

Reconnecting the past: how the landowner of Racecourse Farm is restoring his grandfather's woodland

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Landowner restores woodland through the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO), planting 23,015 native trees to reconnect fragmented habitats and offset carbon.

Racecourse Farm takes its name from the horse racing track that operated on the site in the early 1900s. When Jonathan Capener inherited the 196-hectare farm from his father in 2023, he saw an opportunity to heal a fragmented landscape.

His project, supported by EWCO, has seen 23,015 native trees including oak, field maple, hazel and Scots pine planted across 12.26 hectares.

Key facts

- site: Racecourse Farm, Newcastle-under-Lyme, Staffordshire
- size: 196-hectare farm, with planting across 12.26 hectares
- type: native broadleaf and conifer
- species mix: oak, field maple, hazel and scots pine
- date planted: 2024
- grant: EWCO

Objective

Enhance biodiversity, restore historic woodland areas and improve habitats. The scheme also aims to offset carbon for the landowner's other business.

Restoring and reconnecting fragmented woodlands

In recent decades, Racecourse Farm has been managed primarily for shooting, with woodlands being fragmented to create better sight lines and improved shooting opportunities. This heritage shaped the farm as Jonathan knows it.

His vision centres on transforming these scattered woodland patches back into a well-managed forest ecosystem. The project focuses on restoring Bentilee Wood to its historic boundaries, alongside replanting Oxhay wood – a 6.7ha area that was felled in the 1940s but never replanted. By reconnecting these woodland fragments, the project is restoring the landscape.

View of newly planted trees that link up with neighbouring areas of established woods. Copyright: Robinson Forestry Ltd

Jonathan Capener, landowner, said:

This work is helping to restore the woodland to how it may have looked in my grandfather's time. It's an important step in managing the land for the future.

Enhancing biodiversity and offsetting carbon for a sustainable future

The restoration work focused on creating continuity between woodland habitats, creating wildlife corridors which allows species to move freely across the landscape for the first time in generations.

There is a further 0.24ha shelterbelt that's been planted to screen the nearby Keele Services lorry park from a neighbouring farmhouse.

The project serves a dual purpose beyond conservation. As a business owner, Jonathan is working to address his company's carbon footprint, and the woodland creation at Racecourse Farm provides a natural solution. He estimates that the restored woodlands will sequester around 3,500 tonnes of carbon over the next century through new tree growth and improved management processes.

Working with natural challenges

The project required navigating archaeology features, active badger setts, underground gas pipelines and a small resident deer herd. Jonathan carefully planned his woodland project to work with nature and navigate these existing conditions.

The species selection process used Forest Research's Ecological Site Classification tool which analyses soil conditions, climate data and drainage to help inform species selection. Crucially, the selection considered climate change projections for 2080, ensuring the newly planted trees thrive as conditions change.

Managing deer browsing required creative solutions. Where traditional deer fencing wasn't practical due to the terrain, individual tree shelters protect saplings while allowing wildlife to continue using the wider site, while some smaller shelters in fenced areas protect saplings from rabbits. This approach maintains the site's value for existing populations rather than excluding them from the restored areas.

Young trees planted in rows that are protected by individual tree guards, with a deer fence in the background. Copyright: Robinson Forestry Ltd

Fast tracking funding applications

To support the project, funding was secured through EWCO. EWCO covers capital costs for establishing a woodland. Jonathan's project qualified for additional funding by delivery of multiple benefits including improved water quality, reduced flood risk, contributed to nature recovery, and provision of access for the local community.

Working with an agent, Jonathan navigated the application to EWCO through the Woodland Creation Fast Track. The land was classified as low sensitivity, which meant Jonathan's application could be reviewed and approved within 12 weeks. For this project, the entire process took just 11 weeks from start to finish, allowing planting to happen in the same year as application – avoiding a season gap.

The agent felt the fast track process to be a significant benefit, helping to maintain momentum. They are now producing a woodland management plan to ensure the woodland's long-term health and resilience.

Simon Smith, Forestry Agent, Robinson Forestry Ltd, said:

The fast track process was very positive. From initial interest right through to planting, everything progressed on a manageable timeframe, which is really important.

The Woodland Officer turned things around quickly and worked hard to keep to the timeline. It felt like a genuine priority and meant we could plan and plant without missing a season.

Unlocking the benefits

Creating the woodland will bring a variety of significant benefits to Racecourse Farm. In addition to carbon sequestration, wildlife corridors are appearing, which will increase biodiversity and allow a wider range of species to thrive.

Early signs are promising, with Kestrels and Buzzards hunting on the site since planting. The longer grass has developed a vole population, and they seem to be relishing this new habitat and food source. The alder planted is thriving and alder beetle are evident, which in turn has become a food source for birds.

The woodlands will also help to prevent soil erosion and mitigate flooding by stabilising the land and regulating water flow. By providing natural screening, the woodlands will help to improve air quality from emissions, as well as reducing the impact of anti-social behaviour from the nearby motorway services - which will benefit the local community.

Newly planted woodland around the watercourse on the farm, with rows of young trees visible inside tree guards. Copyright: Robinson Forestry Ltd

Beyond the woodlands themselves, Jonathan has a larger environmental plan, having also introduced leaky dams, pond restoration and 1500 metres of new hedgerows to the farm. The woodlands are a vital piece of the larger ecological puzzle, contributing to a healthier, more resilient landscape.

Jonathan Capener, landowner, said:

Re-establishing woodland on the lower quality areas of land allows me to focus on improving the remaining pasture while creating a network of wildlife corridors that link hedgerows and woodland blocks, all as part of a masterplan to enhance biodiversity across the farm.

Tips for landowners

- take your time to carefully plan and consider the financial aspects
- remember it is a 15-year plan, so include the details upfront to ensure long-term success
- use the free resources available from the Forestry Commission and Forest Research, whether that's to understand what type of soil you have or which species would be best suited to your land

Further information

For guidance on woodland creation and information on grants and available support, visit Tree planting and woodland creation: overview.

To find out how other farmers and landowners are benefitting from woodland creation, visit Tree planting and woodland creation case studies.

<https://www.gov.uk/government/case-studies/reconnecting-the-past-how-the-landowner-of-racecourse-farm-is-restoring-his-grandfathers-woodland>