

The Northern Forest:
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Park Farm, Leathley

Grow Back Greener Scheme: Woodland Creation with biodiversity at heart
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Photo Credit: Jack Hirst



England Trees Action Plan
Delivered through the Nature for Climate Fund

Grow Back Greener Scheme: Woodland Creation with biodiversity at heart

At Park Farm, Leathley, challenges have been turned into opportunities for nature on a new woodland site, through careful, collaborative design. Landowner Alistair Wood, with support from the Woodland Trust, is turning this 11.25-hectare field in Wharfedale into native woodland with a variety of habitats that maximise the opportunities for wildlife to thrive, while minimising the use of plastic.

“It has always been a passion of mine to have more woodland, I love woodland.”

Alistair Wood



Photo Credit: Sam Jordan

The land at Park Farm was fairly wet pasture, sloping down to the River Wharfe’s floodplain, and dotted with existing mature trees. Lying in rural farmland not far from Otley, north of Leeds, it is at the heart of the area covered by the Northern Forest, a visionary partnership to increase tree cover across a large swathe of land stretching from Liverpool to Hull. The new woodland was funded through Grow Back Greener, a grant programme funded by Defra and administered by the Woodland Trust in the Northern Forest.

Alistair also decided he wanted to put the scheme through the Woodland Trust’s carbon offer, as a way of increasing the revenue from the site. This did not affect the design, which was led with a focus on biodiversity.

The land is complex, and features that had to be considered included a large gas pipeline crossing the site, a public footpath, wet and waterlogged areas, a badger sett, and mature, open-grown trees. A breeding bird survey was carried out and showed some minimal wading bird activity in nearby fields. While these features made the design more complex, the complexity allowed for a more biodiversity friendly planting, with a greater variety of habitats and structural heterogeneity.

“I was always keen to make the woodland look and feel as diverse and non-uniform as possible.”

Alistair Wood



Photo Credit: Jack Hirst



Photo Credit: Paul Barker

The mature trees provide a head start for the new wood in developing “old growth” features such as standing deadwood, and this increases the biodiversity of the new woodland. To protect these trees, it was proposed to leave large open space around selected trees, and then the area around this open space was planted with flowering shrub species and oak saplings, encouraging the existing trees to continue to mature as open grown field trees, and also providing nectar and pollen sources close to the trees.

Since Alistair was keen that he would be able to get around the site on foot, the design included a number of internal paths and rides that would give access to every compartment and included wider paths to allow vehicles access for future management.

Due to the proximity of breeding waders, ecologists suggested a corner of the site be planted only as scrub, to minimise the perching points and cover for predators that larger trees would cast in this area. This fitted well with initial thoughts which had earmarked that area to be scrubby.

To meet Alistair’s aspirations to minimise plastic, deer fencing was installed, with rabbit netting, and internal high seats to help manage deer, should the fence line be breached. Seven raptor perches were installed across the site in areas where there were few other perching points, to help birds of prey such as kestrels and barn owls to manage the vole numbers that may boom and might damage the unprotected sapling trees. Because there is less certainty of planting success without plastic protection, the density of trees in the design was doubled and the grant agreement was altered to allow for up to 50 per cent loss of the trees, since Grow Back Greener has the flexibility to allow for this.

“It was an easy choice between using plastic guards, or a deer fence with no guards. The visual impact of the fence is so much less than a field of tree tubes.”

Alistair Wood

The planting design maximises opportunities for wildlife, with 11 compartments including different areas of open space. These encompassed everything from wet woodland, scrub, dense woodland, stands of oak, open wetland areas and dry south facing unplanted slopes. This diversity will allow for a great number of habitats to establish, due to the varied species compositions and the structural variation of the different compartment densities. We emphasised getting the right tree into the right place.

Key facts

The site is 11.25-hectares of ex rough grazing pasture, of which 7.18-hectares is planted and 4.07-hectares were left unplanted.

13800 trees and shrubs were planted by hand on site, including over 25 species within the design, almost entirely without plastic guards.

At Leathley, as well as planting trees, we aimed to maximise opportunities for wildlife, for example through creating ten ponds and soil mounds, and leaving deadwood on site.

All the planting, construction and management work costs were 100% covered by the Grow Back Greener fund, as well as providing suitable funding for maintenance for the next 10 years.



Photo Credit: Sam Jordan

Further features were added to increase diversity of habitat. Before the fencing and planting started, Alistair created a number of soil mounds (around 1m high) and adjacent scrapes across the site. Some of these scrapes have since filled up with water. This has created a number of different habitats including temporary and permanent ponds, and exposed soil. There is also a lot of fallen deadwood due to an old ash with ash die-back falling. The wood was moved inside the deer fence and will provide habitat and refuge for a great number of species, especially invertebrates. Deadwood is often absent from new woodlands.

Once Alistair was happy with the design, the scheme was put through the Forestry Commission's statutory checks and was approved. All the initial works, including fencing and tree planting, began in January 2024 and took four months to complete. Local community interest company YorGreenCIC planted the entire scheme by hand with no mechanical aid, as well as running volunteer days with corporate groups from organisations such as Lloyds Banking.

The Grow Back Greener grant provides maintenance funding, and the Woodland Trust provided maintenance advice. This is not prescriptive and allows flexibility to respond to how the trees and land develop over time. As well as surveys to monitor establishment of the trees, fixed point photography has been set up to track the visual changes on the site.

The Grow Back Greener funding and Alistair's vision and passion have combined to create the building blocks of a woodland and a landscape that we hope will soon be host to a broad array of wildlife and native flora, creating a hub of biodiversity.

To find out more about the Northern Forest or to get involved, visit: thenorthernforest.org.uk



Photo Credit: Jack Hirst

The Woodland Trust, Kempton Way, Grantham, Lincolnshire NG31 6LL.

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