



**WYCHWOOD
FOREST TRUST**

Reviving the Wychwood

Strategic Priorities 2025–2028

Our Story

The Wychwood Forest Trust (WFT) took root in 1997 around an idea to champion the restoration of the landscape character and habitat mosaic found across much of West Oxfordshire when it was once a royal forest. One of the last great hunting forests to be enclosed, many remnants and tell-tale signs of older more vibrant landscapes can still be found scattered across 41 parishes. The Wychwood occupies a unique place in the landscapes of lowland England and in some rare, special places there is still a feeling of great antiquity.

Britain's ancient forests are often misunderstood. In the popular imagination, they exist as vast swathes of seemingly endless, dense woodlands penetrated by occasional shafts of dappled sunlight. But in medieval times, a royal hunting forest was a legal designation that covered an area comprising many different habitats. As well as extensive woodlands, the historic forest included open heaths and downs, cultivated fields, marshes and floodplains, all providing a variety of wild spaces for flora and fauna.

The activities of communities within the Wychwood, united by a shared way of life, shaped it for many centuries. The bootprints and tool marks of human-induced changes to the landscape can be seen today in our dry stone walls and hedgerows, and in our remaining ponds, coppices and hay meadows.

Nearly thirty years ago, WFT set out to increase people's awareness of the unique historical character and ecology of the area. We hoped that it would help shape a vision for the future, one shared by many local stakeholders, and lead to coordinated and collaborative local initiatives.

And it did.

Our achievements over the last three decades have been significant. We have built positive relationships with estates, farmers, councils and local groups, and completed many community-led conservation projects. We have acquired nearly 150 acres of land across the Wychwood area, and we manage a further 50 acres for partner organisations. Our different nature reserves now range from former agricultural grasslands to exhausted quarries, from water meadows to ancient woodlands.

However, despite new wildlife legislation, direct conservation efforts, and planning policy that requires no further loss through development, we continue to see the decline of nature. The UK is one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world, and one of the least forested in Europe. Our modern county is a microcosm of this, as evidenced in the State of Nature in Oxfordshire report published by Wild Oxfordshire in 2017¹.

Now, more than ever, there is still an urgent need for our work.

¹ Phillips, H., 'State of Nature in Oxfordshire 2017: Full Report', Wild Oxfordshire, 2017, https://cdn.prod.website-files.com/62602eef03c83769e0539df4/63387bab1588e21d8bd680d6_State-of-Nature-in-Oxfordshire-2017_Full-Report_FINAL_MIN2_COVERS.pdf (accessed on 27 June 2025).

Our Achievements

One of our first projects was working in partnership with Oxfordshire County Council in 1997 to plan the restoration of Dean Common, a former gravel extraction site in the remote heart of the Wychwood. Partly landscaped and partly left for nature to retake, a vibrant mosaic of habitats has developed over the years. The site was recently designated as one of Oxfordshire's Local Wildlife Sites.

Our early projects and successes were recognised in 2006 with a Queen's Award for Voluntary Service, in recognition of our role in 'encouraging people to understand, conserve and restore the landscape and wildlife habitats of the former royal forest of Wychwood.'

We became landowners in 2009 with the purchase of Foxburrow Wood. The land has been transformed from private dairy farmland with only a single tree, to a popular and welcoming community woodland where people and wildlife have returned side by side. Traditional rural skills like dry stone walling and hedgelaying have been integral to the restoration of Foxburrow Wood.

The largest ancient woodland fragment in Hailey parish, Singe Wood, came into our ownership in 2019 through a legacy. Singe Wood is a significant outlying 'island' to the nearby Wychwood National Nature Reserve, the largest remaining part of the old Wychwood. The woodland is a valuable stepping stone in the landscape and we are currently working with the Bat Conservation Trust to assess its value to rare Barbastelle and Bechstein's bats.

Another legacy, Gibbets Hill, came our way in 2022. A rolling 50 acres of former agricultural grassland, the land is close to surviving ancient woodland fragments, and retains a fine network of old hedgerows with some mature and veteran trees. We are pursuing a 'passive rewilding' approach at Gibbets Hill, with long-term monitoring research underway in collaboration with the University of Oxford, Freshwater Habitats Trust and others. Gibbets Hill has become our restoration and research hub, allowing us to experiment with alternative approaches to successful nature recovery.

Our Charitable Objectives

WFT was founded nearly thirty years ago on the following two charitable objectives.

- To educate about the history, ecology and management of woodlands and other wildlife habitats and their place in the unique Wychwood landscapes.
- To conserve, restore and re-establish woodlands and other wildlife habitats in the Wychwood for the benefit and with the participation of the public.

Our Philosophy in 2025

Our Purpose

Building on our charitable objectives, our purpose is to work with the people of the Wychwood to restore and create more woodland and dynamic mosaic habitats for nature recovery across our landscapes.

Our Approach

WFT speaks with an informed, confident voice and is truthful about the state of nature and what needs to be done to reverse declines. We aim to demonstrate what is possible, and inspire others to think and act creatively and with optimism. Our work aligns with the Oxfordshire Nature Recovery Network, which maps opportunities for nature recovery across the county.

We believe that the most effective and positive outcomes can only be delivered through enhancing our knowledge, considering best available evidence, ongoing discussion and effective collaboration.

Our Principles

We will continuously look to innovate and influence effective habitat creation across the Wychwood and West Oxfordshire by staying at the forefront of ongoing nature recovery planning and discussions.

- We will act with integrity when working with members, supporters, partners and colleagues and ensure that WFT remains independent and trusted.
- We will choose our partners carefully and based on common values and purpose, knowing that collaboration is central to our successes.
- We will ensure our limited resources are used effectively, and will decline to participate in conservation projects, agri-environment or development mitigation schemes where evidence of long-term nature recovery success is weak.

This statement of strategic priorities follows on from the Wychwood Project (Oxfordshire) Ltd Five Year Strategic Plan 2017-2023, and will guide the work we do for the period from 2025-2028.

Our Strategic Priorities and Aims for 2025-2028

In pursuit of our Purpose and guided by our Approach and available resources, our efforts over the next three years will revolve around the following Strategic Priorities:

1 Strengthen support for our voluntary colleagues

Some challenges endure in nature recovery, and making best and most supportive use of the invaluable volunteers from our local communities who commit their time in response to the biodiversity and climate crises is paramount.

We will:

- Conduct a review of our own volunteer support and communications, identifying better ways to make use of the wide variety of underused skills and expertise in our communities.
- Work with other local and regional environmental groups to find opportunities for increased knowledge and resource sharing to achieve greater collective progress.
- Assess the facilities we have at Gibbets Hill and Foxburrow Wood, and scope and find funding for a dedicated volunteers' base for use by our own voluntary team and other local conservation volunteers.

By focusing on these strategic priorities, WFT aims to create a collaborative network of engaged, enthusiastic and supported volunteers with a strong sense of belonging to the Wychwood.

By 2028

We will have **achieved** greater participation in our reserves and the wider countryside and provided more access opportunities to nature and open spaces for health and wellbeing.

We will **measure our impact** by monitoring volunteer registration and retention rates, as well as work party attendance; tracking volunteer hours; and gathering feedback from volunteers through questionnaires and interviews.

2 Promote evidence gathering, research and education

Many established conservation methods are part of an overall approach to nature recovery that is demonstrably failing, despite good intentions. We believe in novel thinking and experimentation to learn effective new ways to accommodate nature, whilst understanding that the modern Wychwood, just as the old, has multiple land use requirements.

We will:

- Use Gibbets Hill as an opportunity to trial and research nature-led rewilding techniques to restoring terrestrial and aquatic habitats in collaboration with academic and practical partners, and publish scientific and popular reports of our findings as a source of learning for ourselves and other practitioners of nature recovery.
- Use our own land and our collaborative influence to increase opportunities for people to share space with increasing biodiversity, and explore new ways to include people in nature recovery across the Wychwood.
- Continue to develop learning opportunities for people of all ages through courses and events ranging from ecology to countryside skills.

**By focusing on these strategic priorities,
WFT aims to embrace evidence-based
thinking on the most effective ways
to restore degraded land
and put it into practice.**

By 2028

Our own nature reserves and restoration sites will demonstrate an **increase** in biodiversity.

We will **measure our impact** by monitoring our restoration projects; surveying and recording target habitats and species; and collecting and sharing data on ecological changes.

3 Create stronger collaborations for common cause

The tenets of 'more, bigger, better, joined' were first coined in the 2010 Lawton report to government, Making Space for Nature². As underpinnings of nature recovery, they are even more important now than they have ever been.

Everything we do will be with one eye on the bigger picture, the wider landscape, and each of our activities will look to be more than the sum of its parts. The achievements of recent years have led to several ambitious project possibilities emerging that we are in a strong position to coordinate and develop further.

We will:

- Embrace our own limitations and seek mutually beneficial collaborations with other organisations with aligned goals, where we lack specific technical expertise or resources, and vice versa.
- Collaborate with, influence and advise other landowners and organisations to restore and enhance habitat mosaics, and connectivity between them, across the entire Wychwood landscape.
- Identify, lead and secure funding for a genuinely expansive landscape-scale restoration project, enabling a multi-stakeholder collective to work towards a common goal.

**By focusing on these strategic priorities,
WFT aims to champion the
'more, bigger, better, joined' approach.**

By 2028

There will be more **connected** and ecologically-resistant areas of high quality habitats across the Wychwood.

We will **measure our impact** by monitoring our skill partnerships and collaborative activities; gathering feedback from advisees; and tracking progress towards greater habitat connectivity.

² Lawton, J.H. et al., 'Making Space for Nature: A review of England's wildlife sites and ecological network', Report to Defra, 2010, <https://webarchive.nationalarchives.gov.uk/ukgwa/20130402170324/http://archive.defra.gov.uk/environment/biodiversity/documents/201009space-for-nature.pdf> (accessed 27 June 2025)

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