

The TECT Field - from straight lines to fuzzy edges

The TECT trustees have been thinking about the urgent need to improve our wildlife habitats; to create safe havens for animals, birds and insects to move through; to leave space for diverse plant and tree life to take root; to leave room for the wild whilst encouraging communities to enjoy, protect and better understand nature.

Last summer, we invited Fran Southgate from The Sussex Wildlife Trust to our AGM. We heard, about Knepp and how some of their principles could be adapted for small scale re-wilding projects where free-range grazing herds aren't viable. She talked about regenerative agriculture which brings wilding and agricultural practices together rather than seeing them as opposing forces. There's value in leaving even a small corner of a field to get messy and overgrown; to cut the hedgerows every other year rather than every year.

Fran talked about the still wild, mythic places in Sussex like the deep, water-filled, Knucker Holes where Dragons lie in wait for a passing cow or dog walker. There's a Knucker Hole near Plumpton. We don't know how deep it is as no-one has ever been able to dive to the bottom of it. I found directions to one in Lyminster and a tale about a local man who tried his hand at Dragon slaying. It doesn't end well, for dragon or man: <https://odddaysout.co.uk/knuckerhole>

Inspired by all this, we brought together some ideas to work with the TECT field in a different way. The tall trees to short grass habitat along the lakeside edge of the field was the first cause for concern. Not much can thrive in that space so our first step was to stake out a more generous boundary which will naturally regenerate to create a beneficial "fuzzy edge"; a gently sloping 45 degree angle from the tallest trees down to the grass, providing much needed food, shelter and soil protection. It'll look glorious.

The Oak trees marching down the middle of the field mark the old field boundary so our second step has been to re-instate that hedgeline. There's now 25 metre a "no-mow zone", the width of the roots and canopies of the old oak trees. One Oak lost a huge limb this summer which has been removed from the trunk and left to safely decay in situ, providing food and shelter for a multitude of life forms. There are already brambles springing, creating natural tree nurseries for the many oak and other saplings that have seeded there.

In February, we planted around 250 saplings to help kick start the regenerative process around the field edge. Hazel, Crab Apple, Downy Birch, Goat Willow and Holly were planted in small, mixed clusters. The dry spring has knocked back some of the saplings but we think about half have survived. Thanks so much to everyone who came to help!

We're very grateful to Jacqui Hutson who has been surveying the plants in the field, helping us establish a baseline so that we can track, what we hope will be an increasingly diverse plant habitat over the coming years. And Tony Hutson led us on a fantastic bat survey last Autumn.

“We protect what we love, and we love what we know”; getting to know and understand the species who live and hunt in the field feels so very important now. Knowing their names matters.

Fran reminded us to look at the field in the context of its surroundings; how it links up with other beneficial habitats like ponds, ancient woodland and meadows, providing a route for wildlife to move about. Of course, it's also a place for the Plumpton and East Chiltington communities to walk and meet! From this strange year, my favourite memory is of wandering down to the field on a particularly glorious summer evening, seeing people, scattered around the field, crouched in the long grass waiting for a glimpse of the barn owl as the golden light faded. Magic. I hope it's not too long before we can get together again for work days and Wassailing in the orchard but I'm taking comfort in knowing that whilst our movements are restricted, we've helped create a little bit more room for the wild to move about.

Jo White