

Project Number : R3 Fenscape



Project Overview: Fenscape will create, improve and connect a corridor of fen habitats and other similar wetlands within the urban area of Wigan and Leigh. Through essential capital works and volunteer engagement, the project will improve the area for wildlife and for everyone to enjoy.

Project lead organisation and other organisations involved: Wigan Council

Project Location: Amberswood, Wigan Flashes, Pennington Flash, Bickershaw Country Park

Project dates: 2017 - 2018

Project Outputs

Measure	Target	Delivered	Notes
12 ha fen habitat restored and improved by lowering reedbed	12ha	33.5ha	This was a massive over achievement, thanks in part to the Environment Agency funded project, and as such we had to adjust other aspects around ditching and scrub removal.
Creating 1500m of new ditching	1.5km	1150m	
27 ha of fen habitat restored and improved by scrub removal	27ha	21.5ha	
Number of volunteer days delivered?		511	
3 training courses to raise awareness of wet grassland	3	4	
2 events to raise awareness of wet grassland	2	6	
5 talks to local groups	5	6	
100 people to gain skills in surveying, delivery and liaison	100	195	
Additional outputs delivered			
Slow the Flow			Bickershaw Country Park flood alleviation
District Level Licensing			Great Crested Newt Pond Creation
Anything unexpected or additional outputs!			An addition to this was the Pilot for the Proposed National Nature Reserve Flashes of Wigan and Leigh and restoration at Pearson's Flash. This is covered with restoration projects.

Reflecting on the last 5 years, what's the one thing that you're most proud of that has come from your project being part of the Carbon Landscape?

When asking Lancashire Wildlife Trust's Wigan Manager what are you most proud of the answer of Dr Mark Champion was "everything." But it is not hard to see why it is the Lawton Principles of "Bigger, Better and More Joined Up" in practice. He alongside Martin Purcell of Wigan Council discuss how, out of necessity, they had to become the "designers".

They are also pleased with their reedbed improvements at Bryn Marsh which saw a new pair of bittern breeding there in 2022. Other best practice restoration include their "slow the flow work" snaking water way with stone weirs and pools at Bickershaw Country Park (which was formerly a straight trapezoidal concrete culvert) becoming a place for watervoles, kingfishers, fish and a creating a flood plain with marshland plants and protecting 83 properties. It also created better defences against antisocial behaviour.

Finally, is the 1km water channel around the fringe of the reedbed at Amberswood stopping dogs from disturbing the birds which has allowed water rails to breed there, cettis warblers to move in and meant that the swans (whilst not a protected species) are not at risk from dog mauls. Also at Amberswood were new great crested newt ponds that were designed in such a way that it enabled the paths to stop flooding; so a win-win. This coupled with surface improvements around Amberswood Lake and later improvements because of British Cycling Funding (see Carbon Trail) enabled a massive difference to the site that is regularly commented upon by local people.

Fenscape was a highly involved capital works programme that also required volunteer support across the four sites. It was match funded by the landfill tax provider Cory (now Enovert), Natural England for funding from District Level Licensing and creating new ponds for great crested newts and the Environment Agency with "slow the flow". Improvements to the reedbed at Pearson's is discussed in the Pilot for the Proposed National Nature Reserve.

What difference has this project made to the cultural and natural heritage of Carbon Landscape?

At Amberswood, the project has delivered 6 hectares of new lowland mossland surface, funded by Natural England, has been spread with sphagnum propagules by volunteers, sundews and bog myrtle and the surface ditches have been blocked to hold water on mossland and raise the water table. A further 2 hectares of fen were re wetted as part of this restoration. The re wetted area allowed the area of wet woodland to expand by 3 hectares which improves its suitability for willow tits. A further 2 hectares of fen were re wetted as part of this restoration. The re wetted area allowed the area of wet woodland to expand by 3 hectares which improves its suitability for willow tits. However, the crown in the jewel at Amberswood is the water channel in the reedbed.

At Wigan Flashes the reedbed and fen has been managed and cut by volunteers led by staff on 74 days, the reed has been cut and encroaching willow scrub removed, around 2 ha has been cut around Pearson's Flash, Scotmans Flash and Hawkley reedbed. Volunteer time totalled 328 days. Volunteers have also been involved with the monitoring and surveying of wildlife found within the habitat areas. We also involved our landscape trainees in much of this management and there were

58 days work over the summer and autumn of 2017. As part of the design work for tenders we have had the sites flown by drone operated by our partners at Natural England. This was a free in kind contribution. At Bryn Marsh 1.5 ha of reedbed was lowered by 300mm. A similar area of scrub removal from the reedbed. The area has been landscaped and pools and ditches added to the habitat. The reed rhizome was then planted to create an active reedbed in time for the 2018 breeding season. 500 metres of ditch were recreated to maintain the reedbed habitats. This will be an important habitat for bitterns and water rail.

We have supported the Leigh Ornithological Group to become the defacto Friends Volunteer group for Pennington Flash. Scrub was removed from a man-made island created at the time of the original landscape restoration in the 1970s, the island was then re-formed to produce large fen margins, smoother sides this will make it more suitable for ducks and wading birds. Around 0.5 ha of new wetland habitat was created.

Finally at Bickershaw Country Park we saw

- Removal of scrub and tress encroachment in order to create a more suitable habitat for ground nesting birds.
- Improvements to the weir at Fir Tree Flash to keep the water level more consistent.
- Removal of vegetation from the banks of Fir Tree Flash at key areas to increase the amount of light entering the water, and improve views for visitors.
- Volunteers recruited to help maintain the site and assist with daily management.

Development with Environment Agency funding of 20ha new and restored wetland and low fen. Creation of 0.25 km of engineered bund to direct a stream to the newly create flood plain, that will protect both parts of wigan from flooding and increased wildlife habitat. The delivery of a slow the flow project to assist with reducing the flow within the local catchment. 2.5km of new ditches and 10 ha of bed lowering, by an average of 400mm. Two pairs lapwing are all ready using the improved landscape.

What difference has this project made to people?

Whilst reported separately under Carbon Volunteers and Carbon Skills it cannot be underestimate the importance of the Living Lab that is fenscape as a place for citizen science and learning. Willow Tit survey training 07/02/2018 involved the Identification, survey methodology, recording and sign up to independently survey a grid square within the Carbon Landscape. Bittern training survey training – 14/03/2018 was similar. Then there were ongoing learning opportunities especially the running of AQA Peatland, Wetland and Grassland conservation training courses and then the opportunity to go and volunteer and get the requisite skills “ticked off”.

A big part of our work is reaching out into the academic and education community and to this aim we have given a grazing talk to Salford University, work placement opportunities and talks to students from Manchester Metropolitan University and were part of a 2 day National Grassland Conference held at Edge Hill 20/8/17. Trainees also spoke about their own experiences for example October 2017 – Mike Longden, gave a talk about his ‘changing career’ journey from volunteering to traineeship. There were other opportunities with multiple visits from Edge Hill MSc students on World Wetlands Day’ Walk around the Amberswood site discussing management. We also spoke to Sixth Formers at Winstanley college volunteer fair 18/10/2017.

“The cumulative effect of offering so many opportunities for students to engage with the theory and practice means that we have become a hub and a first-port-of-call for those who want to gain skills in wetland management.”

However, our work is most definitely rooted within the community. We will be eternally grateful to our Friends groups and regular walkers who are the eyes and ears and supporters of the work we do. There were seven events from bat and fungi walks to our regular Open Days where we want to get people comfortable using their sites and more information about the wildlife that lives there. We also did an away day with our volunteers as a thank you. This field trip was to Sefton and Ribble – 04/02/2018 and celebrated the spectacle of wintering birds.

Useful Links

www.facebook.com/Wiganflasheslocalnaturereserve

www.facebook.com/pages/Amberswood-Country-Park/168388389881299

www.facebook.com/BickershawProject

www.facebook.com/PenningtonFlashLeigh

Future Plans and Legacy

The legacy for wildlife is captured in proudest moments. However, the key element is “proof of concept”. This will be important for future restoration work. There is still more to be done. For example, Victoria Fields are currently not within the matrix of sites of the NNR but with restoration works they are likely to become a stronghold with reedbeds and wet woodland.

It cannot be estimated how much Fenscape has trailblazed a path across England, for a new generation of National Nature Reserves. For example, it has changed practices within the structures of Natural England. NNR Flashes of Wigan and Leigh was declared in May 2022 but not purely around rare wildlife. It is based on the potential for wildlife and people. In the future our national treasure NNRs, will become exemplars for meaningful co-production with local people and interested volunteers and change the way we view nature conservation forever.

Lessons learned?

The project at Pennington Flash and improvement works on the island did not fully go to plan because the underwater level was not stable enough. With the advent of the Environment Act 2021 and new legislation around Biodiversity Net Gain one of the originally envisaged projects could not go ahead in the time frame of the Heritage Lottery Funded programme.

Photographic Evidence



Water channel in the reedbed at Amberswood visible from satellite imagery



Bed Lowering at Bryn Marsh, Wigan Flashes



Slow the Flow at Bickershaw Country Park



Willow tit management workshop

Funding Partners

