



FRIENDS OF RAWCLIFFE MEADOWS

The Last Annual Report (2019)

INTRODUCTION

Rawcliffe Meadows, covers more than nearly 18 hectares (around 44 acres) of the Clifton floodplain on the northern outskirts of York and has been managed for conservation since 1990. It was notified by Natural England as a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI), along with Clifton Ings, in September 2013. The site is owned by the Environment Agency and leased to Sustrans, the cycle track operator. It is managed by Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows (FoRM), a voluntary group belonging to the York Natural Environment Trust CIO (YNET).

As well as providing access to open countryside for local people, Rawcliffe Meadows is managed as a traditional Ings flood meadow under the Environmental Stewardship scheme. This is the twenty-ninth and final Annual Report of the Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows, summarising our work since 1990.

Website: <http://rawcliffemeadows.wordpress.com/>

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/rawcliffemeadows>

Policy Statement by Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows, October 2019

Those Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows present at a meeting in November 2018 agreed that “we do not wish to be involved in any mitigation where we consider the proposals inadequate, inappropriate or under-funded.”

As the approved planning application stands the proposals are exactly that and there is nothing in any of the documents about how the remaining parts of the site will be managed and funded into the future.

On that basis the Friends again met in October 2019, following the Planning Committee approval, and knowing that the Environment Agency (EA) cost/benefit analysis is barely viable (that being given as the reason why they have ignored alternative construction methodologies and routes) we are confirmed in the view that the EA are not to be trusted in the delivery of a full and long-term mitigation as they have neither the will, ability, knowledge or budget to deliver it after damaging what will be hectares of historic SSSI.

We will not engage with substandard mitigation in order to burnish the EA's public image. We made a clear offer to work with them on the mitigation if we were satisfied with the method and they chose to ignore this.

The Friends will carry on superficially maintaining, as necessary, those parts of the site presumed to be unaffected by works until such time as the EA commence work and the Environmental Stewardship is cancelled under *force majeure*. There was no wish to ask volunteers to expend further effort after the EA had ignored nearly 30 years of work.

It was also agreed that the Friends were unwilling to take any part in the ‘advisory’ board as this would have no control over ensuring the site was mitigated, restored to previous condition or looked after until such time as it was.

HISTORY

Some of the key events and management activities since 1990.

1990/1991

In 1990, with the development of the York to Beningbrough cycle track, the National Rivers Authority (NRA) sought to encourage the site's use for nature conservation and quiet recreation. A management plan was drawn up by York Natural Environment Trust (YNET) and the Greater York Countryside Project, a locally-based volunteer group Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows was set up at the beginning of 1991 to manage conservation work. The work really started on the 30th December 1990 with a tree planting session organized for the field boundary at the north end. This was repeated on the weekend of the 23/24th February at the southern boundary, just before the area was flooded. A public meeting was held at Clifton Hospital on February 13th to publicly launch the Park with around 50 people present. The plans for the area were outlined and copies of the management report distributed. Surprisingly few people who attended made the effort to get involved subsequently, but we have a stable management group, four of whom are still involved in 2019. Grassland management continues. Two colonies of Tansy Beetles were identified.

1992

Still disposing of the hay crop despite much weed control. The New Meadow was in creation by sowing green hay from Clifton Ings. The Pond was now settling down and fenced off to keep dogs from poaching the banks and trees were planted along the boundary with the Sports Club. The Copse was planted up to replace the dead Elms. At that point some 2300 trees had been planted across Rawcliffe Meadows. The laying of the Ings Dyke hedge commenced. Grassland management, including invasive weed control, continues.

1993

A further Tansy Beetle colony, by the Pond, was identified. We were the Senior Winner in the Community Section of the Golden Sheaf Environmental Action Award sponsored by Ryedale District Council and the Ryedale Mercury. Grassland management continues.

1994

A fourth Tansy Beetle location found adjacent to New Meadow. Cricket Field Copse was created with some 220 shrubs and trees. A further 150 shrubs were planted on the Reservoir Basin banks. A further stretch of the Ings Dyke hedge was laid. Scrapes were started in the Reservoir Basin and grassland management continues.

1995

Roy Crossley's first invertebrate survey revealed 27 bugs, 15 beetles and 180 different flies, some of which were relatively rare. The first year of a small profit for the hay crop! A further section of the Ings Dyke hedge was laid, more trees were planted and further willow coppicing.

1996

As Rawcliffe Meadows became established a variety of training events and talks were held on and off site along with pond dips for the younger ones. Two Harvest Mouse nests were discovered. Nine additional plants were added to the already extensive list. Great efforts are made in grassland management including weed control. The pools in the Reservoir Basin were enlarged.

1997

More new plant species added to the list making a total of 226. A total of 456 beetle species were recorded in a survey including a number of uncommon and rare ones. 23 species of bird were thought to have bred including Grey Partridge Skylark, Stock Dove and Treecreeper. A Water Vole Training Day witnessed great activity along the Ings Dyke and the Yorkshire Mammal Group considered it to be of regional importance,

1998

The Environment Agency accidentally scraped half of the main Pond but compensated by providing six new scrapes in the Reservoir Basin. Developments at the former Hospital site and the Park & Ride caused disturbance, along with a damp summer that produced an epidemic of Ragwort that had to be pulled by hand.

1999

The Park and Ride development provided new fencing and a new scrape and we appeared in Bird Watching magazine as a top Yorkshire site. Harvest Mouse nests were again found and Water Voles again were populous. The Cornfield was presenting good numbers of overwintering birds but it was expected that the Council tree planting would affect ground-nesting and feeding ones (which it did). To date 63 aquatic beetles were recorded including 13 Nationally Scarce ones.

2000

Our new leaflet was printed. On the 2nd June an unseasonal flood occurred with levels up to the top of the flood bank. A damp July messed up the hay cut and removal. This was followed by a massive November flood. The tree planting carried out at the outset along the southern boundary and in Cricket Field Copse showed their value for nesting birds. Council contractors made a mess of the Cornfield management doing work at the wrong times! Rawcliffe Meadows was identified as one of the ten most important sites for water beetles in Yorkshire. The summer flooding appeared to have affected the increasing Tansy Beetle population. The New Meadow, eight years on,

had become a splendid wildflower site. The new management of the Cornfield revealed a diverse arable flora with nationally scarce species being identified.

2001

For the third year in a row the EA messed up the hay cut. More nest boxes were erected in the Copse and management work was carried out on the hedges and trees planted at the outset. Water Voles were still active. The Cornfield recorded good numbers of a wide variety of birds as a result of supplementary feeding to compensate for the management issues. A Lapland Bunting became the rarest bird recorded to date. Three to five pairs of Skylarks bred in the Cornfield. Four new water beetles were identified bringing a total of almost 20, along with two new plant species.

2002

The Internal Drainage Board flailed the laid Ings Dyke hedge making it not stock proof which halted the spring grazing. Dog poo bags became a noticeable nuisance and thirteen sacks of rubbish were collected at the northern entrance. Travellers and ravers also caused substantial littering. A new management plan was produced along with a new Countryside Stewardship agreement where we also took over the Cornfield. The EA left the bank cutting to Sustrans which was an absolute failure. To cap it all a Water Vole survey revealed that the IDB's works had driven off the previously important population. The Cornfield continued to demonstrate good bird numbers and variety with 40 plus Skylark in January. Thirteen species of dragonfly had now been recorded and a further new water beetle added to the list, along with two further plants.

2003

Further planting of large numbers of hedging shrubs. Two broods of Skylark reared in the Cornfield with at least six spring territories. There was a noticeable recovery of the Tree Sparrow population.

2004

Further hedging and coppicing carried out along with a lot of invasive weed control. Worst summer for 13 years caused problems with hay cutting, turning and removal. An autumn flood resulted in only a short aftermath grazing spell. 244 Tansy Beetles were recorded in five locations across the site. Good bird numbers recorded along with some new invertebrate records.

2005

A great deal of flood debris required removing. 37 more nest boxes went into the Copse as a part of 'Save Our Sparrows'. The site received a Yorkshire Wildlife Trust/Power Conservation Award to be spent on producing more Tansy plants but IDB maintenance works destroyed populations along Blue Beck. The perennial weed issue in the Cornfield appeared to be under control finally. A large number of bird records this year with four pairs of Skylark breeding

2006

We were recording our work with BBC Radio York along with appearing on BBC Look North promoting the Tansy Beetle population. Additional plants had been grown on by Brunswick Nursery and these were planted in select locations. We cleared scrapes in the Reservoir Basin, planted brambles to cover wood piles and block desire lines. Unfortunately the hay cut and removal was a disaster and arsonists burnt large sections of the barrier bank. Annual meetings with the EA were supposed to commence. Delays by the contractor in managing the Cornfield probably stopped Skylark nesting and trespassing dog walkers there disturbed overwintering birds, otherwise bird numbers remained healthy.

2007

Heavy flooding and torrential rain throughout the year meant that work parties focused on clearing the debris, including from the Cornfield. The aftermath grazing was halted due to an outbreak of Bluetongue and a ban on cattle movement. A breeding bird survey reported that three pairs of Skylark had nested in the Cornfield producing at least a brood each which was good news. Good and varied bird records were made through the year. Brown Argus and Marbled White were first recorded on the site bringing the site count to 24 species. A moth survey in July recorded 60 species including a number of notable ones.

2008

This year's focus was on trees with the Field Maples at the north, which had been planted by us at the outset, being brought down to hedge height and the Pond hazels also being coppiced. Lots of Gorse was also planted on the Country Park boundary to encourage Yellowhammers and Linnets. Work on the Copse Meadow commenced after many years of seeing it degraded – the main reason was to provide top soil for the river bank repairs! Summer flooding affected hay removal and work on the Copse Meadow. An EA contractor, whilst mechanically digging a ditch in the Reservoir Basin, also dug the first Water Vole scrape, which we planted with Phragmites for Reed Buntings and interesting invertebrates were populating it before the year end. The Floodplain Meadows Partnership visited Rawcliffe Meadows and Clifton Ings. Good numbers and varieties of birds were recorded across the site.

2009

Further work on hedges and interplanting them, along with clearing the Reservoir Basin scrapes. The barrier bank hay had to be removed by ourselves as a result of EA's inability to work cooperatively. More new invertebrate species were identified. A bat survey of the Ings Dyke hedgerow revealed lots of activity. The Cornfield remains an important winter roost and feeding location where large numbers of Corn Buntings are amongst the visitors and even greater numbers of Tree Sparrows. The Floodplain Meadows Partnership confirmed the main meadow as MG4 grassland. For the first time in years the hay cut and removal worked which along with a lack of flooding allowed the cattle to graze into December which should have improved

botanical quality. Much work was also done on the Copse Meadow including the planting of more than 1000 wildflower plugs.

2010

Snow and inclement weather delayed volunteering until March when the Country Park hedge was coppiced and further interplanted. Ten additional nest boxes were added to the Copse. Good numbers of birds were, as usual, recorded. The contractors working on the Cornfield failed as is becoming usual to do the contracted works when they should have but it remains a popular bird habitat. Unfortunately the winter weather seems to have reduced Skylark numbers, instead Lapwings took up the slack! Further work was established by the Floodplain Meadows Partnership but even this was affected by the weather.

2011

Flood damage and debris was an issue again, along with vandalism, as were sewage leaks. A new website was created by Mike Bray. Poor weather delayed the hay cut and the EA failed to cut the banks so the cattle were put on early to compensate but the beasts won't eat the weeds. The Environmental Stewardship was renewed after a lot of hard work by Martin and includes revised management of the Cornfield Reserve. Good numbers of birds were recorded. White-letter Hairstreak butterflies were sighted by the Copse

2012

More wet weather interfering with management and creating debris to be removed. Quarterly meetings with the EA started. The tansy plants in New Meadow were fenced off but in July we found a sewage pipe had leaked flooding it but Yorkshire Water agreed to fund the restoration of it. We started planting Elm saplings as a part of the Great British Elm Experiment. Further tree sparrow nest boxes were erected. Good numbers and variety of birds reported.

2013

The eastern boundary of New Meadow was layed. Flood debris was again problematic. Seed collection was carried out for plants to be propagated at Brunswick Organic Nursery to repopulate the New Meadow following its stripping after the sewage incident. We held our first stall at the Insect Festival. Hay from Clifton Ings was rolled out onto the New Meadow to help restore it. The area and Clifton Ings were designated by Natural England as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Good records and variety of birds were as usual reported and this year the Necklace Ground Beetle was added to the invertebrate list following a survey that added 178 new beetle species making 540 in total.

2014

Lots of scrub management and tansy patch preparation. New Meadow trees were pollarded to reduce shading of the tansy plants. A lot of brash and debris needed clearing but we also managed to plant a lot of new tansy patches along with some

cowslips in the Copse Meadow. We started creation of the Cornfield Grassland. The restoration of the New Meadow, following the sewage leak, was nearing completion. Rawcliffe Meadows remained one of three important sites for Tansy Beetles. More tansy was planted to the east of the Pond but monitoring proved that lacking the usual preparation it doesn't establish.

2015

Plaques were placed on site to remember Bob Edwards, who had been instrumental in setting up the Friends, along with Enid Ord, one of the Friends, who had both died. Further coppicing of trees at the Pond took place to reduce shading of the tansy plants. We now joined Facebook! We were awarded Flagship Pond Site status by the Freshwater Habitats Trust as a result of the quality of the wetlands. Two new interpretation boards were erected by us thanks to funding from the Environment Agency and Yorkshire Water. More tansy was planted on the New Meadow bank and Blue Beck Copse hedge had 20 blackthorn interplanted. Unfortunately the EA cut back the Ings Dyke hedge savagely and were asked to fence a section to maintain it as stock proof. The bee bank in the Cornfield Arable was started. Two workshops on "Restoring and re-creating species-rich grassland" were fully booked amongst a range of public events we held. We received a breeding bird survey from Martin that we had commissioned to help with management. Work continued, with hay spreading, on the new Cornfield Grassland. Our new shed was delivered and unfortunately broken into later in the year! The Yorkshire Mammal Group held a mammal trapping session that included finding lots of Water Vole droppings along with five Common Shrews, three Wood Mice, two Water Shrews and a Bank Vole. More wildflower planting was carried out in the Reservoir Basin. A further 200 tansy were planted on the New Meadow bank in November. Unfortunately heavy city-wide flooding left the site inundated for a lengthy period. A total of 2,248 Tansy Beetles were recorded on the 24th August. 4 Necklace Ground Beetles were captured confirming a well-established breeding population in Copse Meadow. The total beetle species for the Meadows is now 584 or 14.3% of the total British list! 54 spikes of Northern Marsh Orchid were now counted in the Reservoir Basin. Corn Marigold, Corn Mint and Corn Spurrey are all well recorded in the Cornfield Arable.

2016

More work was done on the Country Park hedge to develop the habitat. There was a big flood debris clear up in January with Muslim volunteers from London helping too, this was followed by more work in April as the flooding finally subsided. The first two of the Barn Owl boxes were erected in February. A large amount of tansy planting was carried out near the Pond and within the fenced-off section of the Ings Dyke nearby with the help of Yorkshire Wildlife Trust volunteers. There was also much wildflower planting in the Cornfield Grassland. In her role as Tansy Beetle Species Champion Rachael Maskell MP visited the Pond with representatives from Buglife. With the help of Buglife's Urban Buzz project we started work on the big extension to the 'bee bank' in the Cornfield during which a piece of 2nd Century CE Roman pottery was discovered. Tansy Beetle numbers were reduced in the autumn presumably due to the weather. The EA started 'consultation' on their five year City of York flood risk plan. The flooding encouraged wetland birds to appear in the first four months of the year along with the usual good numbers of Linnets, Tree Sparrow,

Reed Buntings and Yellowhammer in the Cornfield. There were also 24 Stock Doves in the autumn. 109 species of moth were recorded in a trapping in June. Tubular Water-dropwort extended its territory in the Reservoir Basin.

2017

The management of the Reservoir Basin blackthorn is an annual task to maintain the orchids. The Country Park hedge again received additional plants. Having made the EA aware of the minimal mitigation required for development on a SSSI we realised how tight the cost/benefit of the proposed works were. Further tansy planting on the bank of New Meadow means it is probably now at capacity given the shading from the trees. A major theft occurred at the shed resulting in an insurance claim for replacement tools. Martin presented at the Floodplain Meadows Conference in York and we hosted conference attendees on the Meadows. The publication of Martin's "Deep Meadows and Transparent Floods" gave us the opportunity for a guided walk. The third Barn Owl box was finally erected in Copse Meadow. Another regular task that of cutting back the Phragmites and pulling Typha from the Water Vole scrape took place in December. Good numbers and variety of birds used the Cornfield. A pollinator workshop with Steve Falk was held by Urban Buzz that identified, amongst others, the Red-tailed Cuckoo-bee on site. Copse Meadow and New Meadow continued to develop and were categorised as MG4 by the FMP in 2017.

2018

The eastern hedge of Blue Beck Copse was laid over a series of weekends. Another well-attended workshop was held on "Restoring and creating wildlife-rich grassland". Friends got together to consider the suspected EA plans for the Barrier Bank and establish a position. As with other years many of the regularly-needed tasks such as managing blackthorn in the Reservoir Basin, reducing encroachment on the areas where tansy is planted, managing the Water Vole scrape, cutting the Pond compound, managing the Cricket Field Copse and Blue Beck Copse and managing vegetation around the bee bank were held as well. A record number of 51 Stock Doves were counted on one occasion in the Cornfield. A breeding bird survey of the whole site was carried out on behalf of the EA in preparation for their works.

2019

With the EA's consultants Jacobs having submitted the two planning applications on the 24th December 2018 we just had to wait until the consultation process started on the 100 plus documents. There was much contention as the ecological work was poor and the design damaging to the SSSI and trees, with little concern being given to the Cornfield Reserve. The mitigation plan went through a couple of iterations and remaining incomplete by the time the EA pushed City of York into having it at a Planning Committee on 12th September where it was approved with a small majority.

Throughout 2019 we were spent a great deal of time writing objections to the EA documents submitted with the planning application and encouraging others to follow suit. We campaigned to councillors but the May election changed the Council political structure again!

The EA cut the Barrier Bank, and others along the Ouse, in mid-May leaving the arisings in situ for a week or more, having gained a derogation to do the cut and removal in April. This meant there was minimal regrowth in July for the annual cut and wasting a massive amount of hay. Complaints were made and feeble excuses received.

We carried on managing the site but were wary of working in areas that were likely to be lost in the development. We regularly managed the two main Tansy Beetle areas and the first Tansy Beetle was recorded on the 20th March with the mild spell but by 27th August when we did the annual count we found the weather had encouraged an early hibernation. Nothing as fickle as a Tansy Beetle.

We also looked after the bee bank, Cricket Field Copse, the Water Vole scrape along with putting up three Tree Sparrow nest boxes, on posts with baffles, below the allotments which were funded by York Ornithological Club.

Deep Meadows and Transparent Floods – The Story of the Ouse Ings

There are some copies still available of “Deep Meadows and Transparent Floods – The Story of the Ouse Ings” the story of the floodplain meadows along the River Ouse as it runs through the Vale of York. The Ouse Ings have a rich social history, reflecting the high economic value of these meadows to the local community, as well as a rich and diverse wildlife assemblage.

This significant piece of work sees a substantive amount of research incorporated into a very readable format, which makes available to scholars and the lay people alike, fascinating information about the floodplain meadows of the River Ouse.

This book was published and financially supported by the Carstairs Countryside Trust in May 2017 with funds from Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows and the Floodplain Meadows Partnership. It is a glossy 100 A4 page paperback with beautiful colour illustrations.

<https://rawcliffemeadows.wordpress.com/2017/05/11/deep-meadows-and-transparent-floods-the-story-of-the-ouse-ings/>

WILDLIFE REPORT

Rawcliffe Meadows 2019: Wildlife report

With so much work being done in writing objections to the planning application there was little time, energy or will to monitor the wildlife during 2019.

A highlight included the sighting of a large Grass Snake by Gary Kay when cutting hay, which was unfortunately cut up by the mower.

The survey work by the EA's consultants Jacobs identified Great Crested Newts in several ponds in the Reservoir Basin. There were also reports from the allotment holders that they were hibernating on their plots.

FINANCES

The Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows (FoRM) finances are held and managed within those of York Natural Environment Trust (YNET) Charity Number 1097696, Company Number 4712997 whose financial year commences 1st April each year.

The hay crop is cut, turned, baled and collected in an arrangement with a local farmer in return for which the Friends receive assistance with management where agricultural machinery is involved. The hay crop in 2019 saw 78 large bales being collected, as there is now the Cornfield Grassland in addition. Unfortunately the EA's mid-May cut substantially reduced the volume of grass that might have been cut and hence they hay crop. The same farmer also grazes cattle upon the site, in accordance Environmental Stewardship which in 2019 was between 29th July and 14th October, which fulfilled our six week grazing requirement. In return for grazing rights and the hay crop Gary Kay secures the boundaries, along with trimming hedges and other agricultural tasks as required.

The approximate number of volunteer hours spent doing specific tasks on the site in 2019 was as follows:

Organization	No. Of Volunteer Hours
Friends of Rawcliffe Meadows (FoRM)	264
Bootham School	20
Total	284

Based upon the standard methodology, the value of volunteer hours on Rawcliffe Meadows in 2019 was at least £8.21 (National Minimum Living Wage) x 284 = £ 2,331.64 plus free ecological advice worth at least £1000, making **a subtotal of £ 3331.64**. An estimated additional 720 volunteer hours were spent by members of FoRM in ad-hoc repairs, managing grazing, litter and dog-bag picking, bird-feeding, supervision, site meetings regarding site operations, preparing grant applications, along with checking and reporting problems, and also writing reports including this annual one, along with web posts and Facebook posts and emails to the Friends. **So probably well over £ 9000 worth of volunteer hours** spent on the site in 2019.

The highest number of volunteers to turn out for a regular work party was 9 (on the 14th April to manage the tansy on New Meadow banks. The average turnout in 2019 was 5.5.

It is estimated that since 1990 there has been £292,000 of volunteer effort spent on restoring and maintaining Rawcliffe Meadows.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Website Statistics - <http://rawcliffmeadows.wordpress.com/> which has 32 followers

	2019	2018	2017	2016	2015	2014	2013	2012
Page views	5052 (28 posts)	4228 (34 posts)	4641 (37 posts)	5104 (46 posts)	7986 (87 posts)	5572 (73 posts)	5074 (110 posts)	1814 (28 posts)
Visitors	2566	2094	2146	2572	3102	2037	1475	32

Facebook - <https://www.facebook.com/rawcliffmeadows/>

Total page likes – 234 & 256 Follows

There are 52 email addresses on our circulation list.

A Map of Rawcliffe Meadows (with main features mentioned in report identified)



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This being the final report we would like to thank all those who volunteered or supported our efforts in taking Rawcliffe Meadows from poached pasture to SSSI along with creating the amazing mosaic of habitat that was created from 1990. We also treasure the memory of those volunteers who have died in that period and for whom we hoped this would be a living memorial.