THE HURST WATER MEADOW TRUST

Annual Review to 31st March 2025







Charity number 1191096. Website: www.hurst-water-meadow.org.uk

Hon. Secretary: Sally Bell, email: hurstwatermt@gmail.com

Trustee update

Welcome to the Annual Review of the Hurst Water Meadow Trust for the year to the 31st March 2025. The year was characterised by the impact of significant periods of flooding and saturated ground, together with generally mild conditions. This had an impact on wildlife as well as the people who enjoy the meadows. At the same time, we have started to see the benefits of previously completed hydrology projects which have created backwaters and channels where water persists through most of the year.

The Hurst Water Meadow trustees remain unchanged:

Roger Seabrook	Chair
Sally Bell	Secretary
Chris Smith	Treasurer
Thom Airs	Media
Graham Beland	Land and tree management
Louise Beland	Volunteer co-ordinator
Sandra Harding	Education
Sophia Stewart-Liberty	Arts
Richard Tilley	Ecology
David Wilkinson	Archaeology and ecology

The financial position of the Hurst Water Meadow Trust remains healthy. We will publish the annual accounts shortly which will provide all the details. In additional to the income from government grants, in January we received an incredibly generous donation from Hankinson Duckett Associates (HDA). We are immensely grateful to HDA and all our donors for their support. Their donations have a lasting impact on the preservation of our cherished local natural resource, allowing us to continue carrying out crucial conservation projects, promoting biodiversity, and ensuring that the meadows remain a sanctuary for wildlife and a place of tranquillity for all. We will report on the use of these funds in our next update. If you would like to make a one-off or a regular donation please go to our web-site Get Involved - The Hurst Water Meadow Trust, Dorchester-on-Thames, Oxfordshire.

We are also very grateful to everyone who supports the Trust by volunteering and giving their time. There is a lot more going on than might be evident as you walk through the meadows on a beautiful spring day, but without all these actions we would not be able to enjoy the meadows and be confident in their future. A big thank you from the trustees to all those who have participated and continue to do so.

A key aim of the Trust remains education. We are pleased that we have been able to continue our practice of providing a grant to support St Birinus Forest School and we hope to continue to welcome groups of young people to the meadows to increase their understanding and appreciation of these wonderful places.

As we look forward, our aims and objectives remain unchanged and the main active project which could potentially impact the Hurst Water Meadow is the fish passage which is being proposed by the River Thame Conservation Trust (RTCT). They are the lead organisation, responsible for delivering all aspects and managing all risks of the project. At the time of writing this project is still at the stage of seeking planning permission and the trustees are encouraging the RTCT to consult the public, especially those who live close to the meadows, to ensure that those voices are heard as the project proceeds.

To summarise, the aims and objectives of the Hurst Water Meadow Trust are as follows:

Aims and Objectives

- to manage our land in a way which best meets the wide-ranging interests of our users, providing this is compatible with its preservation as Dorchester floodplain meadows, including artefacts of the meadows' historic management
- to promote diversity of fauna and flora typical of floodplain meadows and associated habitats
- to promote a wild-life corridor along the River Thame from its confluence with the Thames to the Buck Pool hatchway on the Hurst water meadow
- to facilitate research of current and historic management practices of floodplain meadows, and to promote public understanding about such practices
- to promote safe public access
- to ensure that we comply with statutory requirements and official regulatory policy, notably in relation to management of the River Thame catchment
- to ensure that we are financially secure
- to conform to best management and ethical practice for charities and public bodies, as may be promoted by the Charity Commission and others.

Wildlife Report – Richard Tilley

Spring 2024 began with all three meadows still flooded into the first weeks of April, after unusually prolonged, continuous flooding from before Christmas 2023. The eighteen months to March were reportedly the wettest on record in England. Snake's head fritillary plants on the Hurst were badly affected by the prolonged submersion, with only two or three managing to flower in March/April instead of the usual thirty plus blooms. BBOWT reported a similar lack of flowers on their more extensive fritillary meadows across Oxfordshire. Few cowslips appeared but the wet ground conditions led to lush grass growth, with many buttercups and dandelions. April was cold and grey this year, but followed by the warmest May on record. Overall, it was a warm and wet Spring.

The extensive flooding and persistently saturated ground often made access onto the meadows difficult. Many of our wildlife observations this year have come from trail cameras posted around the riverbanks rather than direct sightings. As usual, muntjac and roe deer are often recorded as well as fox, grey squirrel, rabbit, wood mouse and brown rat. Water voles are conspicuously absent due to a history of decimation by non-native American mink. In association with BBOWT and the River Thame Conservation Trust, our campaign to trap and remove mink continues. However, our own capture rate has fallen from five or six a year to just one large male Mink in 2024. This probably reflects the impact of prolonged disruption of our trapping effort due to flooding. Apart from mink, trail-camming has shown the meadows and adjacent land are home to most other native members of the mustelid family: weasel, stoat, polecat, badger and otter.

Two guided bird song walks were conducted in May as part of the 2024 Dorchester Festival, ticket sales supporting the festival charities and hopefully raising awareness of the Hurst Trust and the meadows' wildlife. The dawn chorus in Dorchester remains impressive, beginning with skylark, robin and blackbird, followed by wren, song thrush and dunnock. Chiffchaff and blackcap warblers were in full song on the Hurst, with whitethroats on Old Bridge Meadow and sedge warblers along the river on Overy Mead Piece. A few distant cuckoos were heard but once common chaffinches remain absent.

A pair of moorhens successfully raised a large brood of six young on the new backwater at Old Bridge Meadow. The survival of so many might possibly suggest a lack of predation by mink.

Colourful mandarin duck and little egret are relatively new residents that can often be seen along the Thame. Resident local birds of prey include sparrowhawk, kestrel, joined by hobby in the Summer. Buzzards seem to be thriving as well as the ubiquitous red kites, wood pigeons and collared doves.

The summer started with a cold and wet June and July, resulting in a marked lack of insects and especially butterflies on the meadows. Only meadow browns seemed plentiful. Another sudden flood event hit the meadows in September, a month with three or four times the usual rainfall.

As we start 2025, we saw a few more fritillaries appear on the Hurst than in 2024, but still a lot less than we have seen in the past, probably reflecting the impact of the sustained flooding of the meadow.



Meadow Management & Volunteer Work - Louise Beland

We started our Volunteering season on 9th April 2024, after the winter flooding subsided. With the help of the teams from Wallingford and Sonning Common Green Gym, we planted 800 new ‘whips’ (young hedging plants) along the fence line at Overy Mead Piece.

Soon after the planting was completed, vandalism occurred and whips towards the southern end of the fence were pulled out. Thankfully, a neighbourly villager spotted and remedied the damage by replanting but sadly we do appear to have lost quite a few along that southern section. We will continue to review and will assess the situation again this summer.

Sonning Common Green Gym also helped to plant / gap up around 150-200 whips along the existing Overy Mead Piece hedge.



The School Oak log seats have been returned to their locations, a couple had drifted off in the early flooding, and these have been chained down so that they can lift and allow flood water underneath. This appears to have been successful, as these logs have only moved a minor amount during the recent floods.

In June, we repaired an eroded 'bridge' that crosses the main drainage ditch to the right of the main Hurst vehicular entrance. The old ceramic / terracotta pipe was removed, and 3 sections of a larger diameter plastic pipe were installed, just high enough to hold water in the ditch under the blackthorn patch. The drainage ditch was also cleared of wood debris, branches etc. During the recent flooding of the Hurst we have seen that the new pipework is working well to drain that part of the ditch and preventing overspill onto the path.











During the year we also replaced the kissing gate into the Hurst at the end of the Long Bridge; we also cleared the access lane from the end of Monks Close down to the Hurst (mainly to enable the tractor and equipment for the hay cut) which has widened that footpath significantly.





We have had a couple of very old crack willow trees split centrally in their lower stems. One, on the footpath leading from Old Bridge Meadow's backwater towards Overy Mead Piece, was felled for safety. The others are within the larger willow patch on the Hurst and may be felled over the next winter season as part of general maintenance / regeneration work. One of the pair of ash trees at the eastern end of the Saxon hedge was reduced, in 2023, to a "monument tree", as it is suffering with ash die back, and was deemed to a risk to the public. This monument tree has shown a lot of growth this year from the upper branches.

Volunteer work:

2024 proved to be even wetter than 2022 and 2023 which meant that we started late and had to cancel sessions in October. However, we did not lose any sessions due to overly hot weather and we completed well over 30 volunteer sessions with volunteer numbers ranged from 1 (mowing, strimming, logging) to 7 regular HWMT volunteers per session; most sessions we had between 4 and 6 people working often focusing on 'nettle bashing' and management of the bramble patches. We have also coppiced the hazel copse as part of the agreed management plan, providing stakes for the Saxon hedge laying.



Again, we send a very big Thank You to

- our working party volunteers: Richard Farrant, Rachel Marriott, Graham Baxter, Jim Ballantyne, Ian Ford Batey, Graham Beland, Fraser Beland, Malcolm Corry, Dave Scott, Denis Feeney
- and the Mowing Team: Richard Tilley, Malcolm Corry, Dave Scott, David Wilkinson, Graham Beland.

We also owe a big thank you to Andrew Clements and Nigel Evans for organising the Saxon and OBM hedges to be laid and trimmed.

Sadly, we have lost a couple of volunteers: Ian Hayden, who died in late July; Dave Scott and Nigel Evans who have both moved out of the area (Bristol and Somerset).

If you are interested to volunteer, please get in touch with Louise Beland. And if you have any other questions, comments or suggestions, please get in touch with one of the trustees. We would love to hear from you.

Sally Bell / Roger Seabrook on behalf of the Hurst Water Meadow Trustees
March 2025





Photos from the two litter blitz sessions organised by Richard Tilley early in 2025

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