



Annual Report

The Friends of Hell Wath (FOHW) continued with their work throughout 2025, with volunteers and partner organisations engaged in many activities throughout the year.

We remain committed to the conservation and development of habitats across Hell Wath to enable native species of flora and fauna to thrive, whilst balancing access to and enjoyment of the area by visitors. It is encouraging in this Annual Report to note that progress is being made on many fronts as we continue our work to safeguard Hell Wath for the future.

FOHW would like to acknowledge the ongoing support of:

North Yorkshire Council and their Countryside Rangers who regularly provide guidance, manpower, equipment and other resources to complete projects on site.

The Skell Valley Project and Skell Valley volunteers who have provided guidance, manpower, equipment and financing for a number of large-scale projects, which wouldn't otherwise have been possible.

Ripon City Council who provide an annual grant to enable us to hold community events and for the purchase of necessary materials and equipment.

Plantlife UK who have provided expertise and financing to help us better understand Hell Wath's grasslands and what we need to do to improve them in future.

Open Country Volunteers who are a wonderful group of disabled volunteers who have helped with tree planting, grass cutting and path laying.

Our trustees, members and volunteers who freely give their expertise and time to help run the charity, organise events and take part in activities that all help to maintain Hell Wath and safeguard it for the future.

KEY POINTS OF NOTE FOR 2025

The Skell Valley Project (SVP)

Hell Wath has been a fortunate participant in the Heritage Lottery funded SVP for the past four years. A dedicated SVP Ranger has worked with FOHW and North Yorkshire Council to identify projects to enhance the Hell Wath environment. Approved projects have been completed using SVP funding for materials and equipment, engaging contractors and volunteers to undertake works on site.

Examples of such projects completed this year include:

- Extending the crushed stone path from Hell Wath cottage to improve accessibility
- Erecting two rabbit-proof fenced enclosures to protect sensitive grassland areas



Annual Report

- Grass cutting, thistle and ragwort clearance to improve grassland areas
- Himalayan Balsam clearance
- Habitat restoration in the old Quarry by small tree and shrub removal
- Dead hedging around the old Quarry to protect the restored habitat
- Installing new signage with information about Hell Wath
- Installing new signage for a family friendly route around Hell Wath

The Skell Valley Project concluded in May 2025, but Hell Wath will continue to benefit from the works completed during the project and from the ongoing support of the Ranger, who has now been taken on by the National Trust.

Plantlife UK

Hell Wath was accepted as one of six Yorkshire projects by Plantlife UK. This gave us access to a network of people working to improve their site habitats and expertise on grassland habitats. Working with Plantlife UK we identified several key areas of grassland that could be targeted to improve biodiversity and potentially create pockets of woodmeadow on Hell Wath. These areas will continue to be managed by keeping them clear of Himalayan Balsam, thistle and ragwort and by regular scything. This should promote the growth of native species of grasses and wildflowers that will in turn support native species of insects and invertebrates.

Rabbit grazing was identified as severely detrimental to the development of biodiverse meadows. Rabbits graze the young shoots of plants before they have chance to grow, flower and develop seed. A project to erect two rabbit-proof fenced enclosures was completed in March 2025 with the help of Plantlife UK and Ripon City Council funding and the hard work of volunteers from SVP and FOHW. Even with the severe drought conditions experienced during 2025 the increased height and diversity of grasses and wildflowers inside the enclosures was clear to see. Plant surveys have been undertaken to document the differences and these will continue next year. The enclosures were scythed after seeds had set and we look forward to seeing how the enclosures flourish in 2026.

The Plantlife UK project was completed in the summer of 2025, but we will continue to have access to their expertise and the network of project sites and we will continue to work on improving the scope and biodiversity of Hell Wath's grassland areas.

Himalayan Balsam Control

One of the biggest issues we have on Hell Wath is control of the highly invasive species Himalayan Balsam. Many 'HB Bashes' have taken place in previous years, but it has felt that we were fighting a losing battle.



Annual Report

This year one of our Trustees proposed that we take a much more organised approach and we feel confident this has been successful and had a significant impact. The basic approach was to start at each end of the site and work through the woodlands, scrub and grassland methodically clearing every HB plant. Then the inland woodland perimeter of the Local Nature Reserve was cleared.

The same areas were worked on multiple times during the season thus significantly reducing the amount of seed being produced and distributed for next year. Large areas of HB were also scythed, as this had proven to be successful in reducing the number of HB plants growing in subsequent years.

The plan is to continue this approach year after year, working our way from the perimeter towards the centre each year, significantly reducing the amount of HB seed production each year. As the River Skell runs along the boundary of Hell Wath, new seed will continue to be brought in from upstream so there will always be a need for 'HB Bashes' on Hell Wath, but we hope these will be confined to smaller areas and involve less effort in time.

Another approach to Himalayan Balsam control is the introduction of a natural rust. This weakens the HB plants and allows the native plant species to thrive rather than be crowded out. Hell Wath is one of several test sites within the Nidderdale National Landscape. Rust was applied in 2023 and we know the rust has taken and spread out from the original application areas. The effectiveness of the rust application in reducing HB will continue to be monitored.

Quarry Habitat Restoration

Another major project this year has been the restoration of the old Quarry area of Hell Wath. The objective is to restore the habitat to a scarce open winter pond/summer pondside habitat and the recovery of 'lost' plants such as adder's tongue fern.

Work began in Autumn 2024 and continued throughout 2025 as the area remained unusually dry and accessible for working.

Volunteers from FOHW and SVP have worked hard to clear the quarry floor from hawthorn, willow and alder. These had grown unchecked and formed a dense canopy, preventing light reaching the quarry floor, inhibiting the growth of native plants. The cut down shrubs have been used to form a dead hedge around the perimeter to protect the site.

We will wait to see if dormant seeds and plants will now grow in response to the light now reaching the quarry floor, but we will supplement this growth with suitable planting if necessary to restore the habitat.



Annual Report

Further habitat improvement could result from re-coppicing a number of multi-stemmed alders that have been neglected and allowed to grow into tall boles, shading parts of the quarry floor. Permission to carry out this work has not yet been forthcoming from North Yorkshire Council.

Tree Planting & Woodland Management

Funded by North Yorkshire Council from commuted sums, a programme of tree planting was undertaken during the 2024/25 winter as part of a long-term plan to increase the diversity of native tree species on Hell Wath and to begin replacing ash and elm trees dying from disease.

22 species of native trees and shrubs were selected and over 500 specimens were planted by volunteers across Hell Wath. The chosen planting sites included alongside meadow edges with the intention of forming a shrubby margin between grassland and woodland. In time this will provide food and shelter for the bird population.

The newly planted trees are being monitored and maintained by volunteer 'Tree Guardians'. Although we did lose some as a result of the long dry summer, most did survive and we look forward to watching them thrive and grow in the coming years.

We have been concerned about the current state and ongoing management of trees, woodland and hedgerows on Hell Wath for some time. In 2024 FOHW commissioned a tree survey by an independent expert which identified key areas of concern. Following that report we tried, without success, to engage North Yorkshire Council and the Council Tree Officer to agree specific actions that could be taken to address some of the areas of concern. In 2025 The Skell Valley Project funded a review of the woodlands on Hell Wath and the drafting of a comprehensive Woodland Management Plan in line with the UK Forestry Standard management planning criteria. This plan was put forward to North Yorkshire Council, but we have been informed that they are unable to accept it because they cannot commit to resourcing such a plan and do not want their acceptance of a plan for Hell Wath to set a precedent for other sites.

To try to move this forward, FOHW put forward a proposal to carry out specific tree work over the 2025/26 winter period in the old Quarry area and around the pond, funded and completed by FOHW and the National Trust. This proposal has also been rejected by North Yorkshire Council because

"we are in the processes of finalising the NYC Tree Policy, which will underpin the future management of our tree asset stock and from this policy we will produce our Tree and Woodland Strategy (arguably a much larger body of work) which will include the management of all our current and future woodlands assets.



Annual Report

Although we can often think that time is short, and things need to be done in the now, trees and woodlands live in timeframes that far outspan our own and we have been given an opportunity, and the time, to produce a strategy that will benefit all our woodlands and guide us on their management.

In the short term, we will avoid carrying out small pockets of work until approval from all bodies is granted and a comprehensive approach is agreed."

We will continue to lobby North Yorkshire Council to undertake specific tree work if we can resource the work and believe it is in the best interests of Hell Wath habitats.

Other Work / Projects / Points of Note

We are very fortunate to have an active and interested membership and cohort of volunteers who organise and take part in many projects throughout the year. Here is a quick summary of some:

Litter Picking

Organised litter picks are arranged from time to time, but we are also grateful to a number of volunteers who litter pick on a regular basis whilst out walking on their own.

Butterfly Monitoring

Organised weekly butterfly monitoring takes place on a weekly basis from March to September. The findings are uploaded to a national database so that trends in numbers and species can be tracked.

Bat Monitoring

A number of bat boxes are located around Hell Wath. One of our Trustees is a licensed bat surveyor and he leads bat walks to use an endoscope camera to look into each bat box to see if it is occupied and take pictures to identify the species.

Fungi Surveys

Organised Fungi Forays have taken place on Hell Wath to discover and identify species of fungi found in various habitats across the site. Individual volunteers are also active in seeking out and identifying fungi. One indefatigable member has recorded 85 species of fungi throughout the year, including 7 species of waxcap.

Plant Surveys

We have a number of Trustees and volunteers with specialist knowledge in the field of plant identification. Organised surveys have taken place to identify plant species in various habitats across Hell Wath, with some specific surveys arranged for areas of interest, such as the areas enclosed with rabbit-proof fencing and the old Quarry floor.



Annual Report

309 species of vascular plants have been recorded on site to date. Previously unrecorded plants that have emerged this year in the protected enclosures include: quaking grass, spring sedge, field scabious and a hybrid St John's Wort. Small toadflax was newly recorded on the cleared quarry floor and north of the pond, one plant of small teasel appeared in the area cleared of Himalayan Balsam and brambles.

Tawny Owls

We are delighted to report that a pair of Tawny Owls nested and raised chicks in one of our owl boxes this year. The owl boxes were only put up in the 2024/5 winter so we are pleased that they were successful so soon.

Forest Schools Event

This took place on the last weekend of the summer school holidays and provided a range of fun craft, storytelling and nature-based activities for school age children. The weather wasn't too kind but everyone who attended had a great time.

Archaeological Dig

Hell Wath has a rich and varied history. The Ripon History and Archaeology Tribe undertook a series of surveys and small digs on site over the summer with participation from a number of FOHW volunteers. There were interesting finds from the medieval to the military era – including a cache of live ammunition !

Improved Accessibility

Funded by North Yorkshire Council from commuted sums, dropped kerbs and a new tarmac path were installed from the Hell Wath Lane car park to the Ripon Panthers Clubhouse. This significantly improved accessibility for disabled visitors.

Member Activity Groups

We continue to hold regular MAG meetings which give members of the Charity a chance to propose, discuss and plan actions and activities. The meeting this year have been well attended and many topics of interest have been discussed.

Trustee Meetings

The Trustees have met regularly throughout the year to ensure the Charity is run effectively and in accordance with it's Constitution and the regulation of the Charity Commission.

Thank You

The Trustees of the Friends of Hell Wath