

Long Preston Wet Grassland Project
Business & Development Plan Summary
2008 to 2011



Photo: courtesy of Adrian Shepherd



Background

The Long Preston Deeps Wet Grassland Project is a partnership between the RSPB, Natural England, the Environment Agency, the Yorkshire Dales Millennium Trust, North Yorkshire County Council, local landowners and the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority.

The Long Preston Deeps Wet Grassland Project was set up in 2004, with a formalised project group set up in April 2005. The project was intended to have a three year life (2004 – 2007). In mid 2007, a review of the current project concluded that there was a clear need to extend the project because:

- Elements of the 2004-07 work plan have not been completed due to slippage and delay in Environmental Stewardship rollout/ delivery
- There are desirable opportunities to expand the project to provide socio-economic benefits for the local area.
- There are desirable opportunities to develop the area's potential as an eco-tourism destination or stop-over for people.

Project area

Situated just to the west of the village of Long Preston and south of the town of Settle in the Craven District of North Yorkshire, the area known as Long Preston Deeps is located in the upper reaches of the River Ribble (see annex 1). The whole floodplain at this point is approximately 766 hectares.

The River Ribble (Long Preston Deeps) SSSI covers 162 hectares of the floodplain and is notified primarily for its unusual river morphology, breeding wader and botanical/ aquatic plant interest.

The wetland was formerly seen as an important natural resource for rushes, hay, wildfowl and the linen industry. Agricultural improvements from the 18th century drastically altered the landscape with extensive drainage and new field patterns leading to a highly diminished wetland habitat. Now falling economic returns and changes in agricultural policy are providing a new economic opportunity to enable habitat restoration as well as address the new imperative for flood control.

The project area has been identified as showing good potential for the re-creation and enhancement of lowland wet grassland, a high priority habitat for the RSPB and other conservation organisations. Whilst the floodplain floods extensively in winter, the extent of this flooding is limited by active drainage schemes. The amount of standing water in spring and early summer has decreased dramatically.

Breeding wading birds

The Long Preston Deeps area holds relatively high concentrations of breeding wading birds, when compared to those areas that have been surveyed in the adjacent Forest of Bowland AONB and Yorkshire Dales National Park. A 2003 breeding bird survey within the River Ribble (Long Preston Deeps) SSSI found that the site is primarily important for Snipe (8 pairs) and Redshank (9 pairs), but there are also breeding Yellow Wagtail (1 pair), Lapwing (7.5 pairs), Curlew (2.5 pairs) and Oystercatcher (5 pairs). Further research in 2007 outside the SSSI fields found a further 57 pairs – Curlew (13 pairs), Lapwing (16 pairs), Oystercatcher (21 pairs), Redshank (5 pairs) & Snipe (2 pairs). In addition 1, possibly 2 pairs of

Yellow wagtail were recorded. It should be noted that this is not evidence of breeding success and is not additional to the numbers found in 2003. It is estimated that the whole floodplain area could support 150 pairs of breeding wader, assuming that 150 hectares of wet grassland on the floodplain were brought into favourable management. A site becomes of regional importance for birds when 1% of more of the regional population of a species is found there.

Wintering birds and passage migrants

Extensive winter flooding in the southern part of the project area is important for wintering birds as well as for passage migrants as the site lies on a major East-West migration route. Research by local volunteer birders in the winter of 2006/2007 found peaks of up to 1380 Wigeon, 33 Shoveler, 294 Teal and 926 Lapwing. Regionally important numbers of Pintail (185 peak count) were also recorded.

Other species of note

A small population (5-6 pairs) of Tree Sparrows nest on the south eastern edge of the floodplain, near Cow Bridge. This important and isolated population are encouraged by supplementary winter feeding and the provision of nest boxes.

Plants

The River Ribble (Long Preston Deeps) SSSI is also notified for its range of aquatic river macrophytes such as spiked water milfoil, lesser pondweed and river water-crowfoot. The rare northern spike rush can also be found.

Policy context – What the project is helping deliver

- **Defra's Farmland Bird Public Service Agreement (PSA)** "*.....Reversing the long-term decline in the number of farmland birds by 2020, as measured annually against underlying trends.*"
- **UK BAP Targets** - The project will lead to positive restoration of the following UK Biodiversity Action Plan Priority Habitats: floodplain grazing marsh, fen, reedbed and rivers. It will also help the following UKBAP Priority Species: yellow wagtail, lapwing. The project will help deliver the **Craven BAP's** targets for fen and floodplain grazing marsh.
- The project is highlighted in the '**Yorkshire and Humber Wetland Feasibility Study**'¹ and the '**50 Year Wetland Vision**'² work as a key site for landscape-scale wetland restoration.
- **Water Framework Directive** - The River Ribble, flowing through Long Preston Deeps, is classified as 'at risk' of not meeting the WFDs morphology objectives. The proposed project work of restoring floodplain wet grassland will help bring it up to good status. The new wet grassland and water courses will provide habitat for aquatic plants and breeding fish, as well as breeding birds, and improve the nutrient load of the waters.
- **The Ribble Catchment Flood Management Plan** highlights that the flood risk management policy for Long Preston Deeps is '*take action to increase the frequency of flooding to deliver benefits locally or elsewhere*'. This supports the development of schemes which may constitute an overall flood risk reduction.
- **Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI)** - The River Ribble (Long Preston Deeps) SSSI has 66.89 hectares in 'unfavourable recovering' condition and 92.05 hectares in 'unfavourable no change' condition as at 1 January 2008. The project will work to bring the SSSI into 'favourable' condition.

¹ www.yhbf.org

² www.wetlandvision.org.uk

Aims & Objectives

Long term objectives (10-20 years)

The following objectives are based on those developed as part of the original project brief and the review carried out in 2007.

1. To promote and achieve wet grassland recovery for floodplain wildlife in a naturally dynamic floodplain. Long-term target of 500 hectares of wetland restoration/ creation³. Within 5 years, aim to have under management a contiguous block of 200 hectares at the southern end of the floodplain.
2. To develop and present sustainable opportunities for local businesses to 'exploit' the natural features of the floodplain
3. To promote and interpret the floodplain's wildlife spectacle to both local people and visitors.
4. To build a strong groundswell of support for the project with an appropriate range and variety of local partners and stakeholders
5. To forge strong links with complementary local initiatives.
6. To work closely with farmers to help them adapt their land management practices and meet the requirements of their agri-environment scheme agreements independently in the longer term
7. Through monitoring of birds, plants and habitat quality, the management can be monitored to ensure that favourable condition is being met.

Core Activities & Objectives

The project's core activities describe the work which needs to be done to achieve our long-term project objectives and to maintain our partnership

Core Activity 1 Establishing and maintaining a broad partnership.

- To keep our project going and on-track and to ensure that the partnership is informed and on-side.

Core Activity 2 Environmental Stewardship support and delivery

- To carry on our work to encourage farmers and land managers to manage their land in an extensive way to meet our wildlife objectives, principally using Environmental Stewardship. Support existing agreement holders to deliver their agreements through information exchange and through improving skills.
- To bring as much of the floodplain within the project area as possible into sympathetic management. Manage water levels and vegetation height and structure to provide wet grassland conditions which will support optimum densities of breeding wading birds.
- To return and maintain notified habitats and species within the River Ribble Long Preston Deeps SSSI to favourable condition.
- To ensure that management of the floodplain through the project is compatible with its potential use for flood risk management.
- To integrate these objectives with landscape, access and the historic environment.

³ Yorkshire and Humber Floodplain Feasibility Study

Core Activity 3 Development of visitor facilities and eco-tourism potential

- To develop and review a visitor/ local people strategy which will guide the work of the project in this area
- To engage the local community more fully with the project.
- To identify and develop low-key means for visitors to enjoy the Long Preston floodplain's wildlife spectacle and landscape
- To raise awareness and understanding of the floodplain's wildlife and management in an accessible way
- To promote eco-tourism opportunities for local businesses

Core Activity 4 Project representation, communication & advocacy

- Ensure that good news about the project is reported, raise the profile amongst key partners and funding bodies, and share best practice
- To devise a communications strategy
- To communicate information about project success to local and regional partners through a variety of media
- To report achievement of the project objectives through national fora eg. Biodiversity Action Reporting System (BARS).
- To proactively issue positive messages about the project's work and the benefits it will bring to wildlife and landscape so that the project receives positive publicity.

Vision for the Long Preston Floodplain

This vision encapsulates the PSG's views of a possible future situation on the Long Preston floodplain over the next **10-20 years**.

What would it look like?

- A mosaic of wetland habitats of wet grassland, pools, flushes and small areas of reedbeds, with extensive areas grazed predominantly by cattle.
- A predominately open landscape, with soil conditions suitable for breeding waders such as redshank, snipe and lapwing.
- Flocks of wintering ducks, waders and geese on shallow flooded land near the river.
- Watercourses rich in aquatic diversity supporting otters, dragonflies and aquatic plants.

How would it be managed?

LANDSCAPE AND NATURAL RESOURCES

- As a functioning, working landscape with farming at its heart.
- With extensive, varied grazing of wet grassland areas predominantly with cattle (especially in areas with reeds and rushes)
- Careful management of water levels through the year
- Effective use of the floodplain for flood risk management and biodiversity benefit

PEOPLE

- Using distinctive features in the landscape to benefit/sustain local communities, including opportunities for wildlife tourism and promotion of the area's rich archaeological heritage
- To support the continued recreational use of the site, including walking, fishing and birdwatching.
- Through monitoring of birds, plants and habitat quality, the management can be monitored to ensure that favourable condition is being met.

What would be the benefits?

- Creation of sustainable farming methods that benefit the local economy and the environment, through Environmental Stewardship and other mechanisms.
- A wetland rich in wildlife at any time of year. By managing high water levels and vegetation, optimal conditions will be created for wetland species which rely on high quality wetland habitat and which are in decline elsewhere
- Increased opportunities for wildlife tourism and promotion of the area's varied archaeological heritage.
- An educational resource for local schools and lifelong learning, providing a good example of how farming, wildlife and water management can be successfully integrated.
- Local people and visitors can see and experience a wetland landscape and its associated wildlife.
- Local communities to benefit from the distinctive features in the landscape, including opportunities for wildlife tourism and promotion of the area's varied archaeological heritage.
- A demonstration project for wetland habitat restoration and flood risk management in the Long Preston floodplain – with extension of the project up and down the River Ribble in the longer term.

Organisational Structure and Governance

The Long Preston Wet Grassland Project is managed by a Project Steering Group (PSG) consisting of the partner organisations, which meet at least twice per year and on an ad-hoc basis as required.

Since June 2006, a part-time project adviser, Adrian Shepherd, has been working on the project to help achieve the key project objective to encourage farmers within the project area to apply for Environmental Stewardship. The roles and responsibilities of the contract adviser are:

1. Liaise with local farmers and landowners to bring about wetland restoration within the target area for the project using funding mechanisms such as Higher Level Stewardship.
2. Co-ordinate bird surveys
3. Organise demonstration days and training days for farmers and their advisers.
4. Co-ordinate the LPWGP.
5. Liaise with external stakeholders to promote the project.

Communications

Communication will be an increasingly important part of the second phase of the project. Through engagement with local community, key partners and local government, the project will let the local community know what benefits the project will bring to the local area and how it will enhance our environment. It also provides an opportunity to engage with new audiences, such as local businesses. A simple communications strategy needs to be developed as part of Core Activity 4 and integrated into the delivery matrix. Actions could include:

- Main annual partnership event
- Newsletters and press releases
- A website
- Farmer demonstration events
- Guided walks
- Wildlife events, e.g. bird counts, wildlife watches

The Project beyond 2011

It is foreseen that the following on-going management work will be needed to ensure that the HLS schemes in place actually deliver for their given objectives:

- Bird and vegetation monitoring annually for 5 years from the start of the AE scheme, to be carried out by volunteers
- Support, advice and help for farmers completing raised water level management plans, installing sluices and scrapes and manipulating sward height and structure to meet the stated objectives of the HLS scheme. This is anticipated to be needed for the initial **3 years** of an AE scheme on each farm, hopefully at which point the farmers understand what they are being asked to do and can effectively 'fine-tune' the HLS themselves to enable favourable management/ condition to be achieved by year 10 of the scheme.
- Training, mentoring and demonstration events will be used to ensure that farmers will have learnt the necessary skills to enable them to manage the wetland habitat effectively, without the need for on-going intensive intervention from the project adviser. This work forms a 'rolling programme' as new farms come into an agri-environment scheme. The project adviser will work closely

with farmers to help them adapt their land management practices and meet the requirements of their agri-environment scheme agreements, through

- A longer term approach is needed to ensure that a rolling programme of Higher Level Stewardship schemes are effectively implemented, managed and monitored. This work will continue to 2011 and beyond.
- There will be an on-going advocacy role, with the project being increasingly used as a demonstration site to show stakeholders a fully functioning integrated landscape scale restoration project.

It is likely, therefore, that an advisory input will be needed (on top of that likely to be provided by Natural England) until 2011 as part of phase 2 of the project.

To deliver the long-term project objectives, it is considered that the Project needs to be extended

Getting Involved

For more information on the project, please see our project leaflet, or check out our Newsletter to find out what's new with the project. Alternatively, please contact:

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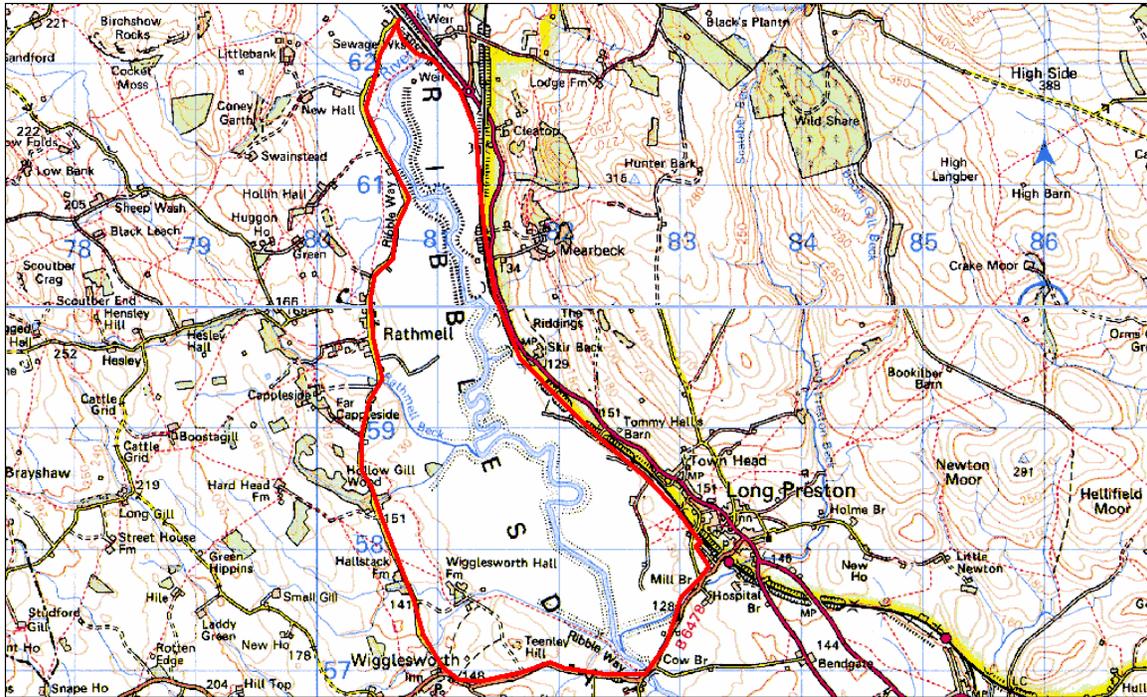
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Annex 1: Map showing project area



The project area includes the River Ribble floodplain between Long Preston and Settle and incorporates all the flat and gently sloping land. The boundary marked by a red line on the map extends from the Settle sewage treatment works to the North, the railway line to the east, the Settle – Wigglesworth road to the west of the floodplain and the B6478 to the south from Wigglesworth to Cow bridge and then to Long Preston.