

1

00:00:14,840 --> 00:00:18,080

2

00:00:20,720 --> 00:00:22,711

Hello and welcome back to Unexpected

3

00:00:22,711 --> 00:00:25,365

Essex. I'm your host Eri Berry and this

4

00:00:25,365 --> 00:00:27,688

is Episode 4 - Turning the Tide. I've

5

00:00:27,688 --> 00:00:30,343

said it before and I'll say it again,

6

00:00:30,343 --> 00:00:32,997

Essex is not always what people think it

7

00:00:32,997 --> 00:00:35,652

is. The name of this county might well

8

00:00:35,652 --> 00:00:37,311

conjure up images of brutalist

9

00:00:37,311 --> 00:00:39,302

architecture in a concrete jungle with

10

00:00:39,302 --> 00:00:41,293

very little consideration for the natural

11

00:00:41,293 --> 00:00:43,947

world. But this could not be further from

12

00:00:43,947 --> 00:00:46,602

the truth. The reality is that Essex has

13

00:00:46,602 --> 00:00:49,256

a rich variety of both natural and semi

14

00:00:49,256 --> 00:00:51,780

natural habitats. Salt marshes along the

15

00:00:51,780 --> 00:00:54,104

estuaries, mudflats and sand flats and

16

00:00:54,104 --> 00:00:56,041

saline lagoons to ancient woodlands,

17

00:00:56,041 --> 00:00:57,591

grasslands, hedgerows, wetlands and

18

00:00:57,591 --> 00:00:59,528

rivers. Sadly, like everywhere in

19

00:00:59,528 --> 00:01:01,852

England, the environment is facing some

20

00:01:01,852 --> 00:01:04,177

challenges. But today I wanted to

21

00:01:04,177 --> 00:01:06,114

celebrate some success stories that

22

00:01:06,114 --> 00:01:08,826

demonstrate what can happen when we work

23

00:01:08,826 --> 00:01:11,150

with nature rather than against her.

24

00:01:11,710 --> 00:01:13,514

I'll also be sharing some resources and

25

00:01:13,514 --> 00:01:15,318

ways that you can get involved with

26

00:01:15,318 --> 00:01:16,864
supporting your local habitats as well.

27

00:01:16,864 --> 00:01:19,183
Before we begin, I just want to point out

28

00:01:19,183 --> 00:01:20,987
I'm not sponsored by any of the

29

00:01:20,987 --> 00:01:22,791
organisations that I talk about in this

30

00:01:22,791 --> 00:01:24,338
episode. I'm just genuinely fascinated by

31

00:01:24,338 --> 00:01:26,915
the work they do and I think it needs to

32

00:01:26,915 --> 00:01:29,908
be celebrated. First up, I

33

00:01:29,908 --> 00:01:32,568
want to talk about Abbotts Hall Farm in

34

00:01:32,568 --> 00:01:34,896
the village of Great Wigborough, next to

35

00:01:34,896 --> 00:01:36,891
the River Blackwater, an Essex estuary.

36

00:01:36,891 --> 00:01:38,886
Abbotts Hall Farm is home to the

37

00:01:38,886 --> 00:01:40,881
headquarters of the Essex Wildlife Trust.

38

00:01:40,881 --> 00:01:43,209

In the interests of full transparency, I

39

00:01:43,209 --> 00:01:45,869

am a member of the Trust, but this

40

00:01:45,869 --> 00:01:48,197

episode is not affiliated with them in

41

00:01:48,197 --> 00:01:50,857

any way. I just really admire their work.

42

00:01:50,857 --> 00:01:53,185

The Essex Wildlife Trust has been around

43

00:01:53,185 --> 00:01:55,180

since 1959 and it's the leading

44

00:01:55,180 --> 00:01:57,462

conservation charity in Essex. They

45

00:01:57,462 --> 00:02:00,138

protect over 8400 acres of land across

46

00:02:00,138 --> 00:02:02,970

87 sites, providing outdoor education and

47

00:02:02,970 --> 00:02:05,230

helping to preserve Essex habitats.

48

00:02:05,870 --> 00:02:07,750

At Abbots Hall Farm they have planted

49

00:02:07,750 --> 00:02:10,257

a 5 acre orchard and 10 acres of native

50

00:02:10,257 --> 00:02:13,077

woodland, but that is only the tip of the

51

00:02:13,077 --> 00:02:16,048
iceberg. So what is

52

00:02:16,048 --> 00:02:18,103
special about Abbotts Hall Farm? Well, it

53

00:02:18,103 --> 00:02:20,843
was purchased in 1999 and it's been on

54

00:02:20,843 --> 00:02:22,556
something of a transformational journey.

55

00:02:22,556 --> 00:02:25,296
The site covers 700 acres and is still

56

00:02:25,296 --> 00:02:28,036
a working farm. However, parts of it have

57

00:02:28,036 --> 00:02:30,434
now been rewilded to provide new habitats

58

00:02:30,434 --> 00:02:32,489
for wildlife. The property selection was

59

00:02:32,489 --> 00:02:34,545
no accident, with Essex Wildlife Trust

60

00:02:34,545 --> 00:02:36,942
teaming up with the Environment Agency to

61

00:02:36,942 --> 00:02:38,997
reestablish coastal marshes on the Essex

62

00:02:38,997 --> 00:02:41,864
coast. There was a seawall at Abbotts

63

00:02:41,864 --> 00:02:44,136

Hall that had degraded over time and it

64

00:02:44,136 --> 00:02:45,840

needed fixing up to prevent flooding,

65

00:02:46,270 --> 00:02:48,472

particularly in the face of rising sea

66

00:02:48,472 --> 00:02:50,359

levels. Following the success of a

67

00:02:50,359 --> 00:02:52,561

previous project in 1991 to recreate salt

68

00:02:52,561 --> 00:02:54,762

marshes on a smaller scale on Northey

69

00:02:54,762 --> 00:02:57,278

Island, also in Essex, this was a more

70

00:02:57,278 --> 00:02:59,480

ambitious project to see if the process

71

00:02:59,480 --> 00:03:02,311

could be scaled up. It took two years of

72

00:03:02,311 --> 00:03:04,513

monitoring to work out what the impact

73

00:03:04,513 --> 00:03:07,029

would be on the surrounding area if salt

74

00:03:07,029 --> 00:03:08,916

marshes were to be reestablished. Once

75

00:03:08,916 --> 00:03:10,489

planning permission was granted, counter

76

00:03:10,489 --> 00:03:13,005

walls were built at each end of the

77

00:03:13,005 --> 00:03:14,892

Abbotts Hall property to ensure their

78

00:03:14,892 --> 00:03:17,463

neighbours didn't get flooded. And five

79

00:03:17,463 --> 00:03:20,083

breaches were built in October of

80

00:03:20,083 --> 00:03:22,703

2002. A month later, the first

81

00:03:22,703 --> 00:03:25,323

big tide successfully flooded 120 acres

82

00:03:25,323 --> 00:03:27,070

of Abbots Hall Farm.

83

00:03:28,070 --> 00:03:30,431

Over the centuries, the Essex coast has

84

00:03:30,431 --> 00:03:33,128

lost over 90% of its saltmarshes to

85

00:03:33,128 --> 00:03:35,152

agriculture and sea defences that were

86

00:03:35,152 --> 00:03:37,512

designed to reduce flooding. This is a

87

00:03:37,512 --> 00:03:39,873

big deal for several reasons. First of

88

00:03:39,873 --> 00:03:41,896

all, those saltmarshes provide habitat

89

00:03:41,896 --> 00:03:44,594

for a number of native species as well

90

00:03:44,594 --> 00:03:46,954

as migratory birds. But it's deeper than

91

00:03:46,954 --> 00:03:48,640

that. Habitat destruction triggers a

92

00:03:48,640 --> 00:03:50,663

domino effect that ultimately affects us

93

00:03:50,663 --> 00:03:53,024

all, and the saltmarshes themselves act

94

00:03:53,024 --> 00:03:55,746

as a natural flood protection. In

95

00:03:55,746 --> 00:03:57,959

addition to this, they support a complex

96

00:03:57,959 --> 00:04:00,171

ecosystem. And it's not just about the

97

00:04:00,171 --> 00:04:02,384

birds. Fish also benefit as the saltwater

98

00:04:02,384 --> 00:04:04,596

channels and mudflats provide a safe area

99

00:04:04,596 --> 00:04:07,125

for fish to use as nurseries. Saltmarshes

100

00:04:07,125 --> 00:04:09,337

also reduce carbon, so they're helping in

101

00:04:09,337 --> 00:04:11,550

the fight against climate change as well.

102

00:04:12,230 --> 00:04:14,639

In 2026, Abbott's Hall Farm is still run

103

00:04:14,639 --> 00:04:15,843

as a wildlife-friendly conservation

104

00:04:15,843 --> 00:04:17,951

estate. The non-marshland parts is still

105

00:04:17,951 --> 00:04:19,758

farmed, but in an ecologically sensitive

106

00:04:19,758 --> 00:04:21,564

way. The property is currently undergoing

107

00:04:21,564 --> 00:04:23,070

some redevelopment so it's currently

108

00:04:23,070 --> 00:04:25,479

close to the public, but it is worth

109

00:04:25,479 --> 00:04:27,587

following them on social media or keeping

110

00:04:27,587 --> 00:04:29,996

an eye on their website to see when

111

00:04:29,996 --> 00:04:32,404

they'll be reopening if you're keen to go

112

00:04:32,404 --> 00:04:35,353

and check out their work. So the

113

00:04:35,353 --> 00:04:37,523

recreation of saltmarsh at Abbotts Hall

114

00:04:37,523 --> 00:04:39,331

Farm was a resounding success,

115

00:04:39,331 --> 00:04:41,139

demonstrating that that 1991 project

116

00:04:41,139 --> 00:04:43,670

could be achieved on a larger scale.

117

00:04:44,670 --> 00:04:46,528

Over 50 similar projects have been

118

00:04:46,528 --> 00:04:48,386

completed across the country, but there

119

00:04:48,386 --> 00:04:51,173

is one more in Essex that I would like

120

00:04:51,173 --> 00:04:53,341

to talk about next. You'll find Wallasea

121

00:04:53,341 --> 00:04:55,818

Island on the South side of the River

122

00:04:55,818 --> 00:04:58,296

Crouch, just below the town of Burnham-on-

123

00:04:58,296 --> 00:05:00,464

Crouch. Not much is really known about

124

00:05:00,464 --> 00:05:02,322

the very early history of Wallasea

125

00:05:02,322 --> 00:05:04,799

Island. In ancient times this area was a

126

00:05:04,799 --> 00:05:06,657

network of tidal saltmarshes and

127

00:05:06,657 --> 00:05:08,515

mudflats. It's speculated that the name

128

00:05:08,515 --> 00:05:10,683

Wallasea comes from the old English word

129

00:05:10,683 --> 00:05:12,541

Walla, meaning foreigner, and suffix Ea,

130

00:05:12,541 --> 00:05:15,260

which means island. So foreigner Island

131

00:05:15,260 --> 00:05:18,202

Island. There have been some

132

00:05:18,202 --> 00:05:19,959

archaeological findings on the South and

133

00:05:19,959 --> 00:05:22,302

east side of the island and these appear

134

00:05:22,302 --> 00:05:24,938

to be Roman. They are likely to be relics

135

00:05:24,938 --> 00:05:27,282

from the days when the Romans might have

136

00:05:27,282 --> 00:05:29,332

used the area for salt extraction. Salt

137

00:05:29,332 --> 00:05:31,089

extraction is still happening in Essex

138

00:05:31,089 --> 00:05:33,140

and there will be a future episode

139

00:05:33,140 --> 00:05:35,190

exploring that, so do watch this space.

140

00:05:35,990 --> 00:05:38,553

So we don't know much about the very

141

00:05:38,553 --> 00:05:41,437

early history, but we do know that in the

142

00:05:41,437 --> 00:05:43,360

15th century, Dutch settlers drained this

143

00:05:43,360 --> 00:05:46,244

land so that they could farm on it. To

144

00:05:46,244 --> 00:05:48,487

do this, they built the original sea

145

00:05:48,487 --> 00:05:50,730

wall. 1875 saw the peak of its

146

00:05:50,730 --> 00:05:52,973

population, with a community of about 135

147

00:05:52,973 --> 00:05:55,216

people who were still farming the land.

148

00:05:55,216 --> 00:05:57,459

However, as you might remember from the

149

00:05:57,459 --> 00:05:59,061

episode about Tiptree Jam, cheaper

150

00:05:59,061 --> 00:06:00,984

imported grains were causing issues for

151

00:06:00,984 --> 00:06:02,907

domestic farmers by undercutting them at

152

00:06:02,907 --> 00:06:05,150

this time, and many of them struggled

153

00:06:05,150 --> 00:06:07,526

financially. Swapped to other crops with

154

00:06:07,526 --> 00:06:09,900

less competition. As a result, most of

155

00:06:09,900 --> 00:06:11,934

the island's population left and Wallasea

156

00:06:11,934 --> 00:06:13,630

became land used as pasture.

157

00:06:15,290 --> 00:06:17,423

When the First World War kicked off, the

158

00:06:17,423 --> 00:06:19,290

importation of grain was a lot less

159

00:06:19,290 --> 00:06:21,423

consistent due to German U boats, so it

160

00:06:21,423 --> 00:06:23,290

made sense for the country to start

161

00:06:23,290 --> 00:06:25,157

growing its own again. Wallasea Island in

162

00:06:25,157 --> 00:06:27,290

response to this was ploughed up to grow

163

00:06:27,290 --> 00:06:29,157

wheat and the same thing happened when

164

00:06:29,157 --> 00:06:31,290

the Second World War kicked off as well.

165

00:06:31,870 --> 00:06:34,012

In 1953, though, disaster struck

166

00:06:34,012 --> 00:06:36,582

following the terrible North Sea flood.

167

00:06:36,582 --> 00:06:39,581

This was catastrophic, with the UK and

168

00:06:39,581 --> 00:06:42,151

the Netherlands being hardest hit, though

169

00:06:42,151 --> 00:06:44,722

Belgium and Germany also suffered damage

170

00:06:44,722 --> 00:06:47,422

too. Essentially, a couple of key

171

00:06:47,422 --> 00:06:49,174

factors combined together to cause

172

00:06:49,174 --> 00:06:50,926

absolute destruction. Firstly, there was

173

00:06:50,926 --> 00:06:53,729

a storm surge that moved south down the

174

00:06:53,729 --> 00:06:56,534

North Sea. This produced hurricane force

175

00:06:56,534 --> 00:06:58,491

northerly winds that pushed seawater down

176

00:06:58,491 --> 00:07:00,447

towards the English coast and the

177

00:07:00,447 --> 00:07:01,752

Netherlands. Secondly, this surge

178

00:07:01,752 --> 00:07:04,687

happened to hit at the exact time of a

179

00:07:04,687 --> 00:07:07,295

high spring tide. Now a high spring tide

180

00:07:07,295 --> 00:07:09,252

occurs when the gravitational pulls of

181

00:07:09,252 --> 00:07:11,860

both the sun and the moon combine and

182

00:07:11,860 --> 00:07:14,469

reinforce each other. The name is a bit

183

00:07:14,469 --> 00:07:16,426

misleading. It doesn't have anything to

184

00:07:16,426 --> 00:07:19,034

do with the season of spring. It's from

185

00:07:19,034 --> 00:07:20,991

the historical wording of water springing

186

00:07:20,991 --> 00:07:23,273

forth. Regardless of the name, this tide

187

00:07:23,273 --> 00:07:25,904

raised the sea levels up to 3 metres

188

00:07:25,904 --> 00:07:28,119

higher than normal. Now if you look at

189

00:07:28,119 --> 00:07:30,612

the shape of the North Sea on the map,

190

00:07:30,612 --> 00:07:32,550

you'll notice that it starts to get

191

00:07:32,550 --> 00:07:34,488

narrower between the Essex coast and the

192

00:07:34,488 --> 00:07:36,427

coast of the Netherlands. This created a

193

00:07:36,427 --> 00:07:38,088

funnel effect. The water being pushed

194

00:07:38,088 --> 00:07:40,304

down from the north and affected by that

195

00:07:40,304 --> 00:07:42,519

high spring tide had to go somewhere, and

196

00:07:42,519 --> 00:07:44,458

that somewhere was over the sea defences

197

00:07:44,458 --> 00:07:46,119

which proved inadequate. To prevent the

198

00:07:46,119 --> 00:07:48,058

breach, the water surged up the Belgian

199

00:07:48,058 --> 00:07:49,996

Scheldt River and the German Elbe and

200

00:07:49,996 --> 00:07:52,935

Weser rivers. Belgium lost 28 lives in

201

00:07:52,935 --> 00:07:54,429
the flooding and Germany experienced

202

00:07:54,429 --> 00:07:56,522
flooding and some damage in its northern

203

00:07:56,522 --> 00:07:59,305
coastal areas. But the biggest

204

00:07:59,305 --> 00:08:01,719
losses of life were experienced on the

205

00:08:01,719 --> 00:08:04,133
West Coast of the Netherlands, where 1836

206

00:08:04,133 --> 00:08:06,548
people died, and the East Coast of

207

00:08:06,548 --> 00:08:09,307
England, which lost 307. A lot of the

208

00:08:09,307 --> 00:08:11,032
coastal communities of Essex were

209

00:08:11,032 --> 00:08:13,446
massively impacted by this flood and the

210

00:08:13,446 --> 00:08:15,515
consequences are still visible in parts

211

00:08:15,515 --> 00:08:18,370
of it today. For Wallasea Island,

212

00:08:18,370 --> 00:08:20,657
the flood of 1953 meant that large

213

00:08:20,657 --> 00:08:22,943

sections of the seawall had to be

214

00:08:22,943 --> 00:08:25,230
rebuilt. The eastern end of the island

215

00:08:25,230 --> 00:08:27,843
was one of the last places after this

216

00:08:27,843 --> 00:08:30,457
disaster in the UK to be drained of

217

00:08:30,457 --> 00:08:32,417
floodwater. Throughout the rest of the

218

00:08:32,417 --> 00:08:34,703
1950s and '60s, the island became a

219

00:08:34,703 --> 00:08:35,683
heavily industrialised agricultural

220

00:08:35,683 --> 00:08:37,643
prairie. By the 1970s, barely anyone

221

00:08:37,643 --> 00:08:39,603
aside from the local farming community

222

00:08:39,603 --> 00:08:41,890
ever bothered to visit because there just

223

00:08:41,890 --> 00:08:44,680
wasn't anything there. Due to the

224

00:08:44,680 --> 00:08:46,733
lack of local residents, nobody was there

225

00:08:46,733 --> 00:08:48,787
to raise a public objection to major

226

00:08:48,787 --> 00:08:49,742
agricultural redevelopments.

227

00:08:49,742 --> 00:08:51,503
Archaeologists have called this "an

228

00:08:51,503 --> 00:08:53,264
annihilation of Wallasea's past", as

229

00:08:53,264 --> 00:08:56,081
there was no effort made to look for

230

00:08:56,081 --> 00:08:57,842
anything of historical importance. The

231

00:08:57,842 --> 00:08:59,603
traditional medieval field systems and

232

00:08:59,603 --> 00:09:01,364
the ditches were completely destroyed,

233

00:09:01,364 --> 00:09:04,181
and this was another grim chapter in the

234

00:09:04,181 --> 00:09:07,123
history of Wallasea Island. By the

235

00:09:07,123 --> 00:09:09,410
turn of the new Millennium, rising sea

236

00:09:09,410 --> 00:09:11,370
levels meant that the farmland on

237

00:09:11,370 --> 00:09:13,003
Wallasea Island was facing catastrophic

238

00:09:13,003 --> 00:09:15,290

flooding. It just wasn't viable in the

239

00:09:15,290 --> 00:09:17,945

long term anymore. So the legends that

240

00:09:17,945 --> 00:09:20,177

are the Royal Society for the Protection

241

00:09:20,177 --> 00:09:22,728

of Birds, generally known by most as the

242

00:09:22,728 --> 00:09:24,960

RSPB, began a highly ambitious project to

243

00:09:24,960 --> 00:09:26,873

transform Wallasea Island back to its

244

00:09:26,873 --> 00:09:29,105

original state, to combat the loss of

245

00:09:29,105 --> 00:09:31,337

coastal saltmarshes and to protect the

246

00:09:31,337 --> 00:09:33,250

region from rising sea levels. The

247

00:09:33,250 --> 00:09:35,163

project kicked off with the RSPB

248

00:09:35,163 --> 00:09:37,076

commencing talks with the island's land

249

00:09:37,076 --> 00:09:38,670

owners to acquire the land.

250

00:09:39,870 --> 00:09:41,964

Now we've talked about how the Abbotts

251

00:09:41,964 --> 00:09:44,058

Hall Farm saltmarsh was re established,

252

00:09:44,058 --> 00:09:45,852

but Wallasea Island is massive in

253

00:09:45,852 --> 00:09:48,245

comparison. So how do you restore a salt

254

00:09:48,245 --> 00:09:50,638

marsh of that size? As we know, the

255

00:09:50,638 --> 00:09:53,031

island was prone to flooding due to it

256

00:09:53,031 --> 00:09:55,424

being too low down compared to the sea

257

00:09:55,424 --> 00:09:57,817

level. The RSPB spent a few years working

258

00:09:57,817 --> 00:10:00,210

out where they would need water to flow

259

00:10:00,210 --> 00:10:02,902

inland for the saltmarsh and drew up some

260

00:10:02,902 --> 00:10:04,696

plans. The next challenge is actually

261

00:10:04,696 --> 00:10:06,790

raising the level of the island itself.

262

00:10:07,560 --> 00:10:10,523

To do this requires a lot of earth.

263

00:10:10,523 --> 00:10:12,974

The reserve is about twice the size of

264

00:10:12,974 --> 00:10:15,425
the City of London. That's the section of

265

00:10:15,425 --> 00:10:17,876
London called the City, by the way. Not

266

00:10:17,876 --> 00:10:20,328
me saying that the reserve is bigger than

267

00:10:20,328 --> 00:10:22,472
the entirety of London, but that earth

268

00:10:22,472 --> 00:10:24,617
has to come from somewhere. The question

269

00:10:24,617 --> 00:10:27,324
is where? In 2008, the answer

270

00:10:27,324 --> 00:10:30,073
arrived in the form of a partnership with

271

00:10:30,073 --> 00:10:32,135
Crossrail. At the time, Crossrail was

272

00:10:32,135 --> 00:10:34,540
about to start excavating soil for the

273

00:10:34,540 --> 00:10:36,258
construction of the Elizabeth Line

274

00:10:36,258 --> 00:10:39,007
tunnels for the Tube. Truly a match made

275

00:10:39,007 --> 00:10:41,412
in heaven. Crossrail needs the soil out

276

00:10:41,412 --> 00:10:44,161
of the way and the RSPB needed to

277

00:10:44,161 --> 00:10:46,566
raise the level of Wallasea Island with

278

00:10:46,566 --> 00:10:49,360
landscaping. After planning permission

279

00:10:49,360 --> 00:10:51,311
was granted, a massive logistics

280

00:10:51,311 --> 00:10:54,042
operation ran from 2012 to 2015, moving

281

00:10:54,042 --> 00:10:56,773
a whopping 3,000,000 tonnes of soil via

282

00:10:56,773 --> 00:10:59,504
rail and cargo ships from the freshly

283

00:10:59,504 --> 00:11:01,845
dug Lizzie line tunnels directly to

284

00:11:01,845 --> 00:11:04,186
Wallasea Island. This soil was sculpted

285

00:11:04,186 --> 00:11:06,917
into rising slopes that were designed to

286

00:11:06,917 --> 00:11:09,648
naturally absorb sea level rises, and in

287

00:11:09,648 --> 00:11:12,379
July of 2015, engineers breached the old

288

00:11:12,379 --> 00:11:14,330

sea walls in three strategically

289

00:11:14,330 --> 00:11:16,440

identified locations. For the first time

290

00:11:16,440 --> 00:11:18,280

in 400 years, the saltmarsh was back.

291

00:11:19,110 --> 00:11:21,844

Seawater flooded the island, creating the

292

00:11:21,844 --> 00:11:24,578

165 hectare Jubilee Marsh. By 2018,

293

00:11:24,578 --> 00:11:27,312

the site had integrated managed sluice

294

00:11:27,312 --> 00:11:29,590

gates to regulate water movement.

295

00:11:30,510 --> 00:11:32,627

Wildlife presence went through the roof

296

00:11:32,627 --> 00:11:35,450

as the years passed and in 2025 the

297

00:11:35,450 --> 00:11:37,214

project officially achieved full habitat

298

00:11:37,214 --> 00:11:38,979

creation completion. Today, there are

299

00:11:38,979 --> 00:11:41,449

over 160 bird species recorded on the

300

00:11:41,449 --> 00:11:43,566

island, including a number of migratory

301

00:11:43,566 --> 00:11:45,683

birds like grey plovers, shovelers and

302

00:11:45,683 --> 00:11:47,447

bar-tailed godwits visiting in the

303

00:11:47,447 --> 00:11:49,917

winter. There's also a number of other

304

00:11:49,917 --> 00:11:52,034

species there, including adders and water

305

00:11:52,034 --> 00:11:54,857

voles. If you're looking for a day out

306

00:11:54,857 --> 00:11:57,327

in nature, Wallasea Island now gets over

307

00:11:57,327 --> 00:11:59,797

30,000 visitors a year hiking along its

308

00:11:59,797 --> 00:12:02,314

15km of coastal landscape trails

309

00:12:02,314 --> 00:12:05,019

featuring saltmarshes, saline lagoons and

310

00:12:05,019 --> 00:12:07,790

mudflats. The area is now protected

311

00:12:07,790 --> 00:12:08,822

with several international

312

00:12:08,822 --> 00:12:10,542

classifications overlapping. In fact, it

313

00:12:10,542 --> 00:12:12,950

is one of the most highly protected

314

00:12:12,950 --> 00:12:14,670
coastal areas in the UK.

315

00:12:15,670 --> 00:12:18,495
First of all, it's designated as a Ramsar

316

00:12:18,495 --> 00:12:19,907
Wetland of International Importance

317

00:12:19,907 --> 00:12:22,025
thanks to its support for migratory

318

00:12:22,025 --> 00:12:24,144
birds. It's also a Special Protection

319

00:12:24,144 --> 00:12:25,909
Area which legally protects critical

320

00:12:25,909 --> 00:12:27,674
habitats for overwintering wading birds.

321

00:12:27,674 --> 00:12:30,146
The surrounding waters are covered by the

322

00:12:30,146 --> 00:12:31,911
Essex Estuary's Special Area of

323

00:12:31,911 --> 00:12:33,676
Conservation, and it's also integrated

324

00:12:33,676 --> 00:12:35,795
into England's East Coast Wetlands, which

325

00:12:35,795 --> 00:12:38,266
stretches from the Thames to the Humber

326

00:12:38,266 --> 00:12:41,091

and is in the process of seeking UNESCO

327

00:12:41,091 --> 00:12:43,592

World Heritage status. In addition, it's

328

00:12:43,592 --> 00:12:45,656

a designated Site of Special Scientific

329

00:12:45,656 --> 00:12:48,399

Interest. And a local wildlife site to

330

00:12:48,399 --> 00:12:50,368

shield habitats from heavy human impact.

331

00:12:50,368 --> 00:12:52,665

And finally, as if that wasn't enough,

332

00:12:52,665 --> 00:12:54,306

there's also planning policies protecting

333

00:12:54,306 --> 00:12:56,603

it in the form of the Metropolitan

334

00:12:56,603 --> 00:12:58,244

Greenbelt and the Coastal Protection

335

00:12:58,244 --> 00:13:01,197

Belt. I think it's safe to say it's not

336

00:13:01,197 --> 00:13:04,123

going anywhere anytime soon. Finally, I'd

337

00:13:04,123 --> 00:13:06,550

like to celebrate a smaller project that

338

00:13:06,550 --> 00:13:08,630

has quietly taken place around the

339

00:13:08,630 --> 00:13:11,334
village of Finchingfield. If you've not

340

00:13:11,334 --> 00:13:13,463
heard of Finchingfield before, it is

341

00:13:13,463 --> 00:13:14,882
beautiful. Objectively beautiful. So

342

00:13:14,882 --> 00:13:16,655
objectively beautiful that it's been

343

00:13:16,655 --> 00:13:18,784
called the most photographed village in

344

00:13:18,784 --> 00:13:20,912
England. And with its central village

345

00:13:20,912 --> 00:13:23,041
green overlooked by a 12th century

346

00:13:23,041 --> 00:13:25,524
church, an 18th century windmill and a

347

00:13:25,524 --> 00:13:27,297
humpbacked bridge crossing over a

348

00:13:27,297 --> 00:13:29,426
gorgeous dark pond surrounded by quaint

349

00:13:29,426 --> 00:13:31,554
cottages and a number of traditional

350

00:13:31,554 --> 00:13:34,392
pubs, you can see why. The trouble is

351

00:13:34,392 --> 00:13:37,230

that duck pond can cause a few issues.

352

00:13:37,910 --> 00:13:40,371

Floods have been a recurring problem for

353

00:13:40,371 --> 00:13:42,481

years, and October of 2001 was

354

00:13:42,481 --> 00:13:44,590

particularly bad. The problem is that

355

00:13:44,590 --> 00:13:46,699

there aren't enough properties that are

356

00:13:46,699 --> 00:13:49,161

listed as flood risks for authorities to

357

00:13:49,161 --> 00:13:50,918

justify funding proper traditional flood

358

00:13:50,918 --> 00:13:53,268

defences. The historic nature of the

359

00:13:53,268 --> 00:13:55,712

village and the fact that a lot of the

360

00:13:55,712 --> 00:13:58,156

area at risk is in the middle of a

361

00:13:58,156 --> 00:13:59,514

conservation area have exacerbated the

362

00:13:59,514 --> 00:14:01,415

problem. So the question was what could

363

00:14:01,415 --> 00:14:04,027

realistically be done?Well, in 2018, the

364

00:14:04,027 --> 00:14:06,261

Spains Hall estate teamed up with the

365

00:14:06,261 --> 00:14:07,856

Environment Agency to explore natural

366

00:14:07,856 --> 00:14:09,452

flood management solutions. Named after

367

00:14:09,452 --> 00:14:12,005

Hervey Di Espana, who held the Manor when

368

00:14:12,005 --> 00:14:14,239

it was recorded in the Domesday Book,

369

00:14:14,239 --> 00:14:16,473

Spains Hall is a Grade 1 listed

370

00:14:16,473 --> 00:14:18,707

Elizabethan country house set in Grade 2

371

00:14:18,707 --> 00:14:20,303

listed grounds near Finchingfield. The

372

00:14:20,303 --> 00:14:22,537

land upon which it's built contains the

373

00:14:22,537 --> 00:14:24,452

Finchingfield Brook, which was the water

374

00:14:24,452 --> 00:14:26,685

source that was causing flash flooding in

375

00:14:26,685 --> 00:14:28,600

the village after heavy rainfall, often

376

00:14:28,600 --> 00:14:30,196
leaving the road impassable and

377

00:14:30,196 --> 00:14:32,111
surrounding properties at risk of flood

378

00:14:32,111 --> 00:14:34,818
damage. So through this research, they

379

00:14:34,818 --> 00:14:36,565
uncovered other projects that had

380

00:14:36,565 --> 00:14:38,313
previously harnessed the impact of...

381

00:14:38,313 --> 00:14:39,711
drumroll please... Eurasian Beavers.

382

00:14:39,711 --> 00:14:42,158
Yeah, you heard me right, folks. Beavers.

383

00:14:42,158 --> 00:14:44,954
Why Beavers, you ask? How do they help

384

00:14:44,954 --> 00:14:47,400
with the flooding? Part of the natural

385

00:14:47,400 --> 00:14:50,197
behaviour of beavers is to build dams to

386

00:14:50,197 --> 00:14:52,643
make sure the water around the entrance

387

00:14:52,643 --> 00:14:55,440
of their lodges where they nest is deep

388

00:14:55,440 --> 00:14:57,886

enough to keep predators out. They also

389

00:14:57,886 --> 00:15:00,333

like to dig out new exploration channels

390

00:15:00,333 --> 00:15:02,979

to check out the surrounding area. These

391

00:15:02,979 --> 00:15:05,452

hold a lot of water by themselves, but

392

00:15:05,452 --> 00:15:07,306

they also create wetland habitats by

393

00:15:07,306 --> 00:15:09,161

pushing water out into the surrounding

394

00:15:09,161 --> 00:15:11,838

soil. A lot of

395

00:15:11,838 --> 00:15:14,191

floods in Britain are caused by rapid

396

00:15:14,191 --> 00:15:16,207

rainfall that doesn't have anywhere to

397

00:15:16,207 --> 00:15:18,896

go, and a study in Devon found that

398

00:15:18,896 --> 00:15:20,577

the beavers introduced there reduced

399

00:15:20,577 --> 00:15:23,265

flood flows by up to 60%. Water is

400

00:15:23,265 --> 00:15:25,618

held in the wetlands that the beavers

401

00:15:25,618 --> 00:15:28,307

create, and it then trickles out at a

402

00:15:28,307 --> 00:15:30,659

much slower pace. This reduces the risk

403

00:15:30,659 --> 00:15:33,012

of flash flooding. Not only are the

404

00:15:33,012 --> 00:15:34,693

beavers very effective at reducing

405

00:15:34,693 --> 00:15:36,373

flooding, but they're also significantly

406

00:15:36,373 --> 00:15:38,053

cheaper than traditional flood defences.

407

00:15:38,053 --> 00:15:40,798

And the best part? They're actually a

408

00:15:40,798 --> 00:15:42,766

native species and they have European

409

00:15:42,766 --> 00:15:45,139

protected species status. Inspired by

410

00:15:45,139 --> 00:15:47,024

these other projects, the Spains Hall

411

00:15:47,024 --> 00:15:49,224

Estate team released two beavers into a

412

00:15:49,224 --> 00:15:50,481

fenced enclosure upstream from

413

00:15:50,481 --> 00:15:52,681

Finchingfield as part of a pilot project

414

00:15:52,681 --> 00:15:55,510

to see how they would get on. At the

415

00:15:55,510 --> 00:15:58,024

same time, they also built 8 leaky timber

416

00:15:58,024 --> 00:16:00,224

dams to give immediate flood risk benefit

417

00:16:00,224 --> 00:16:01,796

while the beavers got themselves

418

00:16:01,796 --> 00:16:04,226

established. The results have been

419

00:16:04,226 --> 00:16:06,110

absolutely phenomenal, and if you have a

420

00:16:06,110 --> 00:16:08,531

look in the show notes, there's a link to

421

00:16:08,531 --> 00:16:10,414

the Spains Hall website where you can

422

00:16:10,414 --> 00:16:12,298

find some visual simulations to show the

423

00:16:12,298 --> 00:16:14,181

before and after of this project. They

424

00:16:14,181 --> 00:16:16,334

also have a YouTube channel where you can

425

00:16:16,334 --> 00:16:18,217

watch the beavers living their best lives

426

00:16:18,217 --> 00:16:20,100

in their natural habitat and those two

427

00:16:20,100 --> 00:16:21,446

beavers initially introduced have since

428

00:16:21,446 --> 00:16:23,598

become a family of seven. And the pilot

429

00:16:23,598 --> 00:16:25,481

project works so well that in 2022, two

430

00:16:25,481 --> 00:16:27,634

new enclosures were built with a pair of

431

00:16:27,634 --> 00:16:30,447

beavers added to each. This has had

432

00:16:30,447 --> 00:16:31,924

a hugely positive impact, with

433

00:16:31,924 --> 00:16:33,402

Finchfield experiencing much lower

434

00:16:33,402 --> 00:16:35,813

floodwaters than it used to. There's

435

00:16:35,813 --> 00:16:38,239

still a way to go to completely prevent

436

00:16:38,239 --> 00:16:40,362

any overspill, but it has been a

437

00:16:40,362 --> 00:16:41,879

significant improvement. So this pilot,

438

00:16:41,879 --> 00:16:44,001

along with others across the country, has

439

00:16:44,001 --> 00:16:46,124

proven this to be a viable potential

440

00:16:46,124 --> 00:16:48,550

solution to flood risks. And in 2023 the

441

00:16:48,550 --> 00:16:50,370

Ealing Beaver Project was launched. This

442

00:16:50,370 --> 00:16:52,190

project has helped stop nearby Greenford

443

00:16:52,190 --> 00:16:53,706

railway station from repeatedly flooding

444

00:16:53,706 --> 00:16:56,132

at a fraction of the cost of more

445

00:16:56,132 --> 00:16:57,648

traditional flood management solutions. I

446

00:16:57,648 --> 00:16:59,468

fully appreciate that that's not in

447

00:16:59,468 --> 00:17:01,591

Essex, but it has been reported quite

448

00:17:01,591 --> 00:17:04,017

recently in the news when they gave an

449

00:17:04,017 --> 00:17:06,132

update on how the beavers were getting

450

00:17:06,132 --> 00:17:08,813

on. So there you have it, three separate

451

00:17:08,813 --> 00:17:10,646
sites in three separate areas of Essex,

452

00:17:10,646 --> 00:17:12,480
all working with nature for the benefit

453

00:17:12,480 --> 00:17:14,837
of everyone. In a world where we hear so

454

00:17:14,837 --> 00:17:16,932
much doom and gloom and can feel so

455

00:17:16,932 --> 00:17:18,503
incredibly helpless in the face of

456

00:17:18,503 --> 00:17:19,812
environmental issues, the knowledge that

457

00:17:19,812 --> 00:17:21,908
there are groups out there trying to turn

458

00:17:21,908 --> 00:17:24,003
the tide and reclaim what could be lost

459

00:17:24,003 --> 00:17:25,836
is nothing short of inspiring. And the

460

00:17:25,836 --> 00:17:28,193
best part? There are so many ways to get

461

00:17:28,193 --> 00:17:30,288
involved. You don't need to own acres of

462

00:17:30,288 --> 00:17:31,859
land, but everyone tending their own

463

00:17:31,859 --> 00:17:33,431

little corner would make a huge

464

00:17:33,431 --> 00:17:35,939

difference in the long run. Plant some

465

00:17:35,939 --> 00:17:38,036

native wildflowers. Build a bug hotel or

466

00:17:38,036 --> 00:17:40,432

a nesting box for birds. Leave parts of

467

00:17:40,432 --> 00:17:43,128

your lawn to grow freely for some of the

468

00:17:43,128 --> 00:17:44,926

year. Put shelter out for hedgehogs or

469

00:17:44,926 --> 00:17:46,723

water out for birds. Even growing

470

00:17:46,723 --> 00:17:48,820

something in a window box can help.

471

00:17:50,100 --> 00:17:52,239

If you're interested in the work of the

472

00:17:52,239 --> 00:17:54,378

Essex Wildlife Trust or the RSPB, you can

473

00:17:54,378 --> 00:17:56,517

find links to them in the show notes

474

00:17:56,517 --> 00:17:58,924

where you can find details of how you can

475

00:17:58,924 --> 00:18:01,063

get involved. I'd also like to suggest a

476

00:18:01,063 --> 00:18:03,202

book that I read that inspired me to

477

00:18:03,202 --> 00:18:04,539

write this episode. It's called

478

00:18:04,539 --> 00:18:06,143

Renaturing by James Canton. He's the

479

00:18:06,143 --> 00:18:07,748

director of Wild Writing at the

480

00:18:07,748 --> 00:18:09,619

University of Essex and his book details

481

00:18:09,619 --> 00:18:11,758

the process of renaturing a field next to

482

00:18:11,758 --> 00:18:13,630

his country cottage into a space teeming

483

00:18:13,630 --> 00:18:15,234

with life. Again, this isn't sponsored,

484

00:18:15,234 --> 00:18:17,641

but it's a great read and it inspired me

485

00:18:17,641 --> 00:18:19,780

to dive into a different side of Essex.

486

00:18:20,540 --> 00:18:22,463

Until next time, thanks so much for

487

00:18:22,463 --> 00:18:24,112

listening. Stay safe, look after your

488

00:18:24,112 --> 00:18:26,585

habitat and I will see you in the next

489

00:18:26,585 --> 00:18:26,860

one.

490

00:18:28,550 --> 00:18:44,230