

Field Notes

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

Awakening our land

Discover more about our new strategy

Spring on the river

Explore the wildlife in and around the River Coln with our River Keeper Mark

Gen Z Farming

We speak to one of our young farm tenants about what the future holds

"You want children to be observing, and then realising they can affect things for good or ill. That applies to land, it applies to people, it applies to everything really."

In conversation with Professor Mick Waters

A young girl uses binoculars to see what she can spot at one of our outdoor learning sites in Gloucestershire.

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Welcome to a new season at the Ernest Cook Trust

From Ed Ikin

"Why does spring continue to hold such wonder? No matter how many times we've experienced it..."

My first seed sowing happened when I was five. In a time-honoured right of passage, my pudgy fingers clumsily spread cress seeds over some damp cotton wool, set in an eggshell. I was collected at the school gate clutching my work as if it was priceless porcelain. I still remember the moment life burst out of those seeds, a vivid green against the inert substrate, growing with a pre-determined purpose.

Thankfully, this early connection to nature stuck. I eventually sowed seeds professionally, slightly less pudgy fingers spreading species from all over the world, slightly less clumsily than at primary school. The act became honed and routine, but the subsequent eruption of life from the uniform rows of seed trays never did.

Why does spring continue to hold such wonder? No matter how many times we've experienced it, and no matter whether we're sowing crops or observing a hedgerow when walking the dog, the surging, surreal, abundant, translucent qualities of spring can change our mood and shift our perspectives. It's a phenomenon that Mick Waters reflects on in our interview with him - the ability for people of all ages to be surprised and delighted by something they already know, when they experience it with all the vivid colour, sounds and scents of real life.

Part of the power of spring is what we don't see. Below ground, roots rapidly convert winter-stored starch reserves into above-ground growth. Seeds have invisible batteries (energy reserves) and processors (the genes that code and create) to build extraordinary flowers, leaves and roots. As we're spellbound by the visible, audience-facing act of a magician, it's what we don't see nature working on, that makes what we do see, so vivid.

This spring we're revealing more of Ernest Cook Trust's work, making visible stories about the very core and purpose of our work. How we understand the impact of our learning programmes. How we care for our land. How we build houses. And how our tenant partners farm.

At the centre of our stories are our places, nine extraordinary estates in six counties. The role these places play in our future story is our focus, as we define and deliver their purpose through our new strategy.

There's no better place to learn more about how we began, what we do now, and what we will do next than our new website, which has germinated with vigour from carefully sown plans.

I hope you enjoy this Field Notes, and the bounteous season that's inspired it.



Awakening our land

Our spring newsletter is later than planned... but we found ourselves busy working on our new website, our brand refresh and our organisational strategy. All of these things give us new opportunities to connect people with land and learning, so we wanted to share them with you personally.

Our 2026-29 strategy

Creating a strategy is often a top-down process, written by a Board or a CEO and then shared with teams to deliver. We felt strongly that this was not how we wanted the Ernest Cook Trust strategy to be developed, so we have been working on this across the organisation since autumn last year. We engaged all of our teams on defining our vision and helping decide our goals, and in the last few months we've been working hard to make sure they are clear and achievable, but also ambitious enough to make an impact in the next three years.

The title of our strategy is "Awakening our land" because the theme we unearthed from everyone's contribution was that our greatest asset is our land and that we can awaken even more potential in it.

If you want to read the full strategy, it's on our new website!

Our new website

This is another thing we have been busy with - developing our new website which went live in mid-April.

An online refresh has been planned

Our strategic goals

LEARNING: We will grow land-based connection, knowledge and skills from first encounters in nature to future careers and beyond.

LAND: We will create resilient thriving places, by enhancing the multiple values of all our land.

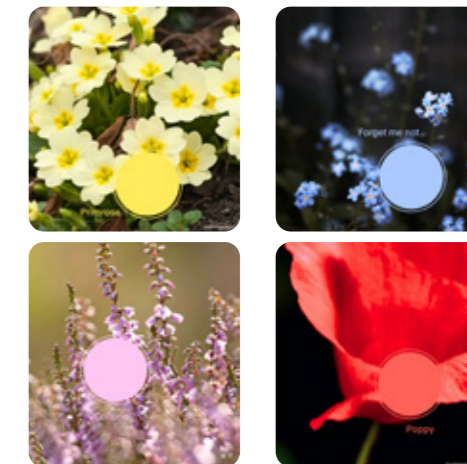
CONNECTION: We will grow collaborative partnerships, inspire our audiences, and influence national conversations.

since last year and this was another really collaborative project. We're so grateful for the support from our colleagues, farm tenants, local residents, members of the community and our partners for their help in designing, testing, and growing the website. Thanks to everyone's feedback it feels really clear, engaging, and designed for all our different audiences and partners.

We've kept a clear focus on outdoor learning, from learning programmes and grants to land-based skills and youth

empowerment - but we've also created more space to share stories about farming, land management, and our property development.

It's also the perfect platform to bring our brand refresh to life. We've embraced new colours inspired by nature, new fonts and illustrations, and most importantly, a more inclusive approach to telling our stories and sharing the impact of our work.



We'd love to hear your thoughts, so please let us know how you find it.

What do you love? What's missing? What do you want to see more of?



Land is in our nature

Every season we celebrate one of our team for their personal contribution to nature and the environment, and this spring we're turning our attention to the wonderful work on the River Coln in Fairford. Although every season brings its own unique joys.

If you've ever enjoyed a video of a water vole, grass snake or nesting river bird on our social channels, then you've probably got Mark to thank! A lot of our nature content is captured on the River Coln by Mark and he shares his knowledge and passion for river nature with us...

"Being a river keeper cannot really be described as a job. Yes, I get up in the morning and head off to work, but to call it a job doesn't feel quite right. It's a way of life, a calling, something you have to do to feel fulfilled. I've always felt that way about being near the water.

For as long as I can remember the aquatic world fascinated me, I always wanted to know what lived beneath that mirrored surface of our waterways. Lifting the veil on that world, separated so definitely from ours, excites me as much today at 43, as it did when I was a kid. To work alongside nature everyday is a privilege, and not something I take for granted. I wholeheartedly believe that my office is the best there is.



A Water Vole caught in motion as it sped down the Coln.



A Great White Egret - once a rare visitor, they are now an increasingly common sight.



Grayling - a native freshwater fish (and Mark's favourite species!)

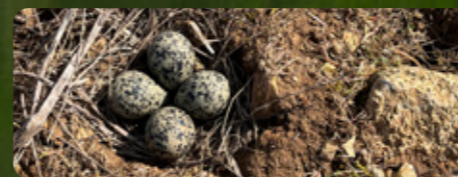
Mark's work is not confined to the river - he also supports on learning opportunities and connecting with local partners.

Last year, we welcomed Associate Professor of Freshwater & Marine Ecology Dr Michelle Jackson, to discuss ways we can work together on the River Coln to support her research. And recently the Trust hosted 'The Confluence', an opportunity for river education practitioners to share their knowledge and learning. This event was arranged with Cotswold National Landscape, and we welcomed the 16 participants for a walk along the River Coln as well as workshops covering topics such as creating a river catchment charter, citizen science with schools and fieldwork methodologies. All of these were enriched by Mark's expertise and support - his passion for the river and nature is contagious and inspiring for all of us.

Along the river and on dry ground, here's some of what's happening in nature this season.



Grass snakes start appearing in April and you'll likely see them until early autumn. Like this one on the River Coln, they're usually found in wetlands, by rivers or ponds, and during the summer they will often be basking in the sun. You can identify them by their greenish colour and yellow and black collar. Although they're the UK's longest snake, they're also harmless - so a fun opportunity to introduce children to our reptile friends when exploring outdoors!



Lapwing eggs found in April on the River Coln just before they hatched.

New legislation on dogs and farm animals

As many will know, new laws came into effect in March that increases the penalty for livestock worrying. There is now an unlimited fine for owners whose dogs chase, attack or cause distress to livestock on agricultural land and the police also have greater powers to seize and detain a dog, including securing animal DNA.

With 87% of sheep farmers experiencing a dog attack on their flock in 2024, this is welcome news for a lot in the farming community and a good reminder to ensure your dog is under control and in sight when walking on or around agricultural land.



Bluebells are a familiar sight in spring, transforming woodland floors across the country with a carpet of purple. So it's easy to believe that nearly half the world's bluebells are found in the UK. This picture is from Lea Wood in April.

They are most beautiful in abundance, and it is against the law to pick, uproot or destroy bluebells. They can also take years to recover from damage - even their leaves. So tread carefully when enjoying this season's crop and help us guarantee years of bluebell carpets in spring.

The Corn Bunting

We were thrilled to spot a Corn Bunting on our Home Estates this spring. This farmland bird would be easy to overlook, but its presence is a thing to celebrate as their population has fallen by over 80% since 1967 and their range has dramatically reduced.



Modern farming has reduced winter food, insects and safe nesting sites for these stout, brown birds and they are a textbook example of a farmland bird in crisis. On a gloomy day we could say their decline points to the wider problems in agricultural ecosystems. But we were so pleased to spot one we decided to share some of the measures our farmers use to help support this Red List species make a comeback.

Where possible, farmers target these measures in known Bunting areas - their remaining populations are fragmented, and success depends on clustered (not scattered) action.

- Delay at least one silage cut on selected fields until late July, to prevent nesting failure
- Allow rough grass margins (especially next to arable fields) for nesting and insect foraging
- Reduce insecticide use in spring and early summer so insects are available for chicks

Working together, with food in winter, insects in summer and nests left undisturbed, we can hopefully see the return of the "fat bird of the barley".



Bird feeding: Feed seasonally. Feed safely.

The RSPB has shared urgent advice on feeding birds this spring to prevent the spread of disease.

Trichomonosis is a contagious diseases that spreads when birds gather in large numbers - such as at bird feeders. To help prevent the spread, you can...

1. Limit your use of bird feeders from May to October, when there's a higher risk of disease and more natural food sources available to birds
2. Clean your bird feeders weekly, move them around the garden and keep food as dry as possible.

For more tips, visit the RSPB website.

Spark a conversation • Michael Birnie

Land is at the heart of Michael's career, and always has been. But if you dig a bit deeper, you discover that what makes the biggest difference to him are the people he works with.



Michael Birnie, Director of Land, Property & Commercial Development



business of running an estate, it's clear he took these roles for the enrichment they offered as much as the professional opportunity.

And the same was true when he discovered the Trust nine years ago: **"I felt so lucky to be approached by the Trust - it was such a sleeping giant. A well kept secret!"**

When he joined, the Trust felt like an organisation that was entering a period of change, with a huge variety of work, and a broad portfolio to manage. But this challenge was what appealed. And now, nearly nine years on, he feels that's coming to fruition. **"We're achieving the things we set out to do, and we have the expertise to do it."**

Michael's love of the land runs deep. He grew up on an estate where his dad was the in-hand farm manager, and he and his brothers loved growing up in the farming world. **"I was the kid that cycled around the stock yard getting into trouble... but we loved when the combines rolled in for harvest."**

And from the age of 14, Michael was working every holiday on surrounding farms - encouraged by his dad to seek his own place and purpose on the land. Having got a farming job straight out of school, that was the path he was sure he wanted to pursue.

His love for learning kicked in later, when he was persuaded to give university a try and discovered that, when he was inspired by the subject matter, learning was a lot more fun than he remembered!

This lesson has followed Michael ever since, and he speaks about his various roles with Smiths Gore, the Buccleuch Estate and Longleat all as huge learning opportunities. Whether sharpening his commercial negotiation skills with private clients, or understanding the

If you ask Michael what "it" is that he does, his first instinct is to point outside. **"Take a look outside, the natural and build environment, the people, the livelihoods and constantly evolving objectives. A land agent, or rural surveyor, draws in the expertise to achieve an aim, to make a difference and collaborate across a multitude of sectors and stakeholders."**

And Michael's role as a rural surveyor has always been about developing business to achieve objectives for a client - whether consulting for multiple clients or working for a family estate. With the Trust, he feels that the client is the charitable objective that sits at the core of the Ernest Cook Trust's existence.

For him, this makes the job even more rewarding and worthwhile. **"I'm using my skill set to help the Trust grow - you know why you're doing the job at the end of the day."**

And on a difficult day, that purpose makes those tough choices or hard conversations easier to manage. Because there's no denying that

managing 9,000 hectares across six counties can come with its challenges!

But it's the people as much as the land that make all this possible. Michael believes that if you **"work with dedicated professionals and build up productive relationships,"** it opens endless possibilities.

The word Michael keeps coming back to is "expertise" when referring to the team he works with, our tenant farmers, and the learning colleagues across the Trust. It's clear that this shared expertise is vital to how Michael does his job and why he enjoys it. **"I like the energy of the Trust. You learn a lot - and it challenges my thinking."**

Michael doesn't see one way of looking at the role of land management. **"Land use in the UK is complex, and often with competing pressures. It's a finite resource and how do we optimise its use for future generations?"** So it feels like less a question of what his team does next, but how.

It's clear that from estate repairs to nature recovery, tenant relationships or strategic developments, it's the strength of Michael's team that he wants to cultivate and grow the most.



Updates from the Estates team



A big welcome to both barn owls and Jake

Starting with the more important new addition, we want to welcome Jake to our Fairford team as our new Woodland Ranger on the Home Estates. Jake did his apprenticeship with our Estate Forester, Lee at Slimbridge, so we are really pleased that he is able to remain with the Trust, following his successful application to the Woodland Ranger role - which he started in April. And we are also very happy to welcome two families of barn owls to the Slimbridge Estate! Lee and Jake installed three new owl boxes on the estate's woodlands last year, and they were excited to see two of the boxes in use - including two sets of owlets. Hoping to repeat this success, more boxes have been added this spring and we'll share updates when we have them!

Barn owls earned their name because quiet barns on open farmland offer the perfect nesting opportunity - but these opportunistic owls will nest in all sorts of hollow spaces, from tree holes to chimneys (and nesting boxes). An interesting fact: barn owls are recognisable by their distinctive heart-shaped face, but did you know that it is shaped that way to guide sound waves to their hidden ears - they have an extraordinary hearing ability that, along with their powerful eyesight, allows them to hunt at night.



Digging for Britain

At the beginning of the year we were very pleased to be featured on Episode 5 of the latest series of *Digging For Britain* on the BBC. The filming took place over the summer, with support from Lee and Jake, on our site at Slimbridge.

For those who don't know, the dig at Slimbridge has uncovered an important Roman settlement and is run by Tony Roberts from Archeoscan and Lee James who represents both the Trust and the Slimbridge Local History Society.

Discoveries at Slimbridge include what would once have been an opulent

Roman bath house, which is an unusual example of wealth and luxury in the early period of Roman occupation of Britain. Coins found at the site date its occupation from around 80 AD to 170 AD.

Among the incredible objects found on site was a bronze scalpel (far left), used in surgery. We later discovered, with help from CMAS (Conservation & Management of Archaeological Sites), that this scalpel is an incredibly rare find - with the only other example of this type of bronze scalpel found in Pompeii!

Lee said the moment when a new and interesting piece came out of the ground was among the most exciting parts of the dig. "You see people pick things up and sometimes you can't take a clear picture of the object because their hands are shaking so much," he said. "When you find something, like a piece of a bracelet, and you know you are the first person to touch it since it was lost by its owner nearly 2,000 years ago, that's quite a moment," he added.



Professor Mick Waters

If you had one child, and you wanted them to learn about the world, what would you do? Mick Waters suggests that you probably wouldn't build a brick classroom, put them in it all day and teach them about the world outside. You'd take them out into the world to learn. And Mick's passion as an educator, former teacher, policy advisor and educational consultant is about how we correct or adapt that system to make it work for the 14.4 million children in the UK today.



Professor Mick Waters says that he didn't exactly thrive at school himself - his own school days **"weren't covered in success! But I think it had something to do with the fact that I never left the desk."** In other aspects of his childhood, he says he did meet people who were intrigued by the world around them. **"They knew the names of things, spoke about trees, flowers, clouds, stars - life. I think that affected me."** And this vital balance between desk learning and intrigue about the world beyond is one that he has sought to balance throughout his professional life in education.

Whatever Mick's modest recollections of a desk-bound education, he has observed children's learning as a teacher and headteacher, later as Chief Education Officer for the City of Manchester, and in his tenure as Director of Curriculum for England. What this has



Mick (here and above) at a learning session and residential at Low Becks Farm in 2025

"Children learn more, engage more, enjoy more, achieve more, when they're practically involved in their learning"

taught him is that **"children learn more, engage more, enjoy more, achieve more when they're practically involved in their learning, doing something that matters and they think it's important to them"**. He learnt this early on in his career, and he still sees it to this day - now working closely with teachers and leaders in schools, Multi-Academy Trusts (MATs) and local authorities, as well as doing policy work for governments, to support the best learning outcomes for children.

So what does this mean for education in the UK? Mick acknowledges that our societal structure needs children to be in school to learn, not least in order for their parents to work. But he also stresses that this isn't how we would design education if we were starting with one child, and how to teach them about the world.

"If you want children to learn about the world in which they live in, the world they're going to grow up in, the world they're going to inherit, then the best place to learn that is in the world. So if you start from the premise that the school building is the artificial environment..."

And that in itself feels like a somewhat groundbreaking idea for those of us who grew up in the British school system or who have children at school today. This isn't a call to abolish school-based learning. But it is a radical reminder that outdoor learning and field work outside of the classroom should be treated as more than a just a nice-to-have or an add-on. It should be embedded in the curriculum and the way children experience learning at school.

Mick describes this approach from a starting point where we want children to be exploring the world in which they live as much as possible. Whether that's through local visits, time spent outdoors, or field work in the local community, they can then take observations back to the classroom to make sense of what they encountered through books, or the internet, and to explore other versions of it. And he explains that, in his not limited experience, this brings abstract learning about far-off places or remote concepts into the real world for children.

"The bit of world we can visit is always relatively small and other parts of the world are different. If you look at farming in rural Suffolk, it's incredibly different from farming in north Wales, which is different again from the farming that happens in Manitoba, which is different from the Ganges delta. So what you want children to do is apply what they're seeing in their part of the world to other environments, for other people, in different places. And then to realise how it's changed over time - using texts or resources to see what farming looked like 100 years ago in rural Suffolk, and why did it change."

Although you can only give children a limited impression of the world in which they live, and sitting at a desk is also useful to expand this knowledge, his description paints a clear picture of how and why experiences in the real world bring the abstract one to life. He also points out that this connection to real world experiences applies to any and all of us: **"Look at these people on the Artemis 2**

[space mission]. They were awestruck and these are astronauts - they've been in space before, and they were talking about how incredible it was. Humans can be amazed by experiencing things they already understand."

The argument for learning outside the classroom is clear, but how do we integrate that within the school system today?

The Department of Education's recent white paper, heavily influenced by the independent Curriculum and Assessment Review led by Professor Becky Francis CBE last year, marks a significant change in education policy - and one that goes beyond the school gates. Without unpacking all the proposed reforms, a key pillar of this strategy is focused on taking a narrow experience of education and making it broader, encouraging schools to strengthen collaboration with their local communities. The white paper also acknowledges the importance of outdoor and nature-based experiences as part of plans for a new core enrichment offer, beginning in 2028.

Mick believes that all of this offers the opportunity for schools to reflect on what learning is actually about, what children need to experience in order to develop as learners, and then how to structure learning accordingly.

"Too often learning starts with 'What's the exam at the end? Now let's go backwards and work out what we can show children locally to help them understand this.' It's back to front."

With the revised curriculum due next year (for September 2028), Mick sees an opportunity for schools to reflect now on how the exam system may constrain them, and how a more experience-led approach could help children build confidence and still achieve strong results. Although resources in the education sector are limiting, it could be a refreshing opportunity for educators

"Children mustn't feel 'I'm 4 years old, I've got an exam in 14 years and I must get on the treadmill to get to it!' There's a life to live before then!"

"When children, anyone, sees an eclipse for the first time they're awestruck. You can colour in stuff in your book as much as you like - but when you see it, you realise it. There are very few people who aren't struck by how fantastic that is!"

and leaders in the school system to see outdoor learning not as an option they have permission to fulfill, but an invitation to really reflect on what they want children to learn and how.

Naturally, our conversation with Mick turns to outdoor learning in both nature and on farms. In 2025 he visited Low Becks Farm in Cumbria, and one of his key takeaways was the different perspectives these experiences offer children.

It often starts with delight, especially if children haven't had experiences like that before. Children look closely at flowers or animals they see outdoors and there's an intrigue they've never experienced. This observation then switches into thoughtfulness - considering what they need to do to care for it or look after the animal or crops. This thought transitions into connection and thinking about the farmer and how they do this on a daily basis - and they remember that this isn't just a cute animal, but it's part of a food system and has a different purpose. **"I just think it's giving children lots of different perspectives on the same thing."**

And it doesn't have to be just on farms or in rural landscapes that children learn these lessons about food systems. Mick says, **"I go to schools where they've got a few raised beds and if they really use them well, they're powerful learning resources. Schools that encourage really good focused work on growing things, so that children see the cycle: from preparing the ground to planting the seed, nurturing the plant to harvesting the crop, to reparing the ground. That happens all over the globe in farming."**

And in Mick's broad experience, whatever the scale or type of outdoor learning visit, children always gain and benefit from it. Farm visits have a particular value, as land-based learning is fundamental to our future, in Mick's opinion. There is what he terms **"a dearth of**

understanding in our country about food technology and where food comes from. People see food on the shelves and don't know where it comes from, where it grows, how it grows - out the ground or on a stalk!" And returning to the value of real-world experiences in learning, there's evidence that children find it easier to understand global systems and processes like the food market by turning a magnifying glass on their own community.

All of this feels like it's leading to a natural conclusion, that real-world learning empowers children and young people in a way that desk-based learning on its own doesn't do. It proves the role children can play in influencing their own future and it brings to life consequential learning - without real-world learning, children don't have a real sense of consequence.

It's an interesting reflection in a world where childhood feels both more dangerous and more sanitised than ever. Mick explains that it was only in the 1870s that the concept of childhood really emerged - and the introduction of schooling prevented many children from going to work. And our understanding of childhood has shifted over the years. Nowadays, children arguably face greater danger from the online world than the real one, and yet we are limiting their real-world experiences and learning more than ever before.

But there is still time to turn this tide. With the Curriculum Review and new education strategy, now is the time for organisations like the Trust to, in Mick's words, **"try to convince policy makers that there are different ways of looking at things."**

And so we will continue to grow our commitment to outdoor learning, land-based skills and long-term funding in the sector to convince others of their value. Because just like the eclipse, the moon landing, the tide on the beach, the bird on the wing, sometimes you have to see it to believe it.

Farm Focus · Home Farm

Sophie Iles is one of our youngest farm tenants but she is already making her mark and has big ambitions for Home Farm on our Hatherop Estate. She's also supported by her father Jeremy, who is a fellow farm tenant. We catch up with her on how her latest ventures are going, how she feels as a young farmer, and why diversity is the future of farming.



Sophie at Home Farm last summer; below with her family at Leaffield Farm; and right with fellow attendees of the OFC/ORFC shared dinner at Somerville College in January.

To describe Sophie as part of a multi-generational farm tenancy would be a bit of an understatement. Her family have farmed the land around Leaffield Farm for six generations, long pre-dating the Trust's ownership. Having taken on the tenancy at Home Farm in 2024 she is the latest generation to join this tradition.

However, if you ask Sophie about her motivation today, her answer is not rooted in the past - it is firmly focused on the future and the practical opportunities the tenancy offer.

"Home Farm has provided an opportunity to extend our regenerative grazing system, offering nutritional and welfare benefits to our beef herd and contributing to wider soil health, biodiversity and sustainability targets.

I was excited to work across new landscapes and have really enjoyed interacting with people and explaining our system while out checking livestock. I am also really grateful for the opportunity it has given me to explore diversification options which may add value to our existing enterprises."

The question of diversification is at the heart of Sophie's work - both practical and academic. Because as well as working at Home Farm, Sophie is studying Agricultural Business Management at Reading University. Her dissertation is even focused on diversifying farm businesses, where she uses Home Farm as a case study to design different business plans for feasibility analysis.

This interest in diversification is not just a practical solution to the challenges of the modern farming landscape - it is also a personal passion of Sophie's.

"I feel like it's a really interesting time to be in farming and I want to broaden my skillset as much as possible through our varied enterprises. I have a lot to learn but I am really looking forward to embracing the practical side of farming again after finishing my degree."

One of things she's looking forward to is how to connect with local communities - marketing their produce more directly with consumers, welcoming farm visits to showcase their regenerative grazing model, and exploring how these benefits transfer into their produce.

This fresh look at British food production is something that, in Sophie's view, unites a lot of young farmers today. **"There is a shared passion for being part of a dynamic industry working towards a united goal of sustainable food production."**

This was one of her key takeaways at the Oxford Real Farming Conference (ORFC) this January, which she attended with the Trust. She also noted the diversity of conference attendees, which made for even more interesting discussions as they compared experiences across the farming sector.

"Interacting with people from a broad range of agricultural sectors and backgrounds at the ORFC helped me gain useful insights into farming in different contexts. The conference subject themes surrounding sustainability, diversification and regenerative practices particularly complemented my university studies so I am really grateful to have had the opportunity to attend with the Trust."

Whether it's plans to connect with local communities at Home Farm or the integration of regenerative grazing,

it's clear that Sophie believes in the value of knowledge sharing within the agricultural industry. **"The isolated nature of many agricultural jobs makes events like the ORFC really beneficial in bringing people together and building connections spanning across multiple sectors."**



It's an approach and mindset she clearly picked up at home, as Leaffield Farm has many joint ventures with other local farm tenants and even supports a local biogas plant that produces renewable electricity for Fairford. Collaboration is clearly a key value in her farming background. And Sophie acknowledges that growing up on a farm has offered early exposure to hands-on learning, as well as the chance to develop key skills in farming.

"Studying agriculture at University among people from a range of backgrounds has made me more aware of the barriers to gaining farm work experience."

And in her characteristically forward-thinking way, she says, **"Differing perspectives within a team generally encourages innovation, so educational opportunities to accommodate farm skillset development may help address these concerns."**

It only seems like a matter of time before outdoor learning and land-based skills become the latest offering at Home Farm, but at the moment Sophie's dissertation needs finishing and there's plenty to be getting on with for now! We are so thrilled to have Sophie's passion for diversification and sustainability in the Trust's own future.



Low Beckside Farm

The team at Low Beckside have had a busy spring across land and learning - including hosting our OWL Collaboration partners, which you can read more about on the next page...

It's lambing season, and the team have been busy with our Swaledale herd. Huge thanks go to our apprentices Chloe and Paige for all their hard work. Congratulations to Chloe for passing her ATV (all-terrain vehicle) qualification, and to Paige for completing her telehandler training recently too.

We've also been busy on the farm developing our outdoor learning space, including our allotment and new accommodation for the hens, built by Amy and her group of students from Ullswater Community College. And in the meantime we've hosted new groups from Right 2 Work for Ullswater Community College's land-based award, as well as outdoor weeks of learning (OWLs) from Newtown and Abingdon in collaboration with Country Trust.

Our outdoor learning visits continue, and amongst our usual farm-based learning we're supporting groups towards the Cumbrian Award. Launched in 2021, this is a regional educational programme for young people in Cumbria to help connect them with the tremendous opportunities the county has to offer - whilst supporting these students in their enrichment and development.

And last but by no means least, we were so happy to join in with the Mungrisdale Spring Fling - the perfect opportunity to celebrate everything the season and the county has to offer, whilst engaging with our local community and all the amazing organisations that took part.



A Parliament at Low Becks

In March we welcomed a parliament to Low Becks Farm in Cumbria... a parliament of OWLs. Because we hosted our OWL (Outdoor Week of Learning) Collaboration partners for a fun-filled 2-day learning session. Our new Programme Networks Manager, Sally, tells us more about this exciting event and what's next for The OWL Collaboration.

Whenever we come together with our OWL Collaboration partners, we take it in turns for different partners to host. We are lucky enough to have not one but two OWL partners in Cumbria, so it seemed only fitting to extend this meet up into a two-day session.

We were welcomed on day one by Outward Bound at their amazing site at Ullswater, before spending day two at our own Low Becks Farm where the Country Trust work with us to deliver outdoor weeks of learning.

Both days offered rich insights into how our partners work, the strength of our shared collaboration, and what we could and should be focusing on to deepen and strengthen outdoor weeks of learning.

A key learning was the importance of teacher engagement in outdoor learning. We need to support teachers to deeply understand of value of outdoor learning in order to grow sustained practice. This could mean a greater focus on our learning sites as spaces for increased professional learning and reflection, alongside engagement approaches shaped by the needs of different places and communities.

As we shared experiences and challenges from across the network, a strong sense of collective learning emerged. These conversations reinforced the importance of our continued shared mission to champion the relevance of outdoor learning in schools and in young people's lives.

We recognised its powerful role not only in supporting health and wellbeing, but also in creating meaningful spaces where young people can explore who they are, find their voice, and develop a stronger sense of self in the world.

On day two we toured Low Becks Farm and discussed our own priorities for future visits and learnings. We were also all momentarily distracted by the exciting sight of not one but two rare red squirrels! The perfect reminder of how nature can enlighten our experiences!

Overall, the two days were a rich, shared experience and we are so grateful for all our partners and their insight and expertise. The perfect example of how lives and land enrich each other.



Funding in flow

This has also been a busy season for grant funding across the organisation. Catch up on our latest grants news below...

Leading the charge on outdoor learning...

We are so pleased to share that 10 non-profit organisations, from children's charities to community interest groups, are new recipients of our Outdoor Learning Leader grants. Over £570,000 has been allocated to help cover the costs of employing inspirational individuals to ultimately support outdoor learning about land, food production and biodiversity.

From the South West, to the East Midlands and North West of England, these 10 organisations focus on supporting young people and especially those from underserved communities. Half of these organisations are around our estate at Low Becks in Cumbria - the Bendrigg Trust, the West Cumbria Rivers Trust, the Cumbria Development Education Centre, Wild Garside Pike, Susan's Farm, plus Blackburn-based Inspire Motivate Overcome (IMO) charity, and The Boathouse Youth in Blackpool.

Our Grant Manager Penny said: "We're delighted to be supporting these ten organisations ... these leaders will help inspire young people and support them in building lasting connections with the natural environment. Everyone in the role will also be invited to join our OPEN network, which brings outdoor learning leaders together. It's a space for sharing ideas, training and support, and previous grant recipients have told us how valuable this network has been."

Also receiving this grant are Gloucestershire based organisations - Creative Sustainability CIC, the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust, and Headspace.

We're thrilled that this grant allows us to extend our work well beyond our boundaries and look forward to welcoming these leaders into our OPEN network.



We're excited to share that we are partnering with the Royal Wildlife Trusts and Sheffield Hallam University on a new pilot programme called 'Bringing Nature into Teaching'. This programme focuses on bringing outdoor learning into secondary school settings through teacher training opportunities across the country. Sheffield Hallam are now completing the research and consultation phase of the programme, which will shape the development of the offering. The Trust has also successfully secured the match funding needed for the pilot in Year 2 and 3 from a silent partner and we are really excited by how scalable this programme is. Watch this space for more updates!



We welcome the support of volunteers from Fairford's Men's Shed to our Fairford workshops and gardens. One day per week, they give a guiding hand to our 18 - 30 year-old supported Interns and volunteers across a range of rural skills and crafts.



Our Outdoor Essentials Grant in action, with South Cumbria PRU

Our Outdoor Essentials Grant is known as the small grant that goes a long way... Our aim is to help remove barriers and enable school children to build relationships with nature and learn outdoors. For some this means enhancing "nature on the doorstep" with improvements to their own grounds or areas in their local communities. For others it means help with transport costs to outdoor learning sites, or helping buy wellies and waterproofs.

Our next round of the Outdoor Essentials Grant opens in mid-May, so keep an eye on our website for more information on how to apply.

Trust News

A snapshot of news from across the organisation.

Keep up-to-date with all our news and activities on our socials

A warm welcome

Most importantly we want to offer a warm welcome to a whole host of new team members in the Learning team!

Firstly we welcome **Dionne**, who joined us at the end of last year as our **Learning Operations Administrator** for the North. Dionne is based in Low Becks, but works with teams across Lancashire and Gloucestershire.

Also in Cumbria, we are delighted that Susie G returned to the Trust at the start of the year. Susie previously worked with us until 2023 and has now rejoined as **Land Based Skills Manager** in the North.

Meanwhile down south, we welcomed **Sally** who joins us as our **Programme Networks Manager**, responsible for our OWL Collaboration and our Outdoor Practitioners Education Network (OPEN).

A fond farewell

Unfortunately, in May we bid a very fond farewell to our Director of Learning, Grants & Partnerships, **Suzie Paton**. As Ed said, "Suzie has been a wonderful, tireless, kind and energising contributor to the Trust for 8 years and led the merger of the Learning and Grants teams with great care and dedication."

We wish her all the best, and as a farm tenant we are pleased that she won't be too far away!



Filkins Shop

The Trust recently contributed £2,000 towards the new community shop at Filkins.

The shop is an extraordinary example of community efforts, set up with local stakeholders over 20 years ago. It's now run and managed by a team of volunteers, operating as a not-for-profit organisation, with any surplus invested back into the shop or distributed to a local cause. As well as selling daily necessities for locals, there is a corner dedicated to more specialist local produce - natural wax candles made in Filkins, apple juice pressed from the village orchards, local artists' greeting cards, and much more.

The building and land was part of a generous bequest by Stafford Cripps and it originally housed a bathhouse connected to the adjacent pool. Whilst the building has been modernised for its current use, it still includes some original tiles!

We were very pleased to be able to support such a worthwhile venture, and it's well worth a visit if you're in the area.



Reflecting on our roots

The team at Court Farm had the privilege of welcoming Ernest Cook's great-nephew, Tom Cook, to Court Farm at the end of March for a brief talk and lunch. It was wonderful to hear so many first-hand anecdotes of Ernest Cook from his own family member - especially Ernest's deep passion for rural England, its landscapes, communities and way of life.

Tom Cook is a passionate supporter of the Trust, having been a trustee himself from 2001 - 2006. It's clear that he still holds a lot of affection for both his great-uncle and the vision he had.

It was really inspiring to hear this on the same day that our Board of trustees officially adopted our new strategy for 2026-29. It brought together our roots and our ambitions for growth, reminding us that our heritage is still at the heart of the Trust. Huge thanks to Tom Cook for making the time, and the long drive, to share his extraordinary memories and encouragement for the Trust's future.



Diddly Squat Farm Shop

This spring, Diddly Squat Farm Shop has launched a new partnership with Ocado, and the Ernest Cook Trust is really pleased to share that we are their chosen charity partner.

Diddly Squat Farm, based proudly in the Cotswolds, has become a British phenomenon thanks to its no-nonsense approach to farming (and occasional chaos along the way). Now some of their product range is available with Ocado, meaning even more people can try their real ale chutney, blackberry Jam, beer mustard or Diddly Dunkers.

Thanks to our charity partnership with Diddly Squat Farm and Ocado, these products don't just taste good, but do good. By donating 10p per item to the Trust, Diddly Squat Farm and Ocado are helping support outdoor learning, land-based skills and young people's futures in farming.

Diddly Squat Farm Shop and the Trust share an ambition to connect young people to their local landscapes, food systems, and potential careers outdoors. We are also part of a shared environment and community that understands the value of farming, local connections, and learning.

This is just the beginning of our work with Diddly Squat Farm, and we are looking forward to creating more opportunities for young people in farming together. We'll keep you updated on how this exciting new partnership grows.



Forest School Leader Theo

Congratulations to our Outdoor Learning Trainee, Theo, who is now a fully qualified Forest School Leader, having passed her level 3 course.

Based in Lancashire, Theo supports our outdoor family, school, and community sessions with our longstanding project partner, Forest of Bowland National Landscape. We're so pleased to see Theo's career continue to develop with the Trust.

"It was lovely to see people who care deeply about children and are open to different ways of learning. The sense of community is always important to me and I feel it helps my learning and my motivation."

Theo



Reporting on impact

Our 2024/25 Annual Report was published later than usual, but it's now up on our new [website](#) and tells the story of our impact that year.

We are reviewing how we measure and report on the impact of our charitable activities and learning programmes. We want to make sure the impact reflects genuine change and that we are measuring the right things to reveal this.

If you're interested in how we measure impact, you can read one of our latest [blogs](#) by Research & Impact Lead, Alison.



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.

February - We joined Tim Farron MP for a Forest Afternoon at Grayrigg CofE Primary School in Cumbria, with one of our partners, 'Little Chatters'.

April - We supported the Murgrisdale Spring Fling, getting into the community spirit alongside our Low Becks Farm neighbours in Cumbria.

The shoot for our brand video brought learning opportunities for our child actor on the riverbank with River Keeper, Mark, and during a Forest School session with the filmmaker. View the video on our website.



April - We hosted a Lent Lunch at Court Farm, with our neighbours from the surrounding villages who are part of the local Lent Lunches Group.

May - This year's Quenington Fete will be held at Court Farm, sharing our beautiful head office grounds with the local community. This marks a return to the Court Farm, which hosted the Fete in the 1980s, as seen here:



March/April - Initial meetings with organisations and the local community around our Trent Estate, as we embark on establishing a whole estate plan.

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
- Outdoor Learning Leader Grants awarded in our latest round of funding, worth £570,000+ over the next 3 years. See our online map for all current Grant recipients.

We are working in collaboration with Sheffield Hallam University and the Royal Wildlife Trusts on an outdoor learning programme, 'Bringing Nature into Teaching' aimed at secondary schools.

April - We hosted our annual Blue Influencers Scheme Conference, and our Youth Advisory Board Residential in Derbyshire, with young people from across the UK.

March - We hosted 'The Confluence' on the River Coln, with the Cotswolds National Landscape, on behalf of the Evenlode Catchment Partnership. The event was an opportunity for river practitioners to share knowledge and learning.

March - Our Director, Michael Birnie became Chair of the Glos & District branch of the CAAV (The Central Association of Agricultural Valuers) at the AGM seminar and dinner in Cirencester. Michael is keen to promote the association's 'Route to Rural', supporting young people into rural careers - a campaign that aligns very closely with our work.

