Ribble Rivers Trust

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NATURAL FLOOD MANAGEMENT

Using nature-based solutions to slow the flow

HABITAT RESTORATION

Re-naturalising rivers to support more wildlife

PEOPLE POWER

Communities and organisations working together to improve rivers

FARM ADVICE

Helping farmland work better for nature

WOODLAND CREATION - EDUCATION - WILDLIFE SURVEYS

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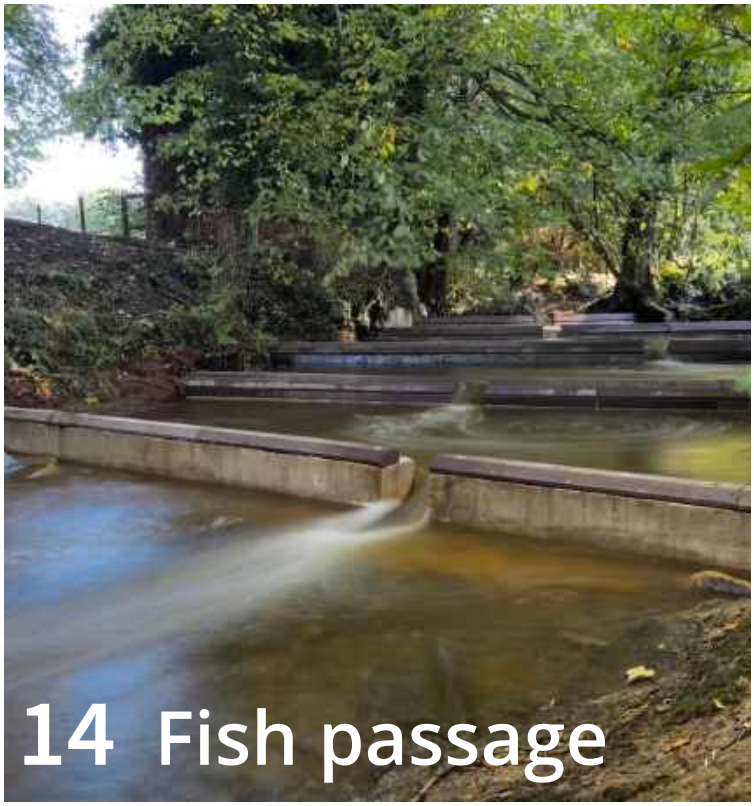
WELCOME

IMPROVING WATER

IMPROVING HABITAT

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES



DATA AND EVIDENCE

SUPPORT US

WELCOME

JACK SPEES

Our CEO rounds up the past year's activities and what the future has in store for Ribble Trust.

As the number and scale of problems facing our rivers seems to be increasing, so do our efforts to address and reverse them. In the past year we have commenced work on new programmes of work, from the EA National Natural Flood Risk Management Programme projects in Clitheroe, Wrea Green and Darwen, to our Species Survival Fund Project, Ribble Revival: Room for Rivers. Each of the programmes involve numerous projects, focused on benefits for aquatic species and people. The coverage of these programmes is catchment-wide, as the problems we must address are equally spread out.

The floods in January of 2025 highlighted the need not only for what we have started, but what more we need to do. Our Community Catchments initiative is seeking to empower and enable communities to take positive environmental action to improve their specific community's area. The focus at present is unsurprisingly on flooding, and we are working closely with Ribchester and Whalley, and have started conversations in Waddington. We hope to develop with those communities 'Community Catchment Plans,' that the members of that community can take forward themselves. With RRT playing a supporting role, this aims to see increased delivery across the catchment – beyond what RRT could do alone.

RRT rarely work alone on projects. In fact, all our projects are a collaboration, whether with landowners, funders or delivery partners, each playing to their respective strengths to achieve shared objectives. In February of 2025 we held a workshop attended by over forty people from a range of delivery organisations to begin identifying collaborations that could be progressed over the next 5 years. These included the Environment Agency, Natural England, NFU, Local Authorities, United Utilities, Highways Agency, and the Ribble Fisheries Consultative Association – to name but a few. The number of attendees was the highest for such an event we have had in many years and highlights the increased demand and desire to see healthier rivers. The challenges ahead can sometimes be disheartening, but the current ground swell of enthusiasm for healthy rivers is so positive that it drives us forward with renewed enthusiasm.

Enthusiasm is also renewed when we see our project successes, not just completion, but the outcomes being realised. Wigglesworth Hall Flood Plain reconnection, completed in 2023, was much celebrated owing to 'getting it done' and the scale of the project, but to see the river naturally connecting to the flood plain, and the farmers' positive feedback to this was a personal highlight of 2024. As was visiting Tawd Valley Park, looking at the completed wetlands that had vegetated with beautiful aquatic vegetation and were

Flynn Spees identifying invertebrates

being frequented by dragonflies. Such was the success that more projects are in the pipeline.

Our River Blitz programme was another fantastic success, with issues identified by, and fed back to, the community on the same day, whilst being passed on to the relevant members of our team to take forward action to address the issues. Several stood out; Swanside for example, which identified a clear problem location, and the reason for the problem. We hope that this will see action to address the issues and see quick improvements. If you haven't attended our River Blitz's my 8-year-old son, pictured left, highly recommends it! We provide all training and information needed on the day, and there is always a great atmosphere with all those attending sharing a desire for cleaner rivers.

The data from our River Blitzes, as well as our wider monitoring plan, is now being used to help inform decisions on how, what and where investment should be made to improve our Bathing Waters at Edisford Bridge, but also the Fylde Coast. This really is putting communities at the heart of decision making, and we do not want to stop with just data and evidence provision.

It was a disappointing year for the Edisford Bridge Bathing Water, failing to meet its water quality standards. However, it was an equally disappointing year for the weather through the bathing season (May to September), and these two things are intrinsically linked. Rain causes faecal matter, and associated bacteria, to be washed into our streams. It is not just sewage, or agriculture, but wildlife, dog walkers (please do pick up after your dogs) and more. Huge investment in sewage infrastructure upstream of Edisford Bridge is expected over the next 5 years, bigger than ever before. This won't just benefit the bathing water but the river in its entirety. With this, plus with some luck a nicer summer, we are hopeful we will see better water quality results in 2025 and the years to come.

Despite having a lot on our plate already, with the programmes already mentioned and dozens more projects of varying nature to boot, we are already planning our next schedule of programmes and projects. It may feel like we have a long way to go for our rivers, but we are on the path and gaining momentum!

Finally, it would be remiss of me not to share my appreciation and gratitude for the hard work of not only our team, but importantly our army of volunteers, from tree planters to river cleaners, citizen scientists to education volunteers, and of course our Trustees – thank you! Our work would not be possible without the valiant efforts of all our volunteers, and it is fair to say that whatever your interest – there is a volunteering opportunity for you!

New wetland in Tawd Valley Park (River Douglas Catchment)

PROJECTS

IMPROVING WATER

NATURAL FLOOD MANAGEMENT

The Ribble Catchment, like many areas in the UK, is increasingly vulnerable to flooding. A combination of factors including urbanisation, land-use changes, and climate change mean that intense and prolonged rainfall events have become more frequent whilst our natural environment has become less able to cope with downpours, putting homes, businesses, and farmland at risk. The impacts are far-reaching, not only causing significant economic damage but also disrupting lives. Flooding doesn't just affect those directly in its path; it impacts entire communities and the health of local ecosystems.

In September 2023, the Environment Agency and Defra announced £25 million funding for improving flood resilience through a new NFM programme. RRT was fortunate to secure funding for three discrete projects in the Clitheroe, Darwen and Wrea Green catchments.

What is Natural Flood Management?

Natural Flood Management (NFM) is an innovative approach to protecting human and wildlife communities from flood risk. Traditional flood management often relies on engineered solutions such as concrete flood walls. While these measures can be effective in certain situations, they're often costly, providing short-term relief, and potentially moving the problem elsewhere. NFM offers a more sustainable alternative by using nature-based solutions (NBS) to slow, store and manage water flow within river catchments.

The principle behind NFM is simple, and it's a case of working with nature. By restoring and enhancing natural features including woodlands, wetlands and peatlands, NFM helps manage excess rainfall, storing water upstream and gradually releasing it, which then reduces the volume of water reaching downstream communities at any one time. These interventions don't just reduce flood risk but also provide a host of other benefits, from improving biodiversity and creating homes for wildlife to enhancing water quality and sequestering carbon.

Some of the most effective NFM methods include:

- Tree planting: Trees slow the flow of water by intercepting rainfall through their leaves and roots, increasing infiltration by breaking up compacted soils, and stabilising riverbanks with their roots to reduce erosion.
- Leaky dams: Leaky dams are built above the river and its normal flow level, so the river behaves naturally under regular conditions. However, when water levels rise, the excess water hits the leaky dam, which holds most of the excess water back temporarily.
- Wetland creation: Wetlands are a fantastic water storage solution, and many of the wetlands we create are ephemeral, meaning that they are designed to dry up between flooding, providing a holding space for sudden rainfall.
- Peatland restoration: Healthy peatlands have the potential to store an incredible volume of water, acting as an enormous sponge. Peatlands are also vital carbon sinks, mitigating climate change and the resulting erratic weather patterns.

All of these actions align with our Catchment Based Approach (CaBA) to river conservation. At the heart of this approach is the understanding that everything in our ecosystems is connected - rainwater flows over hills, through farms, towns, and fields, picking up whatever's there before it reaches rivers. By managing this whole journey, we can improve rivers and mitigate flood risk.

Environment Agency

Department for Environment Food & Rural Affairs

MONITOR

One of the strengths of our NFM work is extensive data and evidence. Flood risk management is complex, and understanding the relationships between rainfall, land use, and rivers is essential for designing effective interventions. To achieve this, we use a range of monitoring tools, including water level loggers, rain gauges, air pressure loggers and time-lapse cameras.

This thorough monitoring plan allows us to track the impact of NFM work over time, gathering 'before and after' data to demonstrate its effectiveness. By collecting and analysing this data, we can also refine our approaches, ensuring that future interventions deliver even greater benefits. Additionally, this evidence base will help us to secure the funding needed to deliver even more NFM projects.

ENGAGE

Ribble Rivers Trust's Community Catchments project is at the forefront of delivering NFM actions. By engaging with residents, landowners, farmers, and businesses in key areas like Wrea Green, Clitheroe, and Darwen, we're bringing together local communities to develop projects that suit the unique needs of each location.

In Clitheroe, for example, the project has focused on planting riparian woodlands to slow water flow and reduce erosion along the banks of the River Ribble. Meanwhile, in Darwen, efforts have included creating wetlands and installing leaky dams in upland areas to intercept water before it reaches more urban parts of the sub-catchment.

However, residents and landowners are not just beneficiaries of NFM; they are project partners. Through workshops, site visits, and hands-on activities such as tree planting, we aim to equip communities with the knowledge and skills they need to take action. This collaborative model ensures that NFM measures are maintained and supported long after initial implementation.

DELIVER

Once we've collected the crucial 'before' data and engaged with local communities, we can look to identify suitable sites for planting trees, creating wetlands and installing leaky dams. Not only will these interventions help to slow the flow and reduce flood risk, they will also support a wider range of wildlife through increased habitat and better water quality.

Atlantic salmon and brown trout in particular will benefit from NFM interventions. Their eggs and juveniles are vulnerable to high flows in winter and spring as they're washed from their nursery redds by the strong currents. By reducing the height of each flood peak and promoting a more gradual rise and fall of the river level, we hope to improve the survival of our salmonids.

Visualisation by YDMT Consultants Ltd.

The River Ribble in flood at Long Preston Deeps

FARM ADVICE AND IMPROVEMENTS

Farming is a huge part of life in the Ribble catchment, shaping the landscapes around us and producing the food we need to feed our nation. As caretakers of this land, farmers are crucial partners in Ribble Rivers Trust's mission to improve river health, protect biodiversity, and ensure a sustainable future for the environment. By working closely with farmers and landowners, we aim to balance the needs of the environment with the needs of farm businesses, creating relationships that benefit both rivers and farmers.

Why Ribble Trust works with farmers

With rivers winding through fields, pastures, and woodlands, farming activities have the potential to significantly impact water quality and the overall health of the catchment. So, it makes sense that we have a well-established, dedicated Farm Advice team who work directly with farmers and landowners. Their objective is to identify opportunities for improvement across farmyards and surrounding lands to benefit both the environment and farmers.

Our advisors work to pinpoint actions that can address challenges such as diffuse water pollution, habitat degradation, and soil erosion. Examples of these interventions include roofing slurry and farmyard manure stores, watercourse fencing, and implementing better soil and nutrient management practices. By tackling these issues, farmers can improve water quality, reduce diffuse pollution, and save money and time through reduced fertiliser and slurry use.

As an added benefit, all of our Farm Advice team come from farming families, and several still farm alongside their day jobs, so they know exactly what issues farmers face.

Funding opportunities and support

In return for this work, our Farm Advisors identify areas that could also be used to deliver further environmental improvements, including the creation of woodlands, wetlands, and hedgerows. Of course, we still want farmers to continue to produce food, so we prioritise small parcels of poor-quality land, or sites that are unsuitable/unsafe for livestock.

Our team then support farmers as they navigate the various funding streams available. These include both public and private sources, such as the Sustainable Farming Incentive (SFI), Environmental Land Management Scheme (ELMS), and the England Woodland Creation Offer (EWCO). In 2024, our team delivered free, confidential farm advice to over 50 farms, which has resulted in over 30 projects!

Hedgerows intercept runoff

FARM GROUPS

Building collaboration and sharing knowledge

One of our key initiatives is the establishment of farm groups across the catchment. These groups provide a platform for farmers to collaborate, access training, share best practices, and stay informed about funding opportunities. Over the past decade, our team has successfully established and worked together with five farm groups, including the River Loud Farm Group, the Long Preston Facilitation Fund Group, and newer groups in Trawden, Hyndburn and the River Douglas Catchment.

Our work with these farm groups is supported by grants from a range of partner organisations, including Natural England, the Environment Agency, United Utilities and the national Rivers Trust.

The farm groups foster a sense of community among farmers, encouraging them to share their journeys and track the outcomes of their efforts. By working together and learning from one another, farmers can adopt practices that not only comply with environmental regulations but also enhance their farm's efficiency and profitability.

The Long Preston Facilitation Group, for instance, represents 20 years of partnership working to manage the Long Preston Deeps floodplain, which spans 765 ha, including 162 ha designated as a Site of Special Scientific Interest. Nestled between the Yorkshire Dales National Park and the Forest of Bowland National Landscape, this area is a priority for wildlife and rare flora. The group focuses on enhancing biodiversity and water management, while sustaining farm businesses and preserving the area's natural heritage.

Taking soil samples

In the River Loud catchment, the group has grown from 15 members in 2015 to 31 members today. This group is integral to the River Loud Phosphate and Natural Flood Management project, and is funded by United Utilities. The project's goals include reducing phosphate loads in the watercourses, implementing natural flood management (NFM) interventions, and improving water quality in general. Farmers in this group have undertaken woodland creation, hedgerow restoration, leaky dam installation, and improvements to livestock infrastructure such as farm tracks, gateways and drinking areas.

With a busy agenda of Farm Group meetings planned for the years ahead, our team hope to engage with even more farmers going forward.

Watercourse fencing to buffer runoff into the river

BATHING WATER QUALITY

TURNING TIDES PARTNERSHIP

Turning Tides is a cross-agency partnership working together in north west England to improve the quality of our bathing waters. Through infrastructure, planning, campaigning, volunteering, educating, engaging and hard work, the aim is to make sure everyone can enjoy our beaches for generations to come.

Unfortunately some of the North West's bathing waters have deteriorated in recent years, so the partnership is focusing efforts on eight priority areas: Haverigg, Morecambe North, Blackpool North, Blackpool Central, Blackpool South, St Annes North, St Annes Pier, and Southport. These areas are popular destinations for recreation, as well as being vital ecosystems.

Despite this, the sites are seriously affected by pollution from sewage discharge, agriculture and road run-off.

To help the partnership with its decision making process on where best to invest funding, RRT has developed a GIS mapping tool that identifies potential contributors to poor water quality. It brings a wide range of information sources, data and evidence together, making it easier to see what's happening in a particular location. This helps prioritise locations for further in-person surveys and investigations, which will lead to better targeted development and delivery of projects that will tackle sources of water pollution.

bathing water

A bathing water is an area of surface water where it is expected that large numbers of people will 'bathe'. This includes rivers, lakes and coastal waters.

EAVES AND SAVICK BROOKS

The Turning Tides Decision Tool identified Savick Brook (of which Eaves Brook is a tributary) as a potential major contributor of poor bathing water quality. It is one of the last tributaries to enter the Ribble before it becomes an estuary, therefore it has a significant influence due to its proximity to the coast.

The watercourse is heavily modified and has been assessed as in moderate condition, failing for chemical status. Whilst sewage discharge is listed as the main water quality reason for not achieving good status, Savick Brook flows through intensive farmland into the urban area of Preston. Rural pollution and other sources may also be contributing to the failing status of this waterbody.

In 2024, the Environment Agency awarded a grant to enable us carry out 'on the ground' surveys of both brooks and identify potential sources of pollution to generate realistic and effective solutions. These may include projects such as creating wetlands or reed beds to help clean the water flowing down the brook, fencing off the water course to create buffer strips between farmland and the watercourse, and planting trees to provide habitat and shade.

The habitat works will ultimately lead to an improvement in water quality in both Eaves Brook and Savick Brook, as well as the Ribble Estuary, which in turn will improve the bathing waters at Southport and St Annes.

Savick Brook

EDISFORD BRIDGE

In April 2024, the River Ribble at Edisford Bridge in Clitheroe was officially designated as a bathing water by Defra, following months of surveys and consultation by the Ribble Trust.

Now the site is designated, the Environment Agency monitors its water quality regularly to protect the health of the people bathing. The site now displays public information about water quality and potential pollution during the bathing water season, which runs from 15 May to 30 September, enabling everyone from paddlers to outdoor swimming enthusiasts to make informed decisions before they enter the water.

Sadly in November 2024, the bathing site's water quality was rated as 'poor', which did not come as a surprise to RRT. It hailed a call to action for strengthening regulations and addressing the root causes of the pollution.

Thanks to a grant from the Environment Agency, RRT launched the Ribble Evidence and Engagement Project (REEP), using the Edisford Bridge bathing water as a focus.

The project kickstarted an engagement process with stakeholders to prioritise and develop projects that address water quality issues, such as agricultural runoff, sewage, and road runoff in the catchment upstream of Edisford Bridge. This approach involved community engagement, citizen science initiatives such as River Blitzes and ecological surveys, and collaboration with partners like United Utilities and Ribble Valley Borough Council.

As part of the project, the Environment Agency funded the installation of Hello Lamp Posts, which engage visitors in an AI-powered chat to gather information and opinions that may not otherwise come to the fore via traditional methods of consultation.

The strategy will ensure that the engagement efforts initiated during the project continue to grow, resulting in an informed and empowered community working towards a healthier river and hopefully an improvement to the classification of the Edisford Bridge bathing water.

Hello Lamp Post at Edisford Bridge

River Ribble at Edisford Bridge

PROJECTS

IMPROVING HABITAT

SPECIES SURVIVAL FUND

In spring 2024, Ribble Trust launched its two-year Room for Rivers project thanks to a £1.65 million grant from the Species Survival Fund.

Administered by the National Lottery Heritage Fund on behalf of Defra, the Species Survival programme will support the creation and restoration of wildlife-rich habitats to help reverse the decline of species across England.

The Species Survival Fund was designed to make crucial early progress towards the statutory 2030 Species Abundance target, which seeks to halt the decline of our native flora and fauna.

SPECIES SURVIVAL FUND

Funded by UK Government

Heritage Fund

ROOM FOR RIVERS

The Ribble Rivers Trust has been monitoring fish populations within the Ribble, Hodder and Calder catchments for over 16 years. Unfortunately, we have witnessed a steady decline in the numbers of salmon, trout, smelt and eel. Many factors are believed to be causing the decline of these iconic fish species, including poor water quality, excessive fluctuations in water levels, and poor quality and connectivity of both in-channel and riparian habitat.

By combining the data collected from our fish, invertebrate and habitat surveys, we have been able to produce maps which show the areas of the catchment that have the least biodiversity, so that we can focus our efforts in those locations and design nature-based solutions to help address the issues.

Using the grant from the Species Survival Fund, a suite of projects have been developed and are being delivered at several of the priority locations around the catchment. The projects aim to enable rivers and streams to behave more naturally, giving them room to meander and space to accommodate high flows, as well as creating biodiverse buffer zones between farmed areas and the channels themselves.

A more naturally behaving river is able to offer a wider range of habitats, and in turn, a more diverse array of species. Slower flows and meanders lead to the formation of pool and riffle sequences, which is crucial for fish spawning. Slower flows also reduce the likelihood of eggs and juveniles washing away. Installing fish passes allows new spawning locations to be accessed, and wetlands and vegetated buffer strips around river channels help to improve the water quality by filtering out pollutants. Baseline monitoring of species has already been carried out at these sites and will continue after the restoration works are complete.

IN-CHANNEL HABITAT RESTORATION

The Mearley and Skirden sub-catchments are particularly prone to high flows due to the topography surrounding them and as a result, flash flooding downstream is common.

Fast-flowing water is also harmful to the invertebrate and fish populations, especially during spawning seasons, as eggs and juveniles are washed out of their nursery redds.

Thanks to the Species Survival Fund, we're focusing our efforts on two sections of Mearley Brook and Skirden Beck, where we'll install leaky dams and other woody material to help slow the flow, promote natural meandering and provide a greater diversity of habitat within the channel itself.

The pools and riffles that form as a result of this work will provide suitable spawning substrate for fish, as well as areas of refuge during high flows. This will hopefully help to boost our struggling salmon and trout populations, with the added benefit of reducing flood risk to communities downstream.

Mearley Brook

DE-CULVERTING

In the past, smaller watercourses that flowed across agricultural land were culverted so that the land above them could be grazed. Not only does this restrict the biodiversity within them, but it also confines the channel, resulting in unnatural morphology.

As part of the Room for Rivers project, we are de-culverting, or 'daylighting' Storth Gill Beck, a tributary of the River Ribble in the North Yorkshire area of our catchment. The work will involve removing the stone walls and roof of the culvert in places where it is feasible to do so, to immediately let light into the river channel and stimulate vegetation growth.

With the stonework removed, natural erosion and deposition will recommence. Meanders will begin to form, as well as pool and riffle sequencing, offering more variety in flow, substrate and habitat that can support a greater diversity of riverine species. Once re-naturalised, there is even potential for Storth Gill Beck to offer prime spawning habitat for salmonid species, which will aid in our mission to increase and create greater resilience within our fish populations.

Our Data and Evidence team will be carrying out monitoring of the site following the works, to assess how quickly fish and invertebrate species recolonise the beck.

In addition to the benefits to wildlife, the de-culverting will help to reduce flooding, since the channel will no longer be confined. The beck will be re-connected to its floodplain along its entire length and water levels will rise and fall naturally, as opposed to flood water backing up as a result of bottlenecks.

A wetland is also being created at the farm to further enhance the biodiversity of the area.

Smelt, River Tamar © Jack Perks

FISH PASSAGE

Fragmented habitat is one of the biggest threats to our freshwater fish populations. Structures such as weirs act as barriers, preventing fish from swimming upstream. Fish need access to a wide range of habitats, including shallow gravels for spawning, deep, cool pools to escape elevated water temperatures in summer, and trailing bankside vegetation for refuge from predators. When their range is limited by in-channel obstacles, competition for food and space increases, and this curbs the potential for a greater, and therefore more resilient population.

The best option for enabling fish passage is always to remove the weir completely, however this is not always possible due to the resulting erosion posing a risk to other structures within the vicinity. Therefore, alternative solutions such as rock ramps, step pools, bypass channels and technical fish ladders are designed and implemented.

Bezza Brook Fish Easement

Thanks to the Species Survival Fund, we've been able to tackle three more barriers around the catchment to unlock more habitat for fish. The Bezza Brook fish easement was the first to be constructed, with the other two fish passage projects planned for delivery in 2025.

Bezza Brook is a tributary that joins the main River Ribble near the Brockholes Nature Reserve at Samlesbury. It is thought to be adjacent to the tidal limit, meaning that it has the potential to host estuarine fish species, including our elusive smelt (pictured above).

Smelt are known to congregate in large shoals in estuaries and migrate into freshwater during the spring months to spawn. They were once widespread around the UK but have declined considerably over the last 200 years, making them one of our primary target species for protection.

In 2019, the Ribble Estuary was designated as a Marine Conservation Zone, one of the reasons being that it offers critical habitat for smelt. Our fish easement project on Bezza Brook complements the designation, opening up more freshwater spawning habitat for smelt to complete their lifecycles.

Removal of the weir was not an option due to the surrounding buildings and infrastructure. Therefore working alongside our contractor, Wade Group, we installed a rock ramp up to the first barrage to reduce the height of the obstacle. We also cut notches in each barrage to create a suitable depth of flow for fish of all species to swim through.

The work was completed in September 2024, just in time for the annual salmon migration. Trout, eel, chub, roach and dace will also benefit from the reconnected habitat, and hopefully this work will go some way to helping our smelt populations recover in the future.

Before

After

WETLANDS

Wetlands are one of the most vital habitats in the world, supporting specialist plant, bird, amphibian and insect species.

Unfortunately, most of our naturally formed wetlands have been historically drained to make way for buildings, roads and agriculture, making them one of our most threatened habitats.

As well as supporting a diversity of wildlife, wetlands perform an important role in keeping rivers healthy. They slow the flow of water and act as a filter, allowing sediment and pollutants to settle rather than being washed straight into watercourses. They also help to reduce flood peaks by storing rainwater away from river channels and releasing it more gradually.

Furthermore, wetlands are a natural solution to climate change as they lock away carbon, helping to reduce the amount of carbon dioxide entering our atmosphere.

Thanks to the Species Survival Fund, we've been able to create five more wetlands around the Ribble Catchment. These will help to improve the water quality within our rivers and reduce high flows to help protect our freshwater fish and invertebrate populations, while at the same time, improving biodiversity on the land.

Three of the wetlands were completed in 2024, one of which was at Haugh Field Farm on the edge of our catchment near Skipton, which is part of Jamie's Farm; a nationwide initiative offering residential farm experiences to young people. We'll be working with the residents to plant up the wetland with native species such as yellow rattle, bilberry and bog myrtle, as well as offering other conservation activities that will give the young people a valuable insight into environmental stewardship.

Not too far away, on the Long Preston floodplain, we created two interconnected ponds, designed to offer varying depths of water with shallow margins to provide suitable habitat for a wide range of species. This wetland will be left to recolonise naturally.

The third wetland project for 2024 was adjacent to Holden Beck near Bolton-by-Bowland, a sub catchment that is particularly prone to flash flooding. The two connected ponds will hold up to 1,100 cubic meters of water to help intercept runoff and reduce high flows through the river channels.

Two more wetland projects are planned for completion in 2025, one at Cow Ark in the Forest of Bowland, and one in the lower reaches of our catchment at Wrea Green, where we will be increasing the capacity of an existing wetland and enhancing it to improve the biodiversity.

Broad bodied chaser dragonfly (M. Flaherty)

Holden wetland

Wetland, Long Preston

Curlew

Haugh Field Farm, Coniston Cold

SPECIES SURVIVAL FUND

Funded by UK Government Heritage Fund

WOODLANDS

IMPROVING HABITAT

Over 80,000 native trees were planted within the Ribble Catchment during the winter of 2024/2025 across 100 acres of land, marking one of our most successful planting seasons to date.

This work was only made possible thanks to the help of the Trust's dedicated volunteers, who worked tirelessly throughout rain, snow and the occasional blast of sunshine, to plant these trees.

Together, these efforts have significantly contributed to the Trust's long-term goal of improving river catchments for the benefit of people, wildlife and the wider environment.

Tree planting typically takes place between late autumn and late spring, a period when trees are dormant and less likely to suffer harm during handling and planting. All trees planted by Ribble Rivers Trust are native and responsibly sourced to ensure they are well adapted to local conditions, increasing their chances of survival and long-term growth.

The trees planted will deliver a wide range of environmental benefits. As natural flood defences, woodlands slow the flow of rainwater and reduce the risk of downstream flooding. Their root systems help filter out pollutants and sediments before they reach rivers, protecting water quality and supporting aquatic life. Trees also provide essential shade, which helps regulate water temperatures and protects fish populations such as brown trout and Atlantic salmon.

Beyond their importance to rivers and wildlife, trees play a vital role in tackling climate change. Woodlands act as carbon sinks, capturing and storing greenhouse gases. They also contribute to landscape resilience, helping communities adapt to more frequent and severe weather events such as floods and droughts.

Through the continued support of volunteers, donors, and partners, Ribble Rivers Trust is building a healthier, greener future.

TRIBUTREES

In 2020, RRT received a grant from the Environment Agency to deliver a 5-year project to increase woodland planting alongside watercourses around the Ribble Catchment, including fencing off rivers and streams to exclude livestock.

The funding enabled our woodland team to identify suitable sites for planting, secure agreements with the landowners, and undertake the fencing and tree planting with a mix of contractors and volunteers.

Now the project has concluded, we are pleased to report that we have improved almost 30 kilometres of rivers and streams through riparian tree planting, with 87,583 trees planted across 58 sites. Thanks to the project, we'll have 75 hectares of new woodland in our catchment—that's the equivalent of 105 football pitches!

GROW BACK GREENER

Grow Back Greener is a programme led by The Woodland Trust with funding from the Government's Nature for Climate Fund. In 2021, RRT partnered with them to increase tree cover around the Ribble Catchment, selecting sites that will have a direct impact on the health of our rivers.

So far, 47 new woodlands have been planted around the catchment, comprising more than 40,000 trees, with a further 14,000 still to be planted over the 2025/2026 winter.

The Grow Back Greener programme has been particularly beneficial to the Trust, as it provides 10 years of additional funding for maintenance after planting. This allows us to inspect each woodland annually and make improvements where needed, ensuring long-lasting benefits to the river environment.

TREE NURSERIES

Thanks to grants from the Forestry Commission, Fellowship of the Trees and donations from local businesses back in 2023, RRT was able to set up three community tree nurseries in Nelson, Clitheroe and Preston. Each autumn, members of the team and volunteers selectively gather native tree seeds of local provenance from ancient and semi-natural woodland sites to plant at the tree nurseries.

In March 2025, the first 400 self-grown saplings were planted alongside Castle Clough Brook, a tributary of the River Calder near Padiham. This was a momentous occasion for one team member in particular, Ellie Brown, who briefly took a step away from her usual ArcGIS work to kickstart the whole initiative.

The tree nurseries have been hugely beneficial, not just for our local ecology, but to members of the local communities who have volunteered their time to gather, plant, water, weed and care for the saplings, and ultimately see them form a new woodland.

LANCASHIRE WOODLAND CONNECT

Ribble Trust is approaching the halfway point in its 10-year campaign to double the amount of woodland in Lancashire. Having joined forces with neighbouring rivers trusts in the Lune and Wyre catchments, we are aiming to create and connect 100 kilometres of new or restored woodland alongside the rivers and their tributaries.

Local councils helped to kickstart the campaign by providing the initial funding and since then, we've been fortunate to secure several grants that are helping us to reach our ambitious target. So far we have planted 215,000 native trees over four winters.

The public can contribute to the campaign too by making a donation in return for a personalised tree dedication. Visit our website for more details.

PEOPLE AND COMMUNITIES

EXPLORING THE ESTUARY

Our Outdoor Learning Officer, Leanne, has been over in Blackpool working with a number of schools in the local area, helping to connect them to their local Ribble estuary and their surrounding green and blue spaces. Leanne's role is supported by the Ernest Cook Trust, whose aim is to get children from underprivileged communities outside and connecting with nature. We have been working for a number of weeks with St Johns Primary school who have been to their local beach to explore the wildlife and look at a number of issues that pollution in the River Ribble is causing for their estuary and local beaches. They also got to learn about water safety from Emma, who volunteers at Blackpool RNLI station, and got to see the lifeboats and the lifesaving equipment they use on their local shores. We then took a sunny trip up river to Avenham Park where the children learned about flooding, invasive species and what they can do to help their local river. Parents of the children were invited to attend a special assembly all about rivers, where the children presented their posters informing the school why poo, pee and paper are the only things that should be going down your loo!

Leanne has also been working with a number of other local primary schools in the Fylde area, including KS1, KS2 and SEN schools, along with community groups and sensory sessions for nursery and preschool children. These have been designed to get the children thinking about nature and their local green and blue spaces.

RIVERS IN THE CLASSROOM

Pupils have experienced the wonder of brown trout and their remarkable life cycle within their classrooms! They've had a unique opportunity to watch and nurture the trout as they grew from tiny eggs to fry. Once fully developed, these young trout were released into their local rivers just before the school Easter holidays, where they will live out the rest of their lives in the wild.

In addition to Trout in the Classroom, the children have explored the world of invertebrates, learning their crucial role in the food chain and their significance to the future of the trout they've spent so much time caring for.

This year, we were excited to announce the opening of our second exhibition at Haworth Art Gallery, Accrington, building on our original installation at Towneley Hall, Burnley. In total, 13 schools participated in Trout in the Classroom this past year, making it an unforgettable experience for students across the region!

SPREADING THE WORD!

Over the past year, we have been raising awareness of our remarkable projects through shows, events, community group presentations, and parish council meetings. Our dedicated team has engaged with countless individuals, sharing inspiring stories and showcasing the positive impact of our work on local ecosystems and communities. By participating in these events, we not only spread the word about our initiatives but also foster connections with community members, encouraging their involvement and support. Together, we can create lasting change and build a stronger, more informed community committed to protecting our shared resources.

EXCITING NEW GAMES

While we thoroughly enjoy visiting schools, community groups, and engaging with volunteers, we've also embraced innovative ways to connect with our audience by developing educational games accessible on our website. Currently, we offer two interactive games: one challenges players to race against the current to collect litter, while the other tests their knowledge of tree leaves.

Exploring diverse methods of engagement is vital, as it allows us to reach a broader audience, foster inclusivity, and adapt to different learning styles. We're excited to announce that more games are on the way, highlighting the incredible work of all departments within the Trust. Stay tuned for an upcoming detective game that will immerse players in the fascinating world of monitoring, encouraging curiosity and promoting environmental stewardship in an engaging, fun format!

ENGAGING COMMUNITIES

Over the past year, we have actively engaged with our communities through a variety of activities aimed at raising environmental awareness, fostering lasting relationships and inspire people to take action. Our guided walks have offered participants the chance to explore local projects while learning from guest speakers who share their expertise on topics such as the unique moss found in our Darwen moorland and the identification of wetland birds. We've also visited various community groups, including lunch clubs and environmental organisations, to discuss our ongoing initiatives and encourage dialogue, allowing attendees to ask questions and share their thoughts.

In our creative endeavours, young people, after learning about our work with leaky dams across various projects, took part in crafting clay river structures using twigs, moss, and stones, followed by a fun challenge to design their own leaky dams. In addition, we've had young people crafting seed bombs with our native seeds to spread as part of our Blackburn with Darwen Riverbank Revival project, aiming to turn urban spaces into thriving ecosystems that benefit both wildlife and people. Both favourites for the schools, Scouts and Girlguiding groups that took part! We couldn't forget the festive season, we completed Christmas craft videos on YouTube and wreath-making workshops at Trinity Methodist Church and Community Hub.

Our local community groups have not only learned about our work but have also rolled up their sleeves to contribute through volunteering efforts, including non-native invasive species (INNS) removal, cleanups, and tree planting, all aimed at enhancing their local environment. By engaging individuals of all ages, we encourage them to take an active role in caring for our natural environment for future generations.

OFWAT INNOVATION FUND

MAINSTREAMING NATURE BASED SOLUTIONS

Nature-based solutions are actions that help to restore, manage and protect ecosystems from issues like flooding, draught and pollution, while simultaneously benefitting human wellbeing and biodiversity. Inspired by and incorporating nature, these solutions are often more cost-effective than human-made infrastructure and help to build better resilience to our changing climate.

Despite nature-based solutions being widely evidenced and accepted as effective land management techniques, their implementation on-the-ground is lacking.

In 2023, Ribble Trust was part of a successful bid to the Ofwat Innovation Fund along with 19 other partners comprising local rivers trusts, water companies and environmental businesses. The partnership secured £8 million to explore, deliver and test nature-based solutions over five years to help facilitate and enable the transition of nature-based solutions into business-as-usual, making them more recognised, accepted and more frequently implemented to deliver a greater value of socio-economic and environmental benefits.

The Rivers Trust's Chief Executive, Mark Lloyd said: *"Despite enthusiasm for nature-based solutions in policy documents, their investment and delivery remain very limited in scale, and too often they are blocked by risk-averse mindsets. This project seeks to change that, making NBS a key aspect of the integrated approach to water and environmental management that we desperately need."*

The Ribble Trust was awarded £350,000 to work as part of this multi-sectorial national partnership and will help to feed back valuable learnings from its own real-life test and demonstration projects. The Ofwat Innovation Fund was launched in 2020 to help the water sector to better meet the evolving needs of customers, society and the environment.

WHAT ARE NATURE-BASED SOLUTIONS?

- **Tree and hedge planting** can help reduce rainfall run-off, flooding and pressure on sewers, as well improving water quality, providing more habitat for wildlife and keeping rivers cool in heatwaves.
- **Buffer strips** with long vegetation alongside rivers can intercept run-off and pollution, improving water quality, reducing riverbank erosion and providing more space for nature.
- **Soil restoration** can aid in reducing flood risk by enabling more rainwater to soak into the ground, rather than flowing straight into channels.
- **Wetlands** can also help to store floodwater, filter out pollution for better water quality and provide valuable habitat.
- **Leaky dams** can help to slow the flow and reduce flood peaks.

Water Breakthrough Challenge

CITIZEN SCIENCE

Citizen science is defined as the involvement of volunteers in science. It's a cost-effective way to increase the amount of data being gathered, while simultaneously engaging people with science. As a small charity with a big catchment, RRT has benefitted enormously from the efforts of its citizen scientists over the years through initiatives such as riverfly monitoring, as they have helped to collect valuable data that shows us which rivers and streams are most in need of improvement, allowing us to prioritise our works.

The Catchment Systems Thinking Cooperative (CaSTCo) was set up in 2022 with £7.1 million of funding from Ofwat to revolutionise the way crucial data about the health of the nation's rivers is gathered and shared, ensuring there is a more robust evidence base for tackling environmental challenges.

The cooperative, which is made up of rivers trusts, environmental charities, water companies and academia, will test and build a national framework to support communities and citizen scientists, decision-makers, scientists, and industry to collect and combine data from community monitoring along with other datasets to deliver improvements to the water environment.

The Ribble is one of nine demonstration catchments testing hypotheses to ensure the data framework is applicable in practice. RRT has been assessing the 'RiverBlitz' method of data collection, which is used to analyse water quality and biodiversity. During a RiverBlitz, the numbers of different riverine species are counted, water temperature and chemistry is tested, and habitat condition is recorded, to form a snapshot of the health of a target watercourse. The more RiverBlitzes we conduct, the more we can understand about the health of our rivers and identify areas that are most in need of improvement. The results are already influencing the activities of RRT, the Environment Agency and our water company to make more effective improvements to the river environment.

Not only will our findings help to inform CaSTCo's national data framework, the project has already resulted in a better experience for our citizen scientists by making the data more accessible, standardising methodologies, improving health and safety practice and communicating more effectively.

As well as RiverBlitzes, we offer training to volunteers to undertake habitat assessments, bat and otter surveys, riverfly monitoring and identify barriers to fish migration (weirs, dams etc.). Many of our citizen scientists have noticed improvements to their health and wellbeing as a result of their work, including improved mood and better physical health.

citizen scientist

noun

a member of the general public who collects and analyses data relating to the natural world, typically as part of a collaborative project with professional scientists.

DATA AND EVIDENCE

Every year, the Ribble Trust gathers ecological data from around the catchment with the help of volunteers, citizen scientists, student placements and partner organisations. This data helps to show trends in the populations of our riverine species and highlight where we have issues.

We focus our monitoring on indicator species such as salmon, trout, eels, riverflies and otters, since they are sensitive to changes in water quality and habitat, and their presence or absence can help us to target our conservation efforts in the areas of the catchment that need it the most.

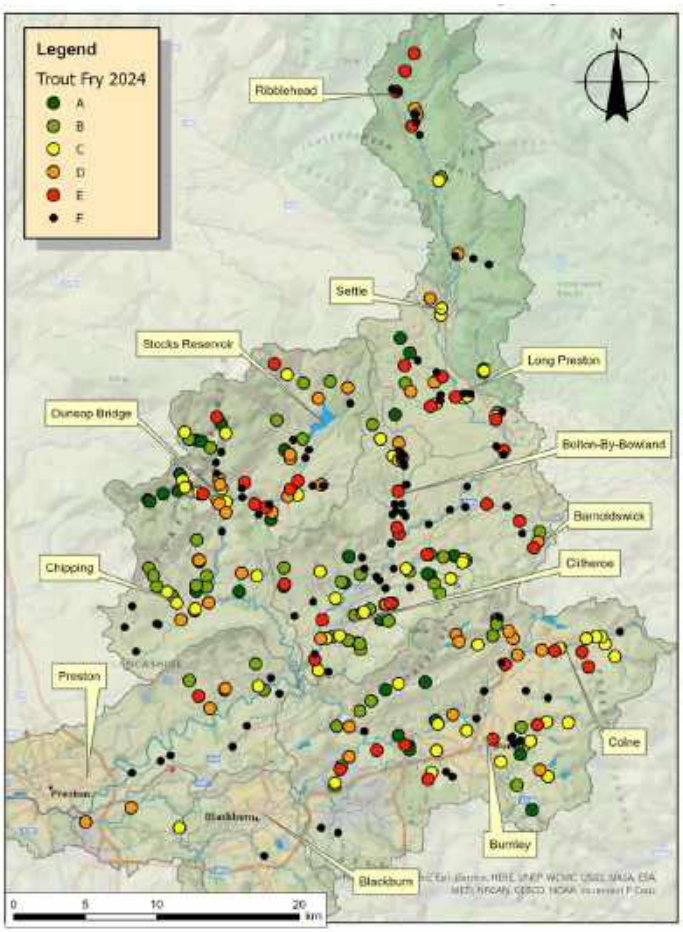
FISH SURVEYS

The Ribble Rivers Trust's 17th annual report reveals troubling trends for fish populations in the Ribble Catchment, underscoring both successes and ongoing challenges in conservation. Extensive electric fishing surveys conducted from June 16th to September 30th at 321 sites across three major sub-catchments highlight a decline in key fish species, despite habitat restoration and protection efforts.

Brown trout fry, found in 71% of surveyed sites, displayed mixed results. Although 85 sites had trout densities rated as "Good" or "Excellent," a long-term analysis indicates a mild downward trend in fry densities since 2008. The report shows that, despite improvements in fish passage and restoration, trout populations across the Hodder, Ribble and Calder catchment are converging towards lower densities, suggesting environmental pressures that extend beyond localised conservation success.

The report raises deeper concerns over Atlantic salmon populations, which have shown a statistically significant decline. Only 15.6% of sites yielded salmon fry in 2024, and trends indicate a troubling trajectory towards potential local extinction in some areas. Once-robust salmon populations now show consistently low densities across the catchments, pointing to widespread challenges such as losses during the marine stage of its life cycle.

In response, the Trust continues its work on key initiatives, such as installing upgrading fish passes, replanting native vegetation, and establishing buffer zones to support habitat recovery. However, the findings emphasise a pressing need for more coordinated, large-scale conservation measures and regulatory support. Without intensified efforts, the future of fish populations and the wider ecological network that relies on them remains uncertain.



RIVERFLY SURVEYS

We are very fortunate to have a dedicated team of citizen scientists who visit their local rivers and streams on a monthly basis to take a sample of the aquatic invertebrates present.

These quick surveys can tell us a lot about the health of a watercourse; the more abundant and diverse the riverfly population is, the better the water quality.

Although one sample is just a snapshot, if the same site is monitored consistently, over time we can start to see improvements or declines in the numbers of invertebrates. This can help to alert us to potential pollution problems if we see a sudden drop in riverflies, or if the numbers are rising, it could be a result of habitat improvements nearby and can show that our efforts are having a positive impact.

We run training sessions every year for new volunteers who are interested in helping us monitor our catchment's health through riverfly monitoring. Please get in touch for details of our next training event.

WATER QUALITY SURVEYS

The Ribble Catchment is 750 square miles, which is a large area to monitor for a relatively small team. In a bid to amplify our data collection and therefore produce a more detailed picture of the issues and successes around the catchment, the Data and Evidence Team have put together handy travel-sized water testing kits that all our project officers can take with them on their site visits.

Taking a water sample takes less than five minutes, yet from it we can determine the temperature, pH, dissolved oxygen and pollution levels of every site tested. The results are sent directly from the field to the Data and Evidence Team for analysis.

If the results of a water sample are poor, it does not necessarily mean the issue lies within the vicinity of the test site. It is more likely indicating that there is a problem upstream and further detailed investigation would be required to identify the source.

The team are also able to test for E. coli if a water sample is returned to the lab in good time. This is particularly important for monitoring water quality around popular bathing sites, such as Edisford Bridge, Marles Wood and Lower Hodder Bridge.

Photo: Dave Gibson, Friends of Tawd Valley

Some water testing kits are also being given to voluntary conservation groups for monitoring their local waterways. Subject to funding, we hope to equip more citizen scientists in the future to help with our data collection.

ASSESSING OUR IMPACT

We collect baseline ecological data for many of our projects to help quantify any improvements in water quality, flow and biodiversity that may result from our work.

A lot of our river improvement projects take place on farmland, including woodland planting, fencing off watercourses to create buffer strips along riverbanks, wetland creation, farm nutrient plans and farmyard clean and dirty water separation. Our Data and Evidence Team visit many of these farms prior to any works taking place in order to carry out baseline soil testing, riverfly surveys and water chemistry analysis.

These farms will be revisited year after year for repeat surveys. Some improvements may be seen immediately, such as reductions in pollution, while other changes, like water temperature reduction, may take time as new woodlands grow large enough to create shade.


Tawd Valley Park Wetland

Natural Flood Management (NFM) has been a major focus of the Trust in recent years. It involves slowing the rate of flow through watercourses by installing leaky dams, re-meandering artificially straightened channels and storing excess water away from rivers by creating wetlands and removing artificial flood banks. Slowing the flow can help to reduce the likelihood of flash flooding, as well as maintaining water levels during periods of low rainfall, which benefits the fish and invertebrate life within.

The Data and Evidence Team have carried out extensive baseline monitoring of flow levels, velocities and water quality in three of the Ribble's sub-catchments; Mearley Brook near Clitheroe, Wrea Green and Darwen Moor, where we have a raft of NFM projects ready for delivery. The monitoring will continue once the works are complete so we can demonstrate how effective each intervention has been.

Detailed monitoring is also being carried out on a newly constructed two-pond wetland in Tawd Valley Park by the local Friends Of group. The wetland, which was completed in 2024 thanks to grant funding from the Environment Agency, is designed to take road runoff and filter out pollutants before the water enters the River Tawd. By comparing the water quality in the first pond to that of the second, we have clearly demonstrated how much cleaner the water entering the river is, and we hope this will lead to increased biodiversity in the River Tawd, as well as the wetland itself.

VOLUNTEERING

Our volunteers are a crucial part of our mission to improve our rivers. Without them, we wouldn't have nearly as much impact as we're having right now.

There is a wide range of activities that volunteers can get involved with. Some that we do all year round, like litter picks and fencing, and some that vary with the seasons; tree planting throughout the winter months, and invasive species control during the spring and summer.

Often, there are more site-specific activities that are required to restore the river habitat, such as leaky dam construction, riverbank repairs and reintroducing native plant species.

We're lucky to have some incredible volunteers who help week in, week out, with our education activities in schools, as well as those who've adopted sites to check and maintain long after the initial work has been done, such as our woodland sites.

Although we work in all corners of the catchment, in 2024, a lot of our conservation efforts were focused around the River Hyndburn area, which had been identified as a priority watercourse for restoration. Many volunteers turned out to help with the litter picks and Himalayan balsam pulling sessions along Tinker Brook, and we also joined forces with the local litter pickers group to carry out monthly clean-ups around Platts Lodge in Accrington. Through this work, our volunteers have helped to promote the recolonisation of native fauna along the riverbanks, reduced the rate of erosion and sedimentation of the watercourse, prevented microplastics from entering the water, and hugely improved the look of the area for the local communities.

Additionally, we welcomed an army of volunteers for a widescale clean-up of the Ribble Estuary at Warton, including the Scouts, Lytham & District Wildflowers Association and local families and individuals (pictured). Tyres, road signs and oil barrels were amongst the piles of litter collected.

Other large groups that joined us in 2024 included UU River Rangers, Bowker and BAE Systems, Heywood, Serco, Recycling Lives and UCLAN.

A final word from Mike Flaherty, our Volunteering Officer, who comments: *"A big thank you to all our volunteers and corporate groups who have given their time to help achieve incredible things for the Ribble Catchment. Your time and help contributes to improving our rivers, not just for us, but for the wildlife that calls them home."*

How to volunteer

If you're an individual or family looking for opportunities to volunteer, head to our website;

ribbletrust.org.uk/volunteer and enter your details to join the mailing list.

You'll receive weekly bulletins about our upcoming volunteering opportunities. Simply follow the links in the emails to sign up for the events.

For opportunities for larger groups, please email admin@ribbletrust.com.

No experience is necessary and all tools and training are provided. All that we ask is that you come dressed appropriately for the activity and the weather.

WAYS TO SUPPORT US

JOIN THE TRUST

Sign up as a regular supporter and we'll keep you posted on how your money has helped improve rivers. Simply visit our website to join online, or complete the form on the next page and return it to us. We'll send you a joining pack in the post, and our annual newsletter for each year that you remain a supporter.

DONATE

The Trust's projects are mostly grant funded, but unfortunately there are some things that grant funding doesn't pay for, such as running costs, wildlife surveying, staff and volunteer training, project research and development, and site maintenance. The money raised from donations helps us cover these vital costs and keeps us going. Donate, if you can, via our website.

CORPORATE SUPPORTERS

Is your company looking to improve its environmental credentials? Whether you are a tech start up, a small independent high street shop, or a major UK company with a multimillion pound turnover, Ribble Rivers Trust can help you to reach your corporate social responsibility goals. Visit our website for more info.

LEGACIES

Leaving a gift in your will is a great way to ensure that your legacy will continue to make a difference, long after you are gone. There are multiple benefits to leaving charities a gift in your will, including tax relief. However, perhaps the most important benefit is the satisfaction of knowing that you have supported a cause that is important to you. Visit our website for more info.

DEDICATE A TREE

Whether you want to mark a milestone, remember someone special, or give someone a unique gift, you can dedicate a tree in Lancashire for a small donation. Your tree will be planted on a site which you can access and we'll give you a map of your woodland so you can visit it. Head to our website for more details.

DOWNLOAD A FUNDRAISING PACK

Do you have a fundraising idea that can help raise vital money to help rivers and wildlife? Our fundraising packs include everything you need to get started, including sponsorship forms. Head to our website to download the pack.

GO FISHING!

Our Angling Passport scheme offers day ticket fishing at a number of picturesque beats around the Ribble Catchment. From wild, remote streams, to main stem rivers, you can enjoy coarse and game fishing from as little as £5.00 per day. Catch and release is strongly recommended, and you must hold a valid rod licence to fish. Tickets can be purchased via our website.

VOLUNTEER

Donating to a charity doesn't have to be all about money - your time is just as valuable. There is no way we could restore as much habitat as we do without the help of our amazing volunteers. From tree planting and invasive species control, to litter picking and wildlife surveys, each activity is a chance to get outdoors, have fun and help nature. See page 20 for more info.

www.ribbletrust.org.uk

Game and coarse fishing at several locations around the Ribble Catchment, including the main Ribble and Calder rivers.

The Angling Passport scheme aims to highlight the importance of maintaining a clean and healthy river as a valuable asset to recreation and the local economy. Proceeds from the ticket sales are invested back into the conservation of the Ribble Catchment's rivers and streams.

Buy your tickets online at: www.ribbletrust.org.uk/go-fishing

JOIN RIBBLE RIVERS TRUST

As a charity, we rely entirely on supporters, donations and grants to continue the vital conservation of our rivers. If you love nature and would like to make a difference, please complete the form or visit ribbletrust.org.uk to join online.

Your details

Title | Surname

Forename(s)

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Your donation

Your subscription is a donation towards our work. The more you can afford to give, the more we can do to improve our rivers.

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- ○ **Or your own amount:** £

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As a charity, we depend on the generosity of our supporters who care about the environment and want to make sure it's protected for future generations. Become a supporter of Ribble Rivers Trust today and together we can help make a difference.

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