

Growing Community Connections

Final report

Background to the project

The Growing Community Connections (GCC) project was originally established by the Woodmeadows Trust to help local organisations create and manage community Woodmeadows. Focused on groups in Yorkshire and neighbouring counties, the project was centred around Three Hages Woodmeadow as its hub.

Launched in 2022, local groups were invited to apply competitively, with priority given to sites offering the greatest potential impact. To be eligible for funding, groups needed to hold land ownership or a lease and have a bank account in place - meaning participating organisations were already relatively well established. Some were long-standing nature reserves, while others were newly created sites. Although the project initially aimed to support 10 sites, by the time management passed to Plantlife in 2024, 6 sites remained active.

Why Woodmeadows?

Woodmeadows are amongst the most biodiverse of all of Europe's habitats and are especially rich in flowering plants. Meadows intermingle with trees, glades, scrub, coppice, pollards and orchards, creating a multi-faceted landscape full of biological interest. Traditionally these habitats have been found in mainland Europe but are similar to wooded-pasture that was commonplace in medieval Britain. The main difference was that certain areas were shut off from animals in spring and summer so that a hay-crop could be harvested. On smaller sites we can mimic this, by cutting and collecting the hay, coppicing glades and planting a broad range of tree and wildflower species. Regular management is key in order to create a fluctuating and dynamic system allows different light-conditions, messy-edges and variation in age and structure. The benefits to local-people are numerous, with physical activity, community cohesion, time in nature and wild-food to name a few. **This project aimed to use Three Hages Woodmeadow as a catalyst, to create a cluster of community Woodmeadows around York for everyone to enjoy.**



Foxglove Covert: Tour of their Woodmeadow paddock.

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Project aims

The project's original aim was to provide tailored guidance to help groups establish thriving community Woodmeadows.

This included developing site management plans, offering ecological and practical advice, and supporting the creation of a GCC network.

Additional support was also intended around funding, fundraising, and building community and volunteer engagement. However, once the project transferred to Plantlife, its scope was refined to focus more specifically on habitat creation, management, and monitoring.

Given the shortened timescale of just over a year, a key priority became fostering a strong network between participating groups as a lasting legacy. The GCC network will continue to provide opportunities for groups to share knowledge, celebrate successes, and work through challenges together in a supportive environment.



Three Hages Woodmeadow © Paul Rowland

The Community Groups



Foxglove Covert

40ha nature reserve in Catterick Garrison, owned and managed by the MoD. Listed as 0.2ha on their application form, but there is potential to work with a much larger area – the site is already a patchwork of scrub, woodland and grassland.

Aims

Engage with recovering army personnel (rehabilitation project), as well as increasing visitors and volunteer pool from local public. Already have strong links with local schools.



The Island

3.5ha site near Monks Cross, York. The Island is a children's charity supporting disadvantaged, isolated and vulnerable young people to realise their potential through positive mentoring relationships and activities.

Aims

To establish a woodmeadow and landscaped area in conjunction with the building of a new centre for the organisation. To use the site for environmental education and as a safe space.



Hell Wath, Ripon

30ha Local Nature Reserve, 0.2ha listed on application form but potential to expand. Managed by 'Friends of' group, with established volunteer group.

Aims

To improve management of entire site, including woodland flora introduction and woodmeadow area(s).



Grow Wild York

0.2ha site, with potential to expand (triple in size) at an open farm site with 20,000 visitors per year. Grow Wild is a non-profit community hub focused on sustainability, land management and nature.

Aims

To provide wildlife habitat and experience for volunteers.



Riccall Woodmeadow

1ha site in Riccall village. Owned by a local Trust, with management coordinated by Parish Council. Recently established woodmeadow project that received support from Woodmeadow Trust with design etc (a Growing Community Connections pilot).

Aims

To create a community woodmeadow, with visitors, school trips, volunteering etc.



Park House Barns

2ha site near Gilling East in the Howardian Hills National Landscape. Managed by Autism Plus. Main focus is working with groups of young people growing fruit and vegetables. Currently working closely on Forgotten Flora project – another Woodmeadows Trust/Plantlife project.

Aims

To improve the site for wildlife, increase opportunities for volunteer engagement, and create two areas of woodmeadow, including an orchard.

Activities delivered

Between March 2024 and August 2025 Plantlife delivered an initial stakeholder workshop and then 6 training workshops, each with a specific topic.

Workshop	Location	Date	Activities
1	Three Hagges Woodmeadow	21.08.24	Woodmeadow Management, Tour of the Reserve, Intro to Rapid Grassland assessment, Discussed future training needs.
2	Riccall Woodmeadow & Three Hagges	23.10.24	Wildflower seed collection/storage, Wildflower Plug propagation and planting, Ground-prep and practical planting demos. Yellow-Rattle collection and sowing.
3	Foxglove Covert LNR	29.01.25	Coppice management: Presentation about history and methods, practical session covering coppice/pollarding, and a tour of Foxglove Covert including their Woodmeadow.
4	Hell Wath NR	07.05.25	Identification of grassland indicator species, Rapid Grassland Assessment using quadrats, biodiversity and recreation, Invasive Non-native Species, and site tour.
5	Grow Wild York	22.07.25	Taster Scything session, site-tour of Grow Wild, Intro to invertebrate survey techniques, Wildlife recording/citizen science.
6	Three Hagges Woodmeadow	27.08.25	Tour describing site management, hay-making techniques by-hand, review of site management plans, Q and A session, GCC network support and next steps.



Three Hagges Polytunnel: Learning about how to propagate and grow wildflower plug-plants.
© Andy Jennings-Giles

Outputs and Outcomes

Outputs

- Across the six full-day workshops and the introductory session, a total of 83 person-days were delivered. This represents attendance from 28 unique individuals, with the combined number of days each person attended adding up to 83 person-days.
- On Average 12 people attended each workshop

Outcomes

Site management plans

- 5 plans produced, with an initial focus on grassland management.
- Additional bespoke advice provided via email covering: pond management, tree/scrub selection, hedgerow management, wildlife encouragement, and species recording.
- For Hell Wath (a larger, more complex site), the report was split into two parts:
 1. Ecological report
 2. Management and recommendations report
- Reports were issued in Aug/Sept 2024 to allow implementation in spring/summer 2025.

Recorded talk on Woodmeadows shared with all groups

- A 1-hour presentation on the history and ecology of Woodmeadows, prepared for the Hell Wath AGM and later shared with other groups.

Bespoke resources created

- Guidance on wildlife recording, use of wildlife apps, planning environmental days, and leading wildlife walks.
- Tailored to the Yorkshire area, highlighting local flora and fauna typical of Woodmeadows.

Wildflower planting

- Several hundred plug plants distributed to groups for planting, following the October 2024 workshop on seeding and planting.
- Participants also received a wildflower-seed booklet produced by the Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust.

Educational resources provided

- All participants provided with:

The Plant Monitoring Scheme Species Guide

The OPAL resource for invertebrate recording



Grow Wild York. Invertebrate identification session.

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Community group progress

Riccall Woodmeadow

Riccall hired a Profihopper machine (as used at Three Hages) to cut and collect meadow vegetation, a vital step for boosting plant diversity. They also created 50% bare ground for sowing local wildflower seed, including Yellow Rattle – a major improvement compared to previous uncut areas or where cuttings were left. In October, dozens of wildflower plug-plants supplied by us were added. Other actions included relaxing hedgerow cutting to encourage blossom and berries, re-lining ponds to retain water, protecting young trees, planting additional native trees/shrubs, and installing bat/bird boxes. They also ran bird, bee, and bat recording walks for the community.

Foxglove Covert

Over autumn and winter 2024/25, staff and MOD Personnel Recovery Centre volunteers managed the woodmeadow paddock with scrub clearance and scything. Following our advice, they began an annual cut-and-lift to reduce fertility and introduced Yellow Rattle alongside other wildflowers. Excess Willow, Birch, and Hawthorn saplings were removed, while new berry-bearing trees such as Rowan were planted beside mature Hawthorns. Plans are underway to collect and sow seed from missing species like Eyebright, Saw-wort, and Devil's-bit Scabious found elsewhere on the Reserve.

Hell Wath

Guided by our report, the Friends of Hell Wath secured Skell Valley Project funding to cut and lift grassland in August 2024 – an important milestone after years without management. While some areas showed good plant diversity, heavy rabbit grazing limited seed-set. Fenced trial plots in spring/summer 2025 proved highly successful, and expansion is planned, alongside spreading wildflower seed to enhance diversity. The group is now exploring glade creation, coppicing, and woodland ground-flora restoration. They are also targeting invasive Himalayan balsam in priority areas.

Grow Wild

Last year, over half the paddock was scythed, with cuttings piled to reduce fertility. Grow Wild hosted insect sessions with children, undertook regular beetle recording for national schemes, and planted trees such as Walnut, Rowan, and Willow for both people and wildlife. The site is used for activities with people affected by dementia, brain injuries, disabilities, and for students from Askham Bryan College. Plans include a meandering path through the meadow to enjoy wildflowers, bees, and butterflies. Enhancing biodiversity here also supports natural pest management in adjacent permaculture plots that grow food for York foodbank.

Challenges and lessons learned

- **Park House Barns**

Unfortunately, Park House Barns had to withdraw from the project shortly after the introductory session when the site was sold by the landowner. This unexpected development was entirely outside the group's control. Due to the project's tight timescale, it was not feasible to bring in a replacement group.

- **The Island (York)**

Despite a promising start with the CEO and team at The Island in York, communication later broke down. Following an initial survey in June, we developed and shared a management plan for their proposed woodmeadow around a new-build site. While some email discussions followed, they did not attend the first workshop. We understand that planning consent was delayed until early 2025, and landscaping is unlikely to begin before 2026—well beyond the project's timeframe. We hope that the guidance provided will inform their work when it does move forward.

Success and Testimonials

Between March 2024 and August 2025 Plantlife delivered an initial stakeholder workshop and then 6 training workshops, each with a specific topic.

Hell Wath:

“The Friends of Hell Wath have really appreciated being one of the participants. Our members have benefitted from your input and from visiting other sites. We hope to maintain an ongoing relationship with them.

Conditions have been tough this year (with the drought) but we will continue with our efforts to develop and improve Hell Wath’s meadows in line with Plantlife’s ethos”.

Attendee: “Very useful seeing other sites and discussing similar problems and how they were solved.”

Riccall Woodmeadow:

“Good all-round sessions, plenty of information sharing, future info & contact details. Management plan very useful for our future development. We have created our own action plan directly off this plan”.

“Very useful advice and guidance, as we are still in the early stages of woodmeadow management and learning by our mistakes. The training has been very informative”.

Attendee: “It has provided a wealth of information and advice for non-specialists, allowing them to progress”.

Foxglove Covert:

“Found these in-person workshops incredibly valuable to see other sites and get practical experience in the topics of the workshops. Also found the advice on management plan and discussions very useful”.

Attendee “Brilliant project to be a part of. Let’s hope funding can be found for future training workshops (at Three Haggis).”

Legacy of the GCC Project

The groups have been able to visit each other’s sites, and many plan to continue doing so. A WhatsApp group has been set up to share management advice, exchange knowledge, and promote events. Several participants are also volunteering at Three Haggis, gaining skills they can apply to their own sites. There are plans to share wildflower seed (e.g., Yellow Rattle), and potentially plug-plants or green hay where suitable. Some members have also taken part in scything taster days led by Foxglove Covert rangers, with more sessions expected in future years.

We are providing the groups with a final information pack, including guidance on site monitoring, soil testing, and other useful resources. Thanks to their training, they will now be able to independently monitor their meadows using the Rapid Grassland technique, supporting future management decisions. We have also committed to offering informal advice via email over the coming years if needed.