

The Skell Valley Project



Thanks to National
Lottery players

Celebrating achievements
and looking to the future

May 2021–
May 2025



National
Trust



Nidderdale
National
Landscape

Welcome

This report reflects on some of the key achievements of the Skell Valley Project and looks forward to how we can maintain and develop some of its successes in the future.

The Skell Valley Project worked with partners, farmers, landowners and communities living and working in the valley to forge a sustainable future for it in response to the threat of climate change, a decline in nature, unequal access to the outdoors and neglected heritage.

This £2.5m scheme led by the National Trust and Nidderdale National Landscape delivered a series of projects over 4 years with a wider partnership to rejuvenate the River Skell, which flows through Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal World Heritage Site.

The project was made possible thanks to funding from The National Lottery Heritage Fund, European Regional Development Fund, Wolfson Foundation, Royal Oak Foundation and other private donations.



The source of the River Skell is on Dallowgill Moor which sits within Nidderdale National Landscape



Partners at the project launch event in 2021

The Skell Valley is rich in history, local heritage and wildlife, which come together to form one of the most striking and distinctive cultural landscapes in the area.

The Skell Valley Partnership

The Skell Valley Project was shaped and overseen by a partnership of sixteen organisations and community groups:

- National Trust
- Nidderdale National Landscape
- Eavestone Estate
- Environment Agency
- Forestry Commission
- Grantley Hall Estate
- Grantley, Sawley, Skelding and Eavestone Parish Council
- Harrogate and District Community Action
- Friends of Hell Wath
- Natural England
- Nidderdale National Landscape's Joint Advisory Committee
- North Yorkshire Council
- The Skell Farmers Group
- Ripon Museum Trust
- West Yorkshire Archive Service
- Yorkshire Dales Rivers Trust

A snapshot of the Skell Valley Project

The project was centred around the 12 miles of the River Skell, descending from Dallowgill Moor through Nidderdale National Landscape and Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal World Heritage Site into the historic City of Ripon.

It was initially developed to look at ways of addressing the significant threat of flooding at Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal. Following discussion with partners and the local community, the aims of the project were broadened to address wider challenges around climate change, the decline in nature, neglected heritage and unequal access to the outdoors.

- 1

Our ranger volunteers learnt new practical conservation skills and carried out a range of tasks across the valley.
- 2

We worked with 20 farmers in the river catchment to install natural flood management measures.
- 3

With Yorkshire Dales Rivers Trust we engaged schools with the river's wildlife.
- 4

We got people out and about recording the valley's ancient and veteran trees.
- 5

We researched, recorded and restored the designed landscape at Eavestone Lake.
- 6

We created 3 new walking trails for people to enjoy the valley and boost wellbeing.
- 7

With West Yorkshire Archive Service we explored the rich history of the valley and captured new stories from the local community.
- 8

We conserved the Grade II listed Roman Monument in the Seven Bridges Valley at Studley Royal.
- 9

With the Friends of Hell Wath we improved habitats for nature and access for local people.
- 10

With Harrogate and District Community Action we developed new opportunities for youth volunteering in and around Ripon.
- 11

We worked with groups in Ripon to create new spaces for nature in the city.



Theme 1: Creating a more resilient landscape

Aim: To tackle the threat of climate change on the valley and play a part in its ‘green’ recovery following the COVID-19 pandemic – making the landscape, its people and the local economy more resilient.



A network of ponds created on a Skell Valley farm

Mitigating flooding

Working with farmers and landowners on 20 sites upstream of Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal, natural flood management measures were implemented to slow the flow of water and reduce the amount of soil being washed into the river. Flooding, and its increased frequency and severity in recent years, is a huge threat to the monastic ruins of Fountains Abbey as well as other heritage features in the wider valley.

A programme of river monitoring was carried out to establish a baseline against which the effectiveness of the different natural flood management interventions installed during the project can continue to be evaluated. The project also commissioned a ‘Payment by Results’ report that proposes ways farmers can be incentivised for delivering further natural flood management works and how this might be implemented in the valley.

Leaky dams installed on a tributary of the River Skell



- 7 ponds created & 3 restored
- 29 leaky woody dams constructed
- 4.09km of hedgerow planted & rejuvenated
- 2.12ha of broadleaved woodland created
- 1.91km of farm & forestry track repaired
- 6.55km of riverside fencing installed
- 6 river crossing points completed
- 6 events held for farmers

Boosting the local economy

The project funded a partnership between Ripon Business Improvement District and Visit Ripon to support local businesses in the tourism and hospitality sector. It ran a series of workshops and developed online resources for local businesses to promote the importance of the Skell Valley and its unique landscape in attracting visitors to the area.

- 1 online hub launched for tourism businesses
- 8 business networking events held
- 25 businesses engaged with tourism group
- 8 marketing workshops delivered
- 1 marketing strategy for the Skell Valley developed



Tourist exploring Ripon's market square

Theme 2: Helping nature to thrive

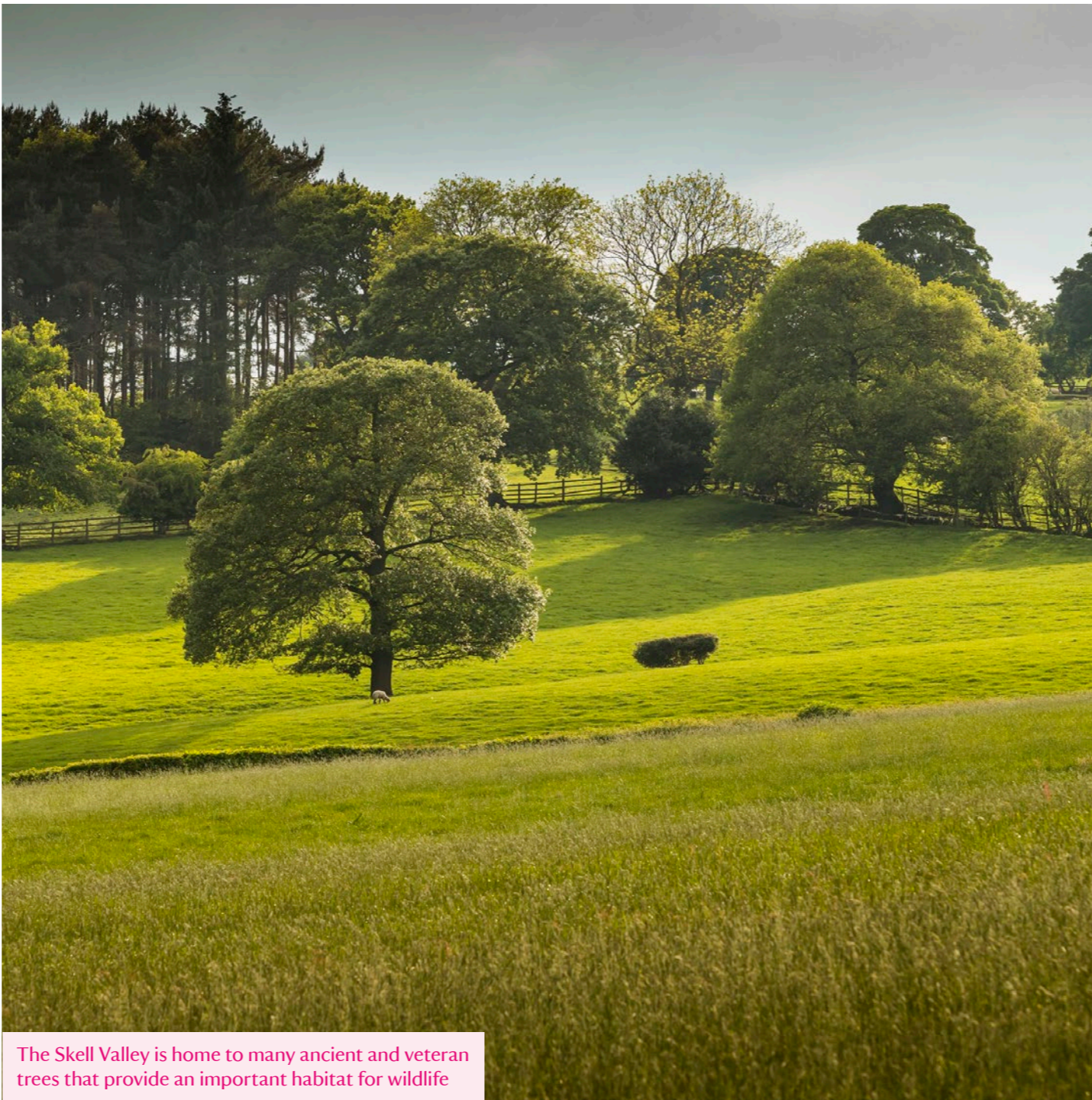
Aim: To reverse the decline in nature, conserve ancient trees and woodlands and the wildlife they support, and create nature-rich green spaces near to where people live.

Recording and enhancing habitats for wildlife

We worked with woodland owners throughout the valley to restore and enhance these habitats for wildlife. We planted more native trees to create additional space for nature. We recruited and trained a team of volunteers to record and map ancient, veteran and notable trees, adding them to the Woodland Trust's Ancient Tree Inventory.

We supported the Friends of Hell Wath to carry out grassland and scrub habitat restoration at Hell Wath Local Nature Reserve. We provided training for surveys such as butterfly identification, grassland fungi, small mammals, dragonflies and wildflowers. These surveys help to inform the future management of the site.

Volunteers deployed static bat detectors throughout the valley to help us understand the distribution and activity of bat species. Calls from Brown Long-eared, Daubenton's, Natterer's, Common Noctule, Common and Soprano Pipistrelle's and Whiskered bats were recorded across the valley. This data improves our understanding of species present and how they use the valley, providing useful baseline data for future monitoring works.

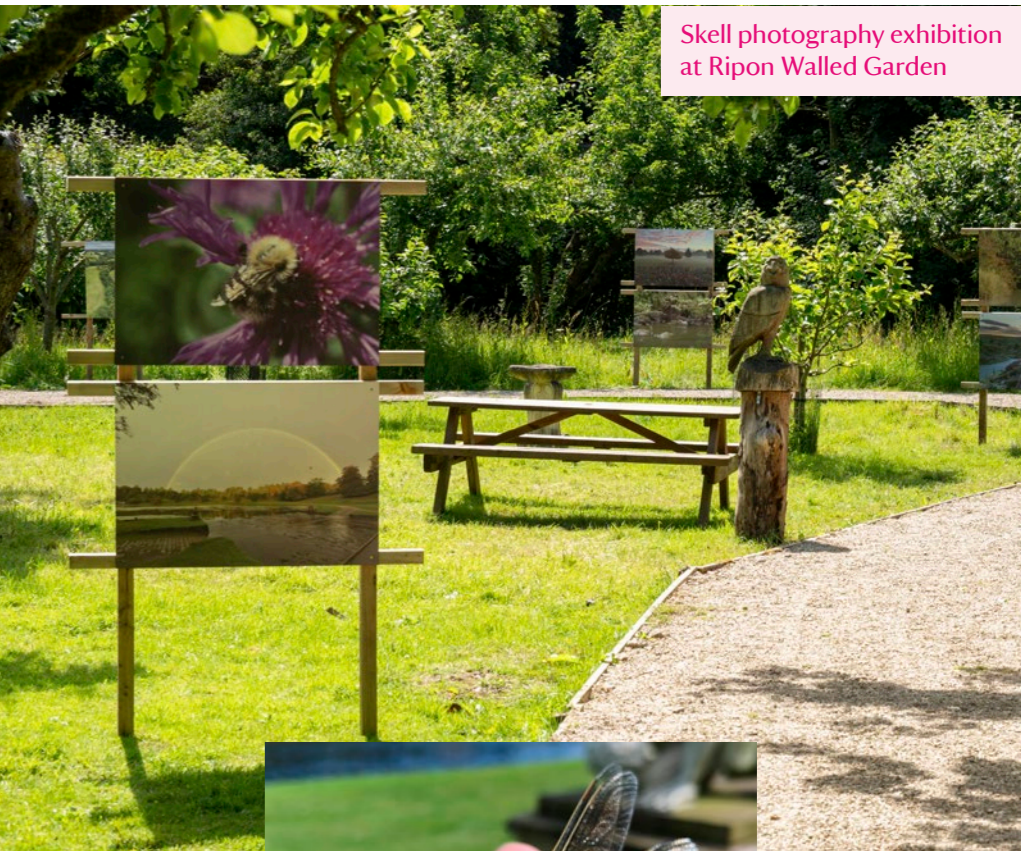


The Skell Valley is home to many ancient and veteran trees that provide an important habitat for wildlife

Improving green spaces for people and nature

Working closely with local community groups, volunteers and organisations we have improved spaces for nature close to where people live in the centre of Ripon at the Workhouse Museum, Walled Garden, YMCA, Temple Gardens and Picking Gill Nature Reserve near to Sawley Village. Improvements in these areas include control of invasive species like Himalayan Balsam, repairing and creating more accessible paths, providing new seating, drystone walling, hedgelaying, tree works and bulb planting.

- 85 ancient and veteran trees recorded
- 11.4ha woodland improved
- 3 new woodland management plans
- 5 green spaces improved
- 130,460 bat calls logged
- 7.7ha of scrub and grassland managed



Skell photography exhibition at Ripon Walled Garden



Emperor dragonfly in identification workshop at Studley Royal Water Garden

Theme 3: Empowering people

Aim: To empower people to deliver projects for nature, heritage and landscape, by supporting them in learning the skills they need, and removing barriers that stop people accessing the outdoors and nature around them.

23,834 volunteering hours across the project

108 young people received 'Power of 10' awards

8563 volunteering hours on conservation tasks

Engaging young people

In partnership with Harrogate and District Community Action, we recruited a Volunteering Development Officer to look at improving and strengthening volunteering with local organisations. The 'Power of 10' scheme was created to inspire young people to seek out volunteering opportunities they may not usually explore. The scheme challenges young people to complete 10, 20, 50 and 100 hours of volunteering in their local community. The scheme has since received further funding to continue its work through the UK Shared Prosperity Fund.

People power

A dedicated team of ranger volunteers carried out a variety of conservation tasks throughout the valley including hedge coppicing, tree planting and fencing at local farms, balsam bashing and woodland thinning. They received training in dry stone walling, scything, peat sampling and biosecurity to help them carry out their tasks and continue to use these skills in their fortnightly volunteering with the Area Ranger.



Skell ranger volunteers installing a gate on a farm



School children with their new river dipping equipment



Skell Valley Voices exhibition at Fountains Mill

Voices of the past and present

Led by the West Yorkshire Archive Service, remote volunteers were trained in palaeography to help them transcribe old handwriting in letters and documents from the Fountains archive, making the entire collection more accessible and searchable. Some volunteers received training in how to safely package the earliest documents in the Fountains Abbey collection, ensuring they are kept in a better condition for the future.

Volunteers were also trained in how to conduct oral history interviews with local people about their memories of growing up around the River Skell. The oral histories now form part of an online archive hosted by West Yorkshire Archive Service and featured in an exhibition alongside rarely-displayed historical documents to tell the story of people who've lived in the area over the centuries.

70 remote volunteers transcribed **735** documents from the archive

227,917 words from the archive digitalised

11 pop-up archive exhibitions held across the valley

16 oral histories recorded

Inspiring school children

Working with Yorkshire Dales Rivers Trust, the project ran river dipping sessions for primary school children across the valley and provided training for teachers, volunteers and local groups in river dipping and wildlife identification. A Watery Wildlife Resource Pack was created to encourage school groups, families and individuals to explore their local river safely, with lots of ideas for people to engage with rivers and enjoy learning about the amazing wildlife in our rivers.

565 children engaged with river activities

4 river dipping training sessions run for teachers and volunteers

2 sets of river dipping equipment given to local schools

1 free online river resource pack launched

Theme 4: Celebrating heritage

Aim: To save the Skell Valley’s heritage from the threat of climate change by creating new opportunities that encourage people to explore and care for its nature and history.

The Fairy Steps are a key feature of the Hell Wath Nature Trail



Restoring built heritage

The project restored built heritage features around the valley, including the historic landscape at Eavestone Lake, which was created by the Norton family of Grantley Hall in the early 19th century.

After being recorded and researched by archaeologists and volunteers, specialist contractors removed vegetation and replaced mortar and stonework on the 19th century bridge and boathouse.

Repairs were also carried out to the Roman Monument, which is part of the designed landscape at Studley Royal and was created by John Aislabie and his son William between 1718 and 1781.

Parts of the landscape and built heritage at Eavestone Lake have been restored and can be enjoyed on the Skell Valley Explorer trail



Community archaeology

Working closely with an archaeologist, volunteers researched and recorded historic features at Eavestone Lake, the Chinese Garden at Studley Royal and Spa Gill Woods. Volunteers received training in LiDAR and aerial photography interpretation and archaeological survey techniques. Recording days were held throughout the valley, culminating in an archaeology report capturing the key findings.



Scan here for the
Archaeology Report

7 historic structures recorded

Grade II listed Roman Monument restored

3 new walking trails created

4 walking hubs and interpretation installed

Encouraging exploration

The project launched three new walking trails in the Skell Valley including signage, waymarking and digital resources to help people explore the routes. The trails were developed closely with local communities and organisations with the aim of improving physical access to areas of the valley, creating better intellectual access using interpretation that inspires people to learn about the area’s natural and cultural heritage, boosting wellbeing by encouraging people to get outdoors and removing economic barriers by creating trails that are free to access.



New interpretation on the Fountains Way trail

The Fountains Way connects the City of Ripon with Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal and includes an accessible route option for wheelchairs and pushchairs.



Scan here for the
Fountains Way

The Hell Wath Nature Trail provides a short family friendly route around the local nature reserve.



Scan here for the
Hell Wath Nature Trail

The Skell Valley Explorer is a countryside walk around Grantley and Sawley featuring Spa Gill Woods and Eavestone Lake.



Scan here for the
Skell Valley Explorer

What's next for the Skell Valley?

The Skell Valley Project may have ended, but it is just the beginning of our long-term thinking about this unique landscape. We will continue to maintain what the project delivered, develop new initiatives and continue to collaborate with others.

The Skell Valley Project showed us that working at landscape scale is most effective when carried out in partnership with others. The National Trust and Nidderdale National Landscape will continue working with the farming community to develop further ways of alleviating flooding in the area as well as creating more resilient land and farm businesses in the face of climate change. We will also continue to enhance the ways people can access and enjoy the valley's green space by improving more footpaths as well as maintaining the work we have already completed.

We will continue working with farmers and landowners in the Skell Valley and wider area to maintain and develop further projects that increase the landscape's resilience to climate change, promote nature recovery and enable better access to these places.



Our funding priorities for the next 10 years include:

Continuing to employ an **Area Ranger** for the valley and sustaining the **volunteer team**.

Maintaining the **access and flood alleviation measures** we have put in place as part of the project.

Retaining river monitoring equipment and commissioning expertise to interpret the results so we can understand the flow and sediment levels in the river and make informed decisions about future work.

Delivering further natural flood and sediment management in the river catchment based on our learnings from the first phase of the project and future river monitoring.

Creating **3 new ponds** and putting in **20,000 new hedgerow plants**.

Expanding our work into the corridor of land between Fountains Abbey and Brimham Rocks.

Enhancing existing walking routes and **creating one new route** in the valley.

Monitoring, recording and **improving the condition of built heritage** in the valley and re-instating lost features to two listed structures.

Hosting an annual seminar to discuss plans and share learnings with others.

Support us with our future priorities

Our plans for the Skell Valley will only be possible with support from donors and by working in partnership with statutory agencies, organisations and local people.

If you would like to be part of helping to shape a sustainable future for Fountains Abbey and Studley Royal and the wider Skell Valley, we would love to hear from you. Get in touch with us to arrange a chat with a member of our team at fountainsabbey@nationaltrust.org.uk



We will continue to measure the effectiveness of natural flood and sediment interventions on the river and explore further opportunities to reduce flooding and the build-up of sediment.

A big thank you

We are immensely grateful to everyone who has helped make this project a success. It would not have been possible without the generous contributions of time, money, skills and expertise from partners, funders, landowners, farmers and volunteers.

We hope you enjoyed reading about the Skell Valley Project and how we plan to maintain its achievements and develop new initiatives. If you would like to find out more about the project or discuss how you can help with future plans, please contact us on fountainsabbey@nationaltrust.org.uk

Front cover image: The Roman Monument stands on a steep cliff above the River Skell and can be viewed from the valley floor as you walk through the Seven Bridges Valley in Studley Royal Deer Park.

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Additional Resources



Scan here to read more about the Skell Valley Project



Scan here for the Watery Wildlife Resource Pack



Scan here for Skell Valley Oral Histories