

Case Study

Wilding Waterhall – habitat restoration on peri-urban chalk downland

Brighton and Hove City Council

The Vision

The aim was to restore 60 hectares of downland habitat on a former golf course on the edge of Brighton. This would be done by restoring species rich chalk grassland and managing scrub and woodland to improve habitats for biodiversity.

Grazing was to be reintroduced using GPS invisible fencing and volunteers engaged to help manage habitats.

Background

The land at Wilding Waterhall is owned by Brighton & Hove City Council and had been managed intensively as a golf course since 1923. Baseline surveys indicated the site was already valuable for wildlife, with some biodiverse areas, and good opportunities for habitat restoration.

The site was designated as a Local Nature Reserve and Open Access Land at the beginning of the project in March 2022.



Cattle with GPS collars “pulse-grazing” at Wilding Waterhall. Credit: Mike Luscombe

What we achieved

A herd of Sussex Red cattle were rented from a local tenant farmer and grazing commenced in July 2022. A low-intensity, rotational grazing approach has been established whereby the number of cattle is adjusted to avoid over-grazing and the herd is regularly moved from one area of the site to another. This has enabled a diverse mosaic of habitats; from short grassland, through medium grass, rank/rough grass to scrub and “wood-pasture” maintained using dynamic natural processes and minimal use of machinery.

Over 330 people have participated in volunteering to help manage habitats. Collectively they have contributed over 5,000 hours to protect and restore biodiverse chalk grassland, manage encroaching scrub and create glades in the hawthorn woodland. Work is done with hand-tools, minimizing carbon emissions whilst optimizing participants’ opportunity to connect with nature and the landscape.

Ecological surveys in 2025 (following baseline surveys in 2022) showed positive changes for biodiversity including an increase in structural diversity and nectar abundance and a reduction in tall/rank grassland. The invertebrate survey in 2026 will add significant data to inform the overall picture.

How we did it

As part of the Changing Chalk project, Brighton & Hove City Council funded a full-time Waterhall Ranger to lead on the habitat restoration work, supported by an Education Ranger funded by the National Lottery Heritage Fund.

Infrastructure was installed and equipment purchased including a cattle grid, gates and cattle-crush to enable the reintroduction of grazing. GPS technology, involving collars worn by the cattle to allow grazing to be controlled in virtual paddocks with invisible fences, facilitated a rotational grazing approach.

Public engagement with the project has been hugely successful, to the extent that we've needed to introduce a booking system for our volunteer workdays to limit numbers of participants (for safety reasons and to ensure we have enough tools).

Situated on the edge of the city, the site is visited by many dog walkers. A request for dogs to be kept on leads during the wildlife breeding season (March–July) and at all times around livestock was introduced – however this was met with resistance from a section of the dog-walking community.

“Vegetation survey results suggest that things are moving in the right direction at Waterhall as a result of extensive conservation management including the removal of areas of dense even-aged scrub, thinning of scrub, and the expansion of grazing with cattle.”

Laurie Jackson, Ecologist



Further information

[Wilding Waterhall - Brighton & Hove City Council](#)

[Case study: Wilding Waterhall - Volunteers enabling the conservation of chalk grassland](#)

Lessons learnt

The GPS system has not been 100% reliable in containing livestock. A perimeter fence needs to be maintained in good condition to prevent livestock escaping from the site. Animals with malfunctioning collars need to be refitted with replacement collars promptly to avoid a “break-away herd” from establishing – this requires trained staff with flexibility in their work commitments to do this.

Positioning the cattle crush (where we fit the collars) on higher ground greatly improved GPS performance. We initially sited the crush in a hidden valley to avoid theft, but this contributed to technological glitches as the phone signal is patchy on lower ground.

We relied on goodwill, influencing and negotiation to convince dog walkers to respect the rules around dogs on leads. Some commercial operatives using the site with large numbers of dogs are unwilling to adapt their behaviour to support the aims of the project. A different approach is needed, such as wider regulation of commercial dog walkers in the city, and fines for non-compliance with the Countryside & Rights of Way Act 2000 on Open Access Land – ideally in combination with the use of Suitable Alternative Natural Greenspaces (SANGs) for commercial dog walkers if appropriate sites can be found.

The Changing Chalk Partnership

Led by the National Trust, Changing Chalk was a four-year partnership project from 2022 to 2026 working to reverse the ecological decline of chalk grassland in the eastern South Downs, bring histories to life, and connect local communities to the internationally significant landscape on their doorstep.

www.nationaltrust.org.uk/changing-chalk-partnership



Changing Chalk was made possible with The National Lottery Heritage Fund, thanks to National Lottery players. With thanks also to The Linbury Trust, players of People's Postcode Lottery, and other generous supporters.