



Members' Newsletter

Upper Ouse Conservation Trust
November-December 2025
#003

Happy New Year!

We hope that you have all had a wonderful Christmas and would like to wish all of our members, supporters, visitors and followers a very happy 2026. We are looking forward to our first full year owning and caring for Townend Field Nature Reserve - all thanks to you! Please do continue supporting us in any way that you can; whether that's through volunteering, membership, donations or simply being a responsible visitor of the nature reserve. Thank you!



Nature

More rare sightings and special status recognition for some of our alder trees... it may be winter, but this edition is still bursting with information about nature!

Community

A local Duke of Edinburgh Award volunteer, money from the 'locality fund' to support the nature reserve and your help needed with a special project for 2026!

Landscape Character

The future of the stone wall is safe in the hands of the Upper Ouse Conservation Trust. Find out what's in store for 2026.

Education

Great Ouseburn Community Primary School have begun using the nature reserve and are set to do even more in the spring term. Plus... a VERY special letter.



Using the reserve

Please be respectful of wildlife, residents and school pupils.

- Private land: Stay on the marked permissive footpaths.
- Children must be supervised at all times.
- Please pick up after your dog.
- No fires (including BBQs,) ball games or picnics.



- Dogs on short leads (Townend Field only) when no sheep grazing (The oak notice board at the entrance will make this clear)



- The Long Carr is particularly wildlife sensitive: No dogs allowed (a gate will also prevent sheep going on the Long Carr)

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Objective 1:

Create a safe and lasting environment for wildlife to thrive, preserving the diverse wildlife existing on the site and developing the environment to encourage wildlife to return to the site.



Survey Team: Camera Traps

Our survey team have been busy setting up borrowed (and more recently our own,) camera traps and analysing footage both from during the day and at night. See the 'community' section for information on how we managed to get our own recording equipment!

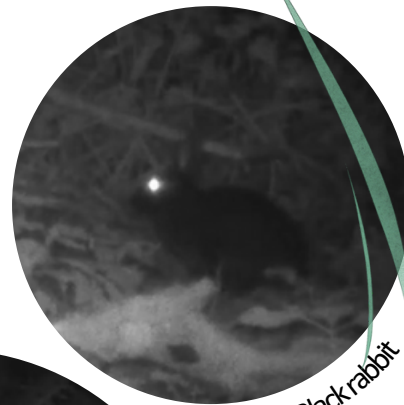
It has been fascinating to see the different wildlife at the reserve that have triggered the camera recordings. You can see some of these on our blog page on our website and also keep an eye out for them on our social media pages. Take a look at some of the stills taken from the videos recorded in November and December:



Grey heron



Roe deer



Black rabbit



Fox



Pheasant

Wildlife Focus: Otter



A Snapshot of the Species

- **Average size:** Adults typically measure about 1.0 - 1.3 metres in overall length (including tail) and can weigh up to approximately 9 kg.
- **Diet:** They are primarily fish-eaters (around 80% of their diet). But they are opportunistic: amphibians, crustaceans, small mammals and birds may also feature.
- **Territory & lifestyle:** Otters tend to live solitarily and maintain large stretches of river or waterway for their home range. For example, a male may require a territory of up to 30 km of riverbank in some areas.

Conservation status:

- Globally: Listed as Near Threatened by the IUCN.
- In the UK: Fully protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and listed as a 'Priority Species' under the UK Post-2010 Biodiversity Framework.



Above: A visiting otter, captured on a night vision camera set up by our survey team.

What to Look for: Signs of Otter Activity

One of the clearest signs that an otter has been nearby is the presence of spraint.

Spraint (otter droppings) are usually deposited in prominent places beside water: rocks, logs, banksides.

The otter captured on our borrowed wildlife camera trap, shows it left spraint by the stream shortly after it climbed out.

They often contain fish scales, bones and shells, reflecting the otter's diet.

Their smell is distinctive - said by some to resemble freshly-mown hay when fish-based, sometimes like jasmine tea, or less pleasant if feathers/hair are present.

These spraint sites are used by otters as scent markers, conveying information about presence, territory and perhaps even identity.

Numbers & Recovery in the UK

Once pushed to the brink by pollution, habitat loss and hunting, British otters have staged an impressive comeback.

In the mid-20th century they were declining sharply, with populations in many parts of England and Wales all but wiped out.

Today estimates suggest around 10,000 to 11,000 individuals in the UK.

In Scotland alone, the population is estimated at about 8,000 otters, making it a stronghold for the species. England currently has far less.

This recovery is a strong indication of improving water quality and habitat restoration, though challenges remain.

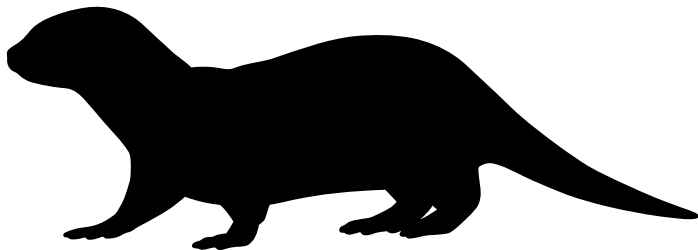


Otter (Continued)

Why They Matter & How You Can Help

Otters are not just charming creatures - they are bio-indicators of the health of our rivers and wetlands. Their presence hints at good food supply, clean water and intact riparian habitat. Improvements in water quality and the banning of certain harmful pesticides have played a key role in their revival.

At the Upper Ouse Conservation Trust, we have worked closely with the drainage board who previously sprayed the banks of the stream with chemicals to keep the water flowing freely. They have agreed to no longer use chemical sprays and we have collaborated on a management plan that keeps nature at the forefront of our minds when they carry out any required work.



What you can do:

When walking by rivers or streams, minimise disturbance: keep dogs under control near water edges. Our footpath through Townend Field allows for dogs on short leads when there are no sheep in the field and no dogs at all when sheep are grazing. The lower field (Long Carr) is an area that is particularly wildlife sensitive, so no dogs are allowed.

Report sightings or sign of otters (spraint, slides in banksides) to local wildlife or river trusts - or if it is at Townend Field Nature Reserve, please let us know via our website. These records help track population health.

Keep your eyes peeled!

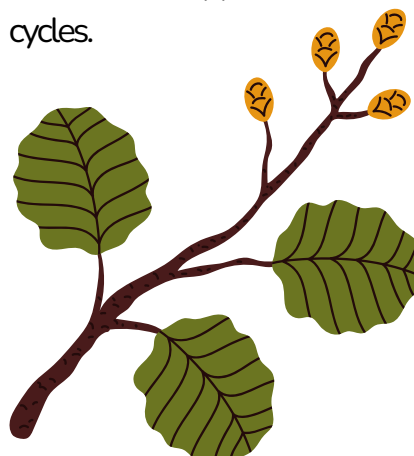


Above: A cluster of alder trees at Townend Field, just before the entrance to the Long Carr.

Veteran Alder Tree Status

Our oldest alder tree has received special recognition as a 'veteran' alder tree, by the Woodland Trust and Harrogate Naturalists' Society. This means that it is listed in the database of important trees due to its age, characteristics, and habitats for other species within the tree.

A veteran alder tree provides vital habitats for wildlife, with its hollows, dead wood, and bark supporting insects, birds, bats, and fungi. It helps improve soil and water quality by adding nutrients, supporting microorganisms, and keeping nearby habitats healthy. The tree also boosts biodiversity by creating a long-lasting, interconnected home that supports food chains and healthy natural cycles.



WOODLAND
TRUST

**Harrogate
& District
Naturalists'
Society**



Why Dead Wood Matters at Townsend Field Nature Reserve



When you're walking through Townsend Field Nature Reserve, you might notice fallen branches, rotting logs, or old tree trunks left where they lie. While it can look untidy at first glance, this dead wood is one of the most valuable habitats in the reserve and plays a vital role in supporting wildlife and healthy ecosystems.. Photo right: A decaying trunk on 'The Island.'

A Home for Wildlife



Dead wood provides food, shelter and breeding spaces for a huge range of UK species. Many animals depend on it for at least part of their life cycle.

Some of the wildlife it supports includes:

- Invertebrates such as stag beetles, woodlice, centipedes and many species of beetle that feed on decaying wood
- Fungi and lichens, including bracket fungi, which break down wood and recycle nutrients back into the soil
- Birds like great spotted woodpeckers, robins and wrens that hunt insects living in logs and crevices
- Mammals such as hedgehogs, bats and wood mice that use log piles for shelter and hibernation
- Amphibians including frogs, toads and newts,

which find cool, damp hiding places beneath rotting wood



Nature's Recycling System

Dead wood is a key part of the natural cycle. As it slowly decomposes:

- Nutrients are released back into the soil
- Soil structure improves, helping nearby plants and trees grow
- Carbon is stored, supporting climate regulation

This process helps keep the nature reserve healthy, resilient and full of life.

Why We Leave Dead Wood Alone

Removing fallen wood can disturb wildlife and destroy habitats that may have taken decades to form. Even a small pile of branches can be a crucial refuge, especially during winter or dry weather.



Birds: Passive Audio Monitoring

The wildlife survey team at the new Townsend Field Nature Reserve were clearly elated at the opportunity to start monitoring the wildlife across the Reserve but were faced with some significant hurdles, not least the initial lack of data.

The area, being private, had never been monitored, so whilst we knew that the habitat was excellent, there was no data to start to inform on the management plans which will be needed to ensure existing valuable habitats are preserved. We were able to quickly implement some regular moth light trapping which over the period from the opening of the Reserve to the year end, resulting in over 140 species,; a great start and including some specialist wetland species.

Martin Hammond, a professional ecologist, and some botanists from Harrogate Naturalists did some early surveying for the plants and habitat types. But what to do about getting some accurate and in-depth data on the birds?

At this stage in the early life of the Reserve we are not getting large amounts of data from visual sightings, that will come in time as visitors start to see things. Fortuitously the purchase of the Reserve is coinciding with huge advancements in technical and affordable innovation and we were lucky to introduce PAM to the team. PAM (passive audio monitoring) allows 24/7 acoustic recording using specialist recording. These are left in the field for sometimes weeks on end and once the audio files are uploaded onto computer and analysed through automatic AI identification software which accurately identifies (in most instances) all bird calls and can produce extensive reports based on the results. A degree of expert validation is needed to confirm out of context identifications, but since the beginning of the recordings in July many dozens of thousands of calls have produced identifications of the very rare Common Quail, Spotted Crake, and Yellow Browed Warbler, amongst of course many other more common birds.



The benefit is that we can for instance confirm presence of birds which may be shy and nocturnal and would otherwise not be seen. This volume of data informs on the richness of the biodiversity of the reserve and will allow very much more accurate and comprehensive management reports. Further information on the results to date will follow in forthcoming newsletters and there will be opportunities for anyone who is interested to help with this side of the data management, whether you are experienced in wildlife identification or not.



Why Moles Matter



Mole Myth-Busting

Moles are often misunderstood. Here are a few common myths:

“Moles eat plant roots”

✗ False — moles are insectivores and do not eat roots or bulbs

“Moles ruin the land”

✗ False — their tunnelling actually improves soil health
“Moles should be removed or killed”

✗ Not necessary — moles are a vital part of the natural ecosystem and rarely cause long-term damage

You may have come across a few areas where moles have been busy in Townend Field, including some patches over our permissive footpaths! During the summer ‘Garden Festival’ event, Sam Shipman, Head Gardener at Beningbrough Hall, spotted our molehills and described them as a brilliant sign, encouraging us to be delighted by the help moles provide. Moles are a natural and important part of the reserve’s ecosystem, and their presence is a sign of healthy soil. In agriculture, moles are considered pests in large numbers for their potential to impact crop yields and contaminate silage. Our main objective at Townend Field is to protect and support nature, and that includes moles - not only as wildlife themselves, but also for what they can do to support nature and help keep the nature reserve a healthy, thriving place!

What Do Moles Do for Nature?

The European mole (*Talpa europaea*) plays a vital role underground, quietly improving the land we all enjoy.

Moles help the reserve by:

- Aerating the soil, allowing air and water to reach plant roots
- Improving drainage, reducing waterlogging in wet conditions
- Mixing nutrients through the soil, which supports grasses and wildflowers
- Controlling invertebrate populations, as they feed mainly on earthworms and insect larvae

The tunnels they create are also later used by other wildlife such as beetles, frogs and small mammals.

Molehills and Footpaths

Molehills can occasionally appear on or near paths. While this may cause minor inconvenience, it’s important to remember that:

- Molehills are temporary and quickly weather down
- The soil brought to the surface is rich and helps plants grow
- Moles are simply following food sources underground, not trying to damage paths

Where needed, paths are maintained — but moles themselves are left undisturbed.

At Townend Field Nature Reserve, we choose to work with nature, not against it. Moles are part of a balanced ecosystem that benefits plants, insects, birds and mammals alike.

Next time you spot a molehill, think of it as a small sign of life beneath your feet — and another reminder that the reserve is a place where nature always comes first.

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Objective 2:

Create a lasting benefit for the local community through permissive access and participation in positive action for nature. Strengthen community sense of place and connection to nature.

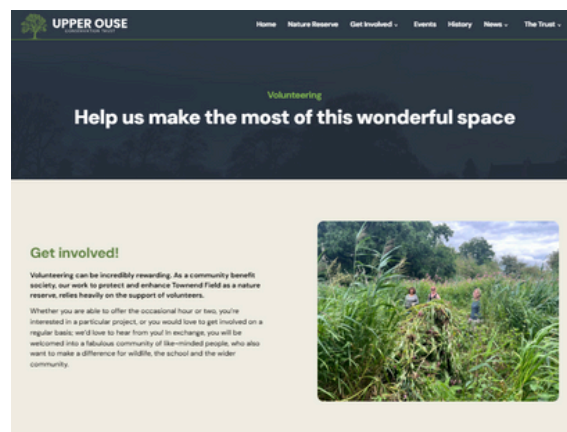


Have you signed up to be a volunteer?

We appreciate your patience whilst we have been setting up our systems to make communication as effective and targeted as possible. **If you have signed up to become a volunteer, please could you make sure that you have completed the website form, even if you have previously given us your details.**

This form gives us the most up to date information and allows us to capture what sort of volunteering you are interested in - so that we don't bombard you with irrelevant e-mails, but also so that we are able to get the right people for each different task!

If you're unsure if you have completed the online form or not, please do it again anyway - we would rather have the right information twice than not at all! It can be found on the 'Get Involved' then 'Volunteering' section of uoct.org.uk



D of E Award Volunteer

Have you spotted Sam Nellist helping at the nature reserve on a Sunday? We are incredibly grateful to Sam, who is doing a wonderful job of clearing the top of the stone wall, even in very cold and wet weather! We have been keeping him busy and are very proud to be supporting him towards his Duke of Edinburgh Award. Keep up the brilliant work, Sam!

Locality Fund



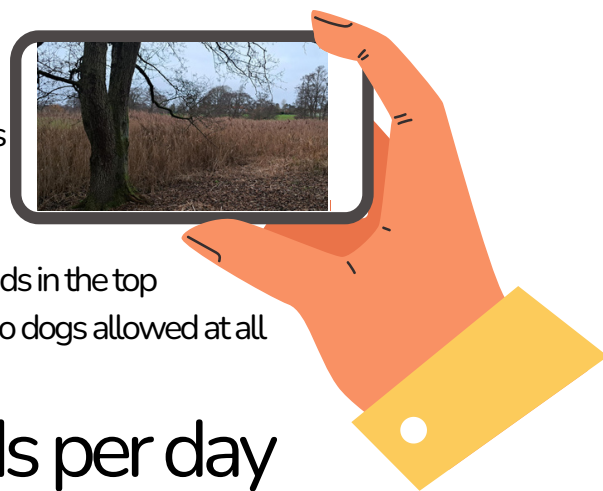
We are hugely grateful to Councillor Arnold Warneken for his support in getting us funding through the 'locality fund' for our own high-quality acoustic monitoring and camera equipment.

Without this, the survey team would not have incredible footage and sound recordings of rare and elusive species. It is only through recording and surveying that we can begin to truly appreciate the wildlife that is at the reserve. This allows us to know what it is we are protecting and to better understand the inter-connectedness of the varied habitats at the reserve and the species that visit or live there.

Updated dog legislation

UK law is being significantly updated in England and Wales through the new "Dogs (Protection of Livestock) (Amendment) Bill" to tackle dog attacks and 'worrying' on livestock. If you are a dog owner or walker, please familiarise yourselves with this legislation. A very brief summary:

- Livestock do not need to be bitten for an offence
- Stress and chasing are recognised harm
- Evidence can be physical and forensic
- "Proper control" means preventing risk, not recalling afterwards
- Responsibility rests with the handler



At Townend Field Nature Reserve, we only allow dogs on short leads in the top (Townend) field when there are no livestock in the field.. There are no dogs allowed at all on the bottom field (Long Carr) regardless of livestock.

Community Project: 5 seconds per day



To mark our first full year of owning Townend Field, we would love to record the changing of the seasons by collecting a snapshot each day until the end of 2026!

Whenever you are at Townend Field Nature Reserve, could you send us either a **landscape orientation** photograph, or **landscape orientation** video for 5 seconds (it can be slightly longer/shorter,) which could either be a view of the landscape, a close-up of something particularly interesting or whatever else takes your fancy! The videos and images will then be put together and shown on our social media and website each month,. **Please e-mail your contributions to info@uoctorg.uk with the title 'community project'**

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Objective 3:

The views the land affords are a significant feature of the village and are specifically mentioned in the village 'Conservation Area Character Appraisal'. We will look to maintain this whilst further developing nature and wildlife on the site.

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The Wall

A wall of this age (built in around the 1700s) and size takes care, sensitivity and consideration. We have been getting quotes from local conservation workers and have also had offers of help from professionals and amateurs alike. 2026 will see the UOCT form a solid plan on how to restore, repair and in some parts, rebuild the wall to the high standard we are committed to and we hope to see work also carried out in 2026.

Watch this ~~space~~ wall!



featured PHOTO

Sulphur Tuft mushroom taken by trustee
Graeme Jackson in November.



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Objective 4:

Facilitate use of Town End Field by Great Ouseburn School, promoting health, environmental awareness and nature connection.

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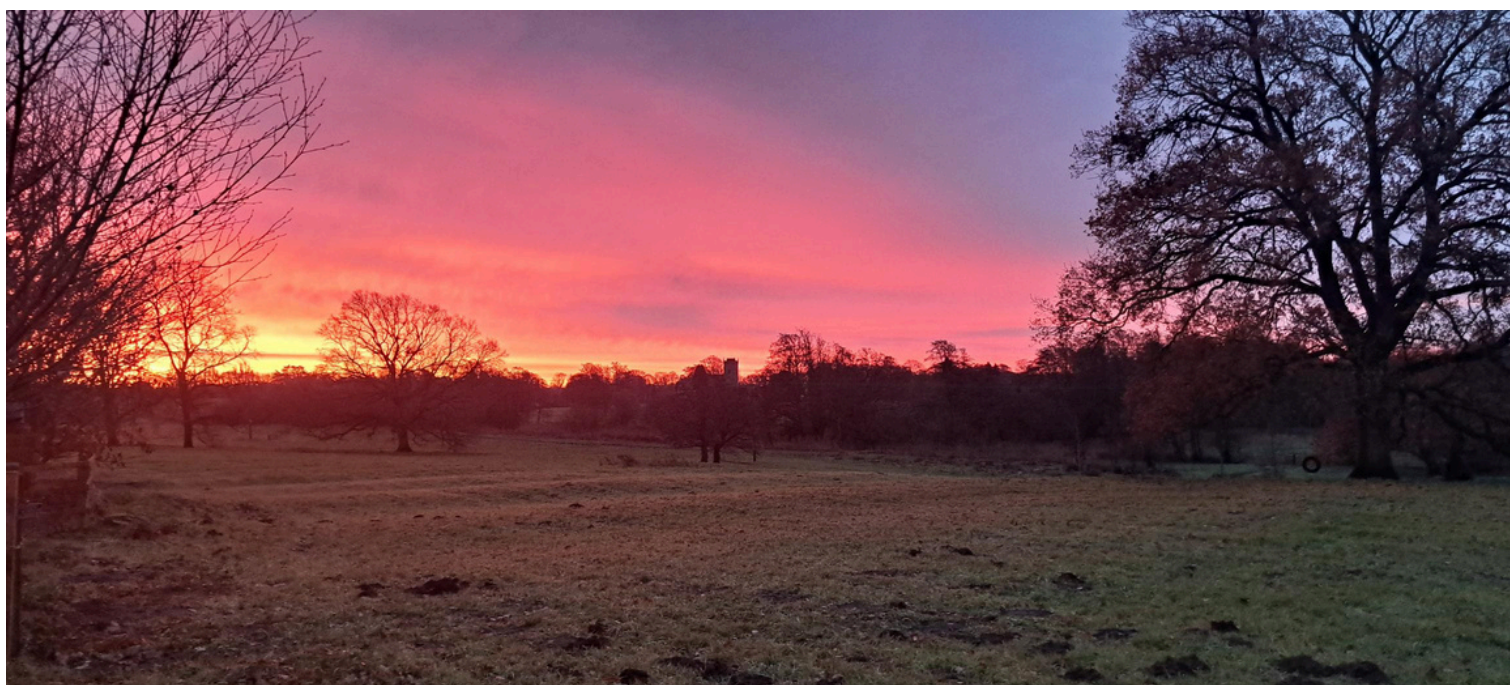
Forest School

Children in the 'Dragons' and 'Unicorns' classes have been spending some time out on the nature reserve as part of their forest school learning. Staff and pupils alike have loved making the most of the space on the school's doorstep and it has opened up a whole new world of learning opportunities!



Whole School Topic: The Great Outdoors

The spring term sees the whole school topic of 'The Great Outdoors,' with each class making links across the curriculum to nature. From learning about animals and their habitats, to designing and building homes for wildlife and creating natural, temporary artwork inspired by Andy Goldsworthy, the school are set to have a brilliant term being able to see the nature reserve come to life in the spring!



Above: Sunrise over Townend Field Nature Reserve, taken by trustee and primary teacher Lou Rayner from the school. in December.

School fence

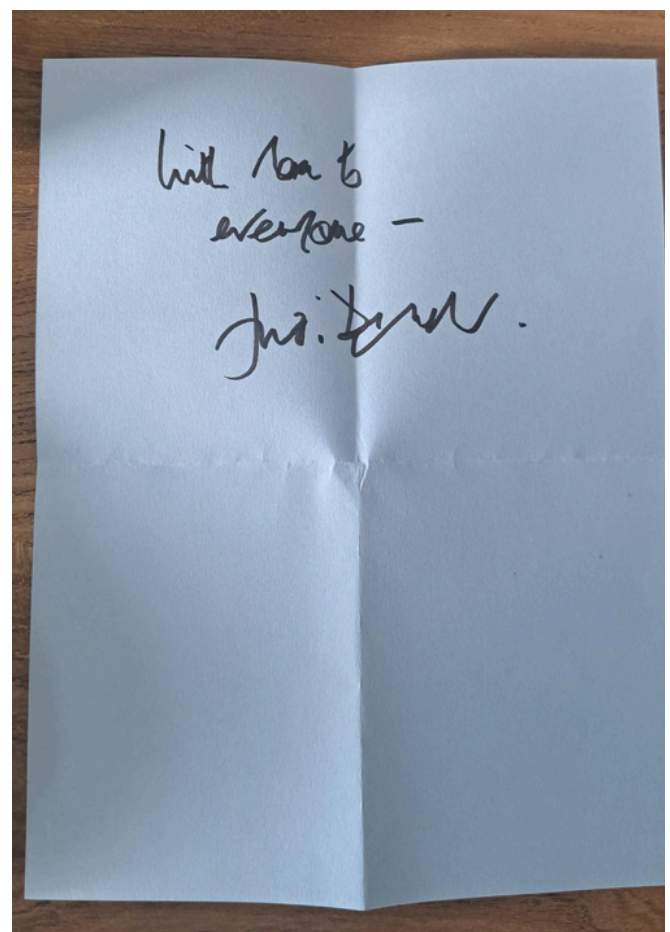
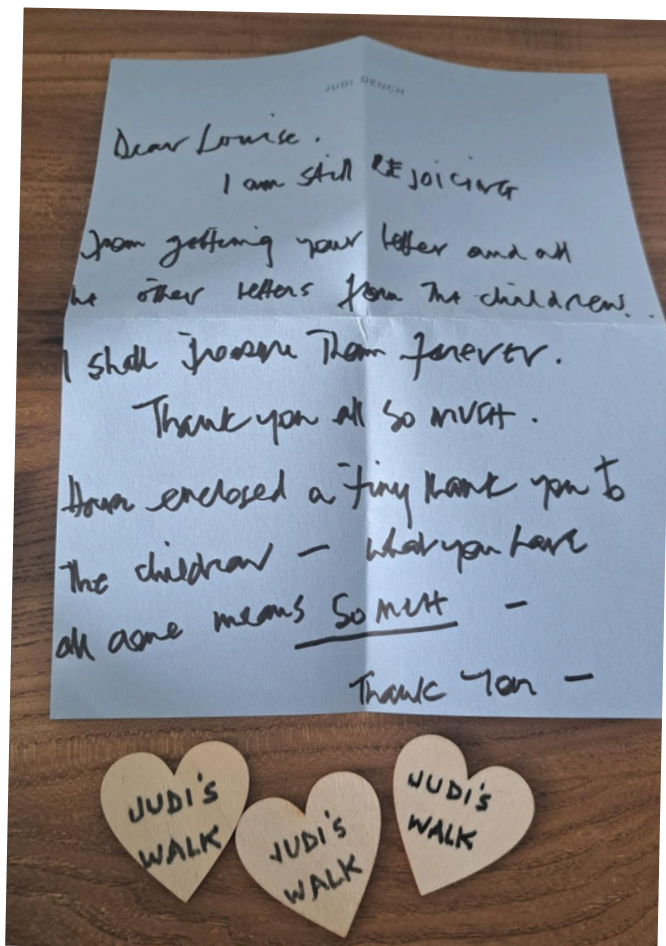
The School Fence is now set to be installed in the new year, after a generous offer from the Voakes family to bring in some favours and help to install the fence as just cost price of the timber. We can't wait to see it up!

A very special letter...

As part of their letter-writing lessons in English, UOCT trustee and Year 3&4 class teacher Lou Rayner asked the children to plan and write a letter each, to Dame Judi Dench.

The class had been inspired by their first visit onto the reserve at the opening event earlier in the term and had asked about 'Judi's Walk,' so naturally 'Mrs Rayner' explained the exciting connection. Judi was born and grew up in York and her father and brother were local doctors, with rounds in and around Great and Little Ouseburn. Judi is also known for having a love of trees, so we just had to get in touch and hope that she would be willing to help the campaign to save Townsend Field and set up a nature reserve!

During the massive fundraising challenge (£275,000 in just 4 weeks,) to purchase the land, we were blown away at not only Dame Judi's support, but how much she truly cared and wanted it to be a success for everyone. Upon learning about this, the class wanted to thank her for her support and write some descriptions of the reserve, to help Judi imagine being there. They each wrote a letter and drew pictures of the reserve and one of Judi's friends kindly accepted receipt of the letters, passing them onto her on our behalf. Soon, we got a reply... with a wooden heart, handwritten with 'Judi's Walk' for each of the children. The class went wild! Thank you, Dame Judi, for continuing to support our beautiful nature reserve; we are eternally grateful!





Thank You!

Upper Ouse Conservation Trust
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#003

Please e-mail your landscape
photograph/short video
contributions to info@uoct.org.uk
with the title 'collaborative project'
Please include the date in which the
video or photo was taken.



Next newsletter:

This is due to be sent out at the
end of March 2026.

Thank you for your continued
support

Website:
www.uoct.org.uk

Email:
info@uoct.org.uk

Phone: (Graeme)
07811 213703

