds - the 'Nature & Nurture' element covered by the grant. While the project itself is a long-term work in progress, the greatest impact has already been seen in the students who have led the work.

"Children who struggle to engage with school have embraced this project, seen that it's a real job, loved being given true responsibility and taken pride in enhancing their school grounds."



The school's 'Nidd Green Hat Gardeners' have wholeheartedly embraced the responsibility of improving their outdoor space, and in the process, their confidence, resilience and teamwork has soared.

Even discovering that the area they were digging was largely rubble and stones couldn't dampen their enthusiasm.

On one particular day, many of the team were fresh from completing the Yorkshire Three Peaks challenge, yet continued to tackle the hard work with their developing determination and pride, creating a space that is benefitting both the school and the wider community.

Enthusiasm for the project has continued into the summer term with the planting of 590 begonia plants. These were locally grown at Horticap, a Harrogate-based charity which helps adults with learning and other disabilities learn horticulture, allied crafts and rural skills.

The idea of the 'Nidd Green Hat Gardeners' grew out of a conversation while driving back from a school trip in January. It was breathed into life with the help of our Outdoor Essentials



Grant, and also the commitment and support of so many people on the ground, including parents, teachers, and volunteers.

The Nidd Green Hat Gardeners' story reminds us that successful grant-giving is about much more than funding a project. It's about believing in people, giving them opportunities to grow, and creating benefits that reach far beyond the original investment.

Read the [blog](#) about this story on our website.

"Many thanks for your support – we couldn't have done this without it. It's already brought a lot of positivity to both the school and the community who pass through our grounds on the way to the leisure centre."



Summer update: the finished planting

The Trust joins IVAR

The Trust has recently joined an impressive community of grant-makers who are part of **IVAR (Institute for Voluntary Action Research)** which promotes open and trusting grant making, and flexible funding.

IVAR's vision acknowledges that voluntary organisations need flexible funding to deliver better outcomes for communities.

In a context of limited resources and increasing need, The IVAR community believes that working together towards shared goals, by making the most use of precious resources on all sides, will lead to greater impact.

We're excited to see how we can contribute to and learn from this community in the future, especially as we're about to welcome our new Head of Grants, tasked with strategically guiding the Trust's grant-making, supporting equitable access to land-based learning, green skills and outdoor learning across the UK.



DEFRA visit to Low Beckside Farm, Cumbria

When Natural England identified our fenland creation at Low Beckside Farm as 'best practice', it caught the attention of DEFRA's Head of Research & Development, Neville Cavendish.

On a subsequent visit to the farm in April, Neville discussed piloting new initiatives with us, in-line with his wide-ranging brief at the government department which covers rural economy, agriculture and communities.



Farm Manager Hector Meanwell & apprentices at the fenland

Goodbye to Trustee, Rory Landman

This summer we say goodbye to trustee Rory Landman, who has served on our board since 2023. Rory has brought invaluable expertise and insight to our board, strengthening the management of our investments, prompting vital conversations about the role of our land and bringing rigour, objectivity and an unwavering commitment to education.



Welcome Sarah to your new role

We're pleased to announce that our new Director of Learning, Grants & Partnerships is Sarah White. If the name sounds familiar, that's because Sarah has worked for the Trust for over 3 years, most recently as Head of Grants & Influence. Sarah brings a wealth of experience, and a vision for learning vital to this central role.



OWL Collaboration exceeds target

The OWL Collaboration programme is on course to exceed its participation target (1,410) for the 5th year running, with 1,385 OWLs delivered by the end of our final quarter, and a further 150 anticipated. Thanks to all our outdoor learning partners in this programme.

Learning from others - Rank Foundation

We visited the Rank Foundation in Plymouth, looking at how place-based grantmaking works. This deeply insightful session will inform how we build the grantmaking systems around our own estates. A first step towards this review is our recent membership of IVAR - more details on page 13.

New role, new opportunities

We have recently agreed to become Chair of The Nature, Farming & Countryside Sector Partnership hosted by Council for Learning Outside the Classroom - an opportunity to elevate our position as sector convenors with a direct line into the Department of Education Liaison Group.

Tree fall gives rise to a unique 'chaise log' bench at Hatherop

A much-loved copper beech tree that fell victim to an early summer storm has been given a new lease of life as a beautifully crafted wooden bench in Hatherop Park on our Home Estates.

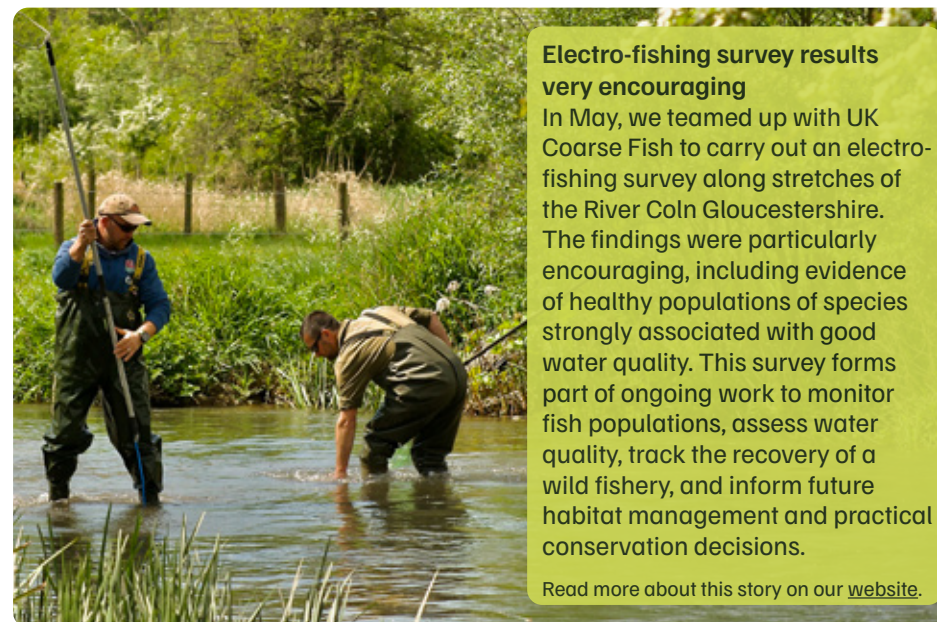
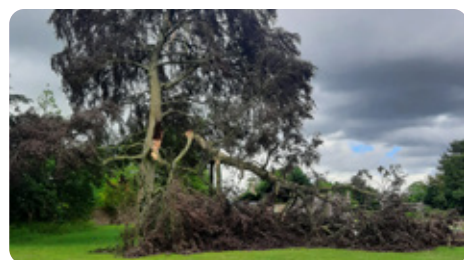
The storm caused a large limb to unexpectedly break off, a phenomenon known as summer branch drop, revealing structural weaknesses to the rest of the tree. The tree had been regularly inspected as part of the Trust's ongoing tree safety programme and had not been identified as a concern during its most recent professional survey.

Following local consultation, the tree was safely felled, then the trunk skilfully transformed by Woodland Manager, Joe into a unique "chaise log" which now provides a place for visitors to rest while also creating

valuable habitat for insects and wildlife as the timber naturally weathers over time.

A slice from the trunk, which measured around 4ft across (1.2m) at the base and at 16 feet long, (4.8m) has been given to Hatherop Castle School for use in science classes to support students' work on dendrochronology - the study of measuring and analysing the growth rings on trees.

The bench will also serve as a fitting memorial to much-loved local resident Clemmie Birtles, with a plaque to be installed in her memory. A replacement copper beech tree will be planted this winter, ensuring the legacy of the original tree continues for future generations.



Electro-fishing survey results very encouraging

In May, we teamed up with UK Coarse Fish to carry out an electro-fishing survey along stretches of the River Coln Gloucestershire. The findings were particularly encouraging, including evidence of healthy populations of species strongly associated with good water quality. This survey forms part of ongoing work to monitor fish populations, assess water quality, track the recovery of a wild fishery, and inform future habitat management and practical conservation decisions.

Read more about this story on our [website](#).



Image: Black2Nature

Communities Grant now open!

Are you a charity or non-profit helping young people enjoy the outdoors and connect with nature? You may be eligible for our Communities Grant if you're in one of these postcodes:

- Cumbria: CA & LA5-LA23
- Glos, Wiltshire & Avon: GL, SN, BS

Find full details on our [website](#).

"The grant didn't just buy equipment, it helped create moments of connection between children, parents, and the land that many told us they rarely find elsewhere."

Hazelnut Community Farm



The Ernest Cook Trust team

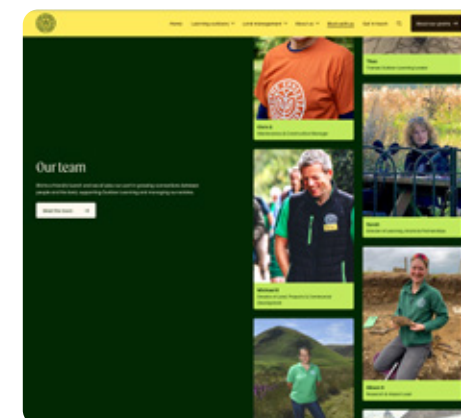
In response to a request for more information about our teams at the Trust, here's a brief summary:

The people in the **Property team** take care of all aspects of our land and property portfolio, working across the estates alongside our farmer partners. Their collective expertise is as impressive as it is broad!

Our **Learning team** encompasses the skills and expertise needed to deliver outdoor learning, manage our programmes, curate our grant giving and funding partnerships, and evaluate activities across the Trust.

Both these teams are supported by the range of disciplines found in our **Finance, Communications, and People teams**, providing specialist support that is critical to the smooth operation of the Trust.

Find us all on the **Work with us** page at www.ernestcooktrust.org.uk



CPRE connections (Campaign to Protect Rural England)

Our Chair, Mary Riall was a guest of CPRE at this year's Chelsea Flower Show, viewing their incredible award-winning garden at first hand, as seen here.

Our Director of Communications, Isobel Stewart enjoyed attending CPRE Gloucestershire branch's invigorating centenary event in June.



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.

May/June The **Outdoor Learning Network** of schools met at St Beghs, Whitehaven, and at Sedbergh Primary School.

July - We attended **The Community Forest National Conference** in Keswick, hosted by our Outdoor Futures recipients, RAISE.

May - We attended **Outward Bound's** event at Muncaster Castle, celebrating 75 years since its first women's course.

June - We were part of the **Northern Edge Summit 2026 Skills, Technology and Education Summit** at Kendal College bringing together educators, employers and industry leaders.

July - Our team in the north took part in the **Lake District National Park Authority's Green Careers & Skills Day**, alongside Cumbria Youth Alliance, talking about our new programme - Growing Horizons.

June - We helped to guide local schools through a carousel of activities at **The Westmorland County Agricultural Society Open Day**, at Levens.

June - We supported **Climate Circus** in Stroud, which tours Gloucestershire this summer, bringing climate stories to life through circus skills and performance.

May - Our **OPEN (South)** network of outdoor practitioners met at Avon Wildlife Trust's Grow Wilder, hosted by Bristol Avon Rivers Trust.

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**.

June - We attended **Future Countryside** at Raby Castle, billed as the leading forum for shaping the future of rural Britain.

May - Our **OPEN (North)** network of outdoor practitioners met at The Gathering Fields, hosted by a funded Outdoor Learning Leader through Lancashire Youth Challenge.

July - We attended **Morecambe Bay Curriculum Conference** at Lancaster Uni.

June - At the **North West Sustainability Conference** in Blackburn, we ran a workshop on sustainable skills, lifelong learning and land-based career pathways.

June - we attended **Cereals**, one of the UK's flagship arable events at Diddly Squat Farm.

July - We hosted a panel discussion about on-farm learning at **Groundswell's** inaugural **GroundSchool** - a new learning centre for the food and farming community.



Contact us: hello@ernestcooktrust.org.uk

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Photography: Stuart Walker, staff, farmers, friends & programme participants

