White Peak Farmers – Going strong for 10 years!

Ten years of Nature Friendly Farming and Working Together



White Peak Farmers, Graham Prince and Alan Simpson help with seed collecting for meadow restoration using the group's seed harvester (photo credit Ann Cantrell).

White Peak Farmers is celebrating it's 10-year anniversary!

Ten years running as a farm facilitation group gives a unique opportunity to look back and reflect on the successes and impact, as well as some of the challenges of facilitating collaboration.

The group first started out following a conversation between five farmers and their local advisor around a kitchen table in the summer of 2015. The conversation centred around forming a farmer group which would be supported by a dedicated 'facilitator' through a new grant called the Facilitation Fund.

The Facilitation Fund was innovative and ambitious. It aimed to get farmers and landowners to work together and join up their land management so that greater environmental benefits could be achieved. This was to be aided by providing advice to groups of farmers rather than individuals, to encourage cooperation, connectivity and landscape impact.

White Peak Farmers, located on the southern tip of the Peak District's White Peak near to Ashbourne, was one of the first successful groups to be awarded funding from the Facilitation Fund back in 2015, which, at that time, was managed by Natural England. It was the smallest group to apply but the

funding panel saw its potential and environmental focus on species-rich grassland, conservation concern species and scope to connect up protected sites, such as Sites of Special Scientific Interest (SSSIs), and the group took full advantage of the opportunity.

Although Rural Payments Agency now administer the funding, support for groups has had a constant over the years in the form of Brian McDonald, Senior Adviser and Facilitation Fund Manager at Natural England, whose vision and drive has embedded the concept of facilitation and collaboration in the minds of policy-makers and Government, which has been key to its continuation.

Since it began, White Peak Farmers has grown, now having twenty-two members whose joint land covers over 1400 ha and is in its third phase of facilitation funding.

The group has helped its members by providing free advice on environmental schemes, grants, managing land to benefit species and restoring habitats. It has also supported work on farms and brought in funding for farming and environmental projects.

It has helped at a pivotal time in farming during the rather tumultuous Post-Brexit changes to farming payments and move towards 'Public Money for Public Goods'. It has helped farms prepare for, and navigate, the new Environmental Land Management (ELM) schemes and transition into the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), important for many farms in the area to replace lost income from the Basic Payment scheme, which is being phased out beginning in 2024.

Since it started, the group has helped nature to recover across its collective holding and has delivered bespoke interventions on 67 ha of farmland – such as wildflower meadow restoration, creation of scrapes and wetlands, and enhancement of woodlands. New ditches and 15 ponds have been created or improved, and 7 km of hedgerows have been created or enhanced through planting hedgerow trees.

The group has put together project ideas which has led to it bringing in over £160,500 in external funding on top of the £190,000 it's received from the facilitation fund to run the group and hold events.

These projects are not seen as one off, they are part of long-term objectives to achieve resilient, high quality and species-rich habitats that also work for farmers and their farm enterprises. The group are continuing to improve these areas, as well as developing new ideas.

The group runs activities from farm walks and open days to bringing in expert speakers, having covered topics from the benefits of dung beetles, creating healthy soil to the benefits of diverse swards, carbon calculators, business advice and farm diversification. The group has a strong emphasis on providing advice on producing food sustainably and providing environmental benefits, as well as emphasising the importance of personal and family wellbeing. Advice on environmental schemes and achieving greater financial security are key topics. It has run over 105 such events over its ten-year history, engaging farmers, landowners, conservationists, volunteers and the general public.

The group has always been guided by farmers and landowners, which is central to its success and is on the cusp of gaining Charitable status, a decision ratified by its steering committee, made up of its farmer members, to bring greater assurance and long-term future for the group.

Volunteers have been important too, and a range of volunteer groups such as the Peak District National Park Conservation Volunteers through to Fit4Work who work with offenders, to community helpers, have supported many of the group's projects. Collectively, volunteers have contributed almost a year to group projects and have helped carry out activities that otherwise would not have happened, such as dew pond restoration, hedge planting, collecting wildflower seed, growing wildflowers and planting

them out into sites (volunteers have grown over 10,000 wildflowers and 500 trees which have been planted out to help restore diversity in meadows, woodlands and hedges).



Peak Park Conservation Volunteers undertaking dew pond restoration (photo credit Ann Cantrell).

White Peak Farmers may be the first group to set up its own wildflower and tree nursery – aided by volunteers and funding from Severn-Trent Water, Staffordshire Moorlands District Council, Species Survival Fund and Farming in Protected Landscapes – and with the ambition to use it to help restore farmland habitats but also to create opportunities for selling into nature markets and offering an alternative income stream, which is something the group want to build on. The group also has its own brush harvester to collect wildflower seed in larger quantities.

The impact of working together has revealed clear and positive changes to people and wildlife.

New locations where uncommon wildflowers such as Saw-wort and Meadow Thistle are now establishing. Conservation concern butterflies such as White Letter Hairstreak and Wall Brown butterfly have had targeted interventions to benefit them such as planting of disease resistant elm trees, creating ‘butterfly banks’ and ensuring nectar sources and food plants are available.



Butterfly bank located in a restored wildflower meadow planted up for additional nectar sources (photo credit Ann Cantrell).

Numerous bird species are benefitting from the better quality and joined up habitat including Skylark, Lapwing and Curlew to Sand Martin, Swallow and Swift and one of the UK's most threatened birds, Willow Tit. Birds are being sighted on farms for the first time or newly breeding – Sedge Warbler, Yellowhammer, Great White Egret, Water Rail and Hobby. Brown Hare is being sighted in greater frequency and across more farms.



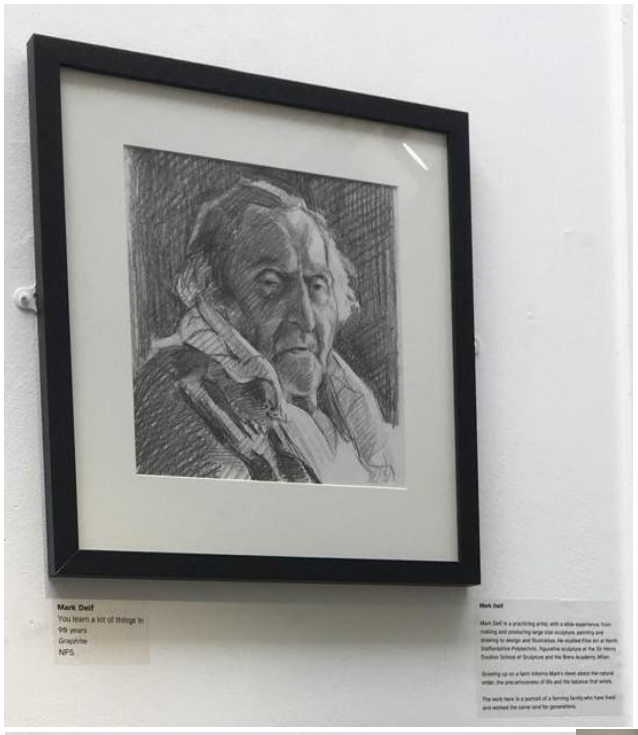
Breeding sedge warbler (photo credit Graham Prince).

One of the strengths of the facilitation group is its emphasis on building connections and relationships. The group is very much about people, community, working together and supporting farms. It is helping to reduce isolation among farmers through providing regular opportunities for farmers to meet up. White Peak Farmers celebrates its members' achievements and aims to be a welcoming and warm group and additional social occasions strengthen its community foundations.



An invitation to a celebration inspired by nature, farming and community (design by Mark Delf).

Connections with local artists, Louise Adams and Mark Delf of Stockton Brook Studios have helped engage, inspire and interpret land management and family farming for wider audiences – the inspiration has been reciprocated and captured through the medium of art.







We are Jacobites – a study of a three generations from a family farm by artist, Mark Delf, (photo credit Ann Cantrell).

The group is also working to find ways for farms to become more resilient – whether that's dealing with the changes to the agricultural sector, diversifying income or from the challenges that climate change is bringing.



Holistic grazing approaches and pastures with trees are helping farms to adapt to climate change, (photo credit Ann Cantrell).

At its height, the Facilitation Fund had 130 groups across England, with more than 4000 farmers engaged. The fund has acted to seed an astonishing number of groups and the approach has demonstrated clear benefits to natural and social capital, reducing isolation and increasing trust among farmers while delivering positive outcomes for the environment.

With the recent closure of the Facilitation Fund White Peak Farmers and other farmer groups are faced with an uncertain future. Facilitation and collaboration require long-term funding to safeguard benefits and to continue to make positive steps forward for people, farming and nature. The sector also needs some certainty and stability for environmental schemes, which are the key tool for incentivising environmental stewardship and sustainable land management.

White Peak Farmers is demonstrating that nature friendly farming and sustainable land management can offer a future for the UK's wildlife as well as providing people with the basic essentials: food, healthy soils, clean water and clean air as well as helping to buffer us against the extremes of climate change, by reducing flooding and the impacts of drought, and importantly offer significant social, cultural and wellbeing benefits.

The group could not have achieved so much without the support of countless people. White Peak Farmers sends thanks to all who have been involved and remembers those that are no longer with us. This article is dedicated to Wilf Ward, a truly special, founder member who continues to inspire the group.

For information about the group, how to join or get involved, visit our website www.whitepeakfarmers.org.uk or social media pages. Email info@whitepeakfarmers.org.uk or call 07729101574.

Membership is free and open to all farmers and landowners in the White Peak, and nearby areas. Membership brings many benefits, including opportunities to connect with other farmers, free advice and potential to access funding for environmental and farming projects. Members also help to manage and run the group, meaning farmers are at the core of everything we do.