Grassroots nature recovery charity transforms five acres of neglected pasture into a wildflower-rich oasis for pollinators

On the northern banks of the River Lune, above the sharp bend of the 'Crook' near Caton, a group of volunteers has steadily transformed a scrubby, degraded pasture into a stunning summer meadow. This vibrant grassland bursts into life with the hum of pollinators and the riotous colours of thousands of wildflowers.

Originally part of the Halton Park estate, Hermitage Meadow once supplied fresh produce to the nearby Hermitage Hotel. After the hotel's closure, local farmers used the meadow for grazing, but over time, it fell into neglect.

The meadow's seemingly inevitable decline into a scrubby tangle was halted when a group of volunteers, experienced in managing nearby fields on the Lune floodplain, convinced Lancaster City Council to lease the meadow to them for management as a nature-friendly wildflower meadow.

The field had not been mowed for over a decade and was overrun with dense tangles of brash, which were crowding out the remaining elements of biodiversity.

Work started in earnest in winter 2021, when the Hermitage Field Community Meadow charity took over management of the seven-acre site. Collaborating with another charity, Life for a Life, which plants trees in memory of loved ones, contractors harrowed and cross-hatched the meadow to break up the soil, allowing fresh new growth to take root.



Volunteers at Hermitage Meadow



Meadow Day Activites © Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust

With advice and input from the Forest of Bowland's Haytime Project Officers, Sarah Robinson and Carol Edmondson, the charity volunteers began seeding the meadow with wildflower seeds brush harvested from the Coronation Meadows at Bell Sykes Farm and other local meadows.

Again, Lancaster City Council stepped in and agreed to let the charity use a greenhouse and polytunnel in which to raise plug plants from locally harvested seed. Since starting to grow their own plants – as well as sharing these with the city council to plant up other projects – volunteers have planted some 18,000 plug plants in Hermitage Meadow.

Head of Trustees, Erica Sarney, said: *"Getting the polytunnel and greenhouse was an absolute gamechanger, because after we took on the field, we realised there was no local seed bank. The greenhouses allowed us to work on raising locally proven plug plants throughout the year cost-effectively.*



Pollinator

The project is supported by a loyal group of funders, which includes the Forest of Bowland National Landscape Partnership, Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust, the Areti Charitable Trust, Plantlife and the Halton Lune Trust. Guided by a committed board of trustees, a group of 50 volunteers look after the meadow, with sessions taking place on an ad hoc basis as and when work needs carrying out.

Within just three years of starting work, the meadow is almost unrecognisable, supporting a much more diverse mix of wildflowers and attracting a host of pollinators like butterflies, moths, bumblebees and hoverflies.

Given the chance to bloom and set seed naturally without early mowing, traditional meadow species like yellow rattle, hawksbeard, red clover,



meadowsweet and eyebright have re-established themselves. Highlights from 2024 included the emergence of common spotted orchids and a rare purple hairstreak butterfly.

"We couldn't have accomplished any of this without our wonderful team of trustees and volunteers and support from the local community and our supportive funders.

"It's all very relaxed, but it's clear our wonderful volunteers get a lot out of the work they put in. We've also hosted parties from local community groups and social prescribing sessions with groups from the Forest of Bowland, Morecambe Bay Partnership and NHS Trusts.

"In July, we will be welcoming many visitors on National Meadows Day, when we will celebrate the beauty and diversity of our meadow with a day of festivities including workshops and demonstrations.

"It's wonderful to see nature re-establishing itself at Hermitage Meadow, but seeing the impact it has had on so many people's wellbeing is – if anything – even more rewarding," said Erica.

For more information, or to get involved in volunteering at Hermitage Meadow, visit the website:
www.hermitagefieldcommunitymeadow.com
or email:
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