

HEATHS TO SEA

Landscape Recovery OF THE LOWER OTTER VALLEY

WHAT

Landscape Recovery is one of the Government's Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMS), alongside the Sustainable Farming Incentive and Countryside Stewardship.

WHY

The UK is legally committed to improving biodiversity and protecting nature. ELMS support farmers to deliver a range of actions that focus on improving biodiversity and water quality, and reaching net zero, while maintaining food production.

WHO

Clinton Devon Estates are leading the project. They are working with tenant farmers and partners, including Bicton College, Devon Wildlife Trust, and RSPB.



WHERE

Across 4,666 ha of the lower Otter Valley. Bounded by Newton Poppleford (N), Mutters Moor (E), the Sea (S) and Woodbury Common (W).

HOW

By creating, restoring, and connecting habitat and wildlife corridors across the area, through a range of actions. This will include delivering new woodland, river and floodplain restoration, wetland creation, conservation grazing and individual farm support.

WHEN

Proposed plans will be submitted to Defra for review in December 2025.

If Defra approves the plans, actions will start from Summer 2026 and be maintained for at least 20 years.

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Landscape Recovery initiatives will contribute to national targets:

- The Global Biodiversity target is to protect 30% of land and sea for nature by 2030
- To halt the decline in species populations by 2030, and increase populations by at least 10% to exceed current levels by 2042 (Environment Act 2021)
- To create or restore 500,000 hectares of wildlife-rich habitat by 2042 (Environment Act 2021)
- To deliver UK net zero ambitions and boost nature recovery by increasing tree and woodland cover to 16.5% of total land area in England by 2050 (Environment Act 2021)



We believe nature recovery, productive agriculture and land use for public benefit can and must co-exist. Our vision is for this diverse landscape to be nature-rich and ecologically healthy whilst also supporting food production, net zero, timber and access needs.



Our vision is that, by working together, the Heaths to Sea Project will:

1. Deliver an accessible, nature-rich landscape resilient to climate change.
2. Support East Devon's net-zero and food production ambitions.
3. Drive a stronger, greener, and more sustainable economy.



CLINTON DEVON ESTATES

HEATHS TO SEA



Department
for Environment
Food & Rural Affairs



Environment
Agency



Landscape Recovery

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Of the 4,666 hectares of land put forward for the Heaths to Sea Project, currently:

- 59% is used for agriculture
- 26% is managed for nature (including the National Nature Reserve)
- 15% is woodland

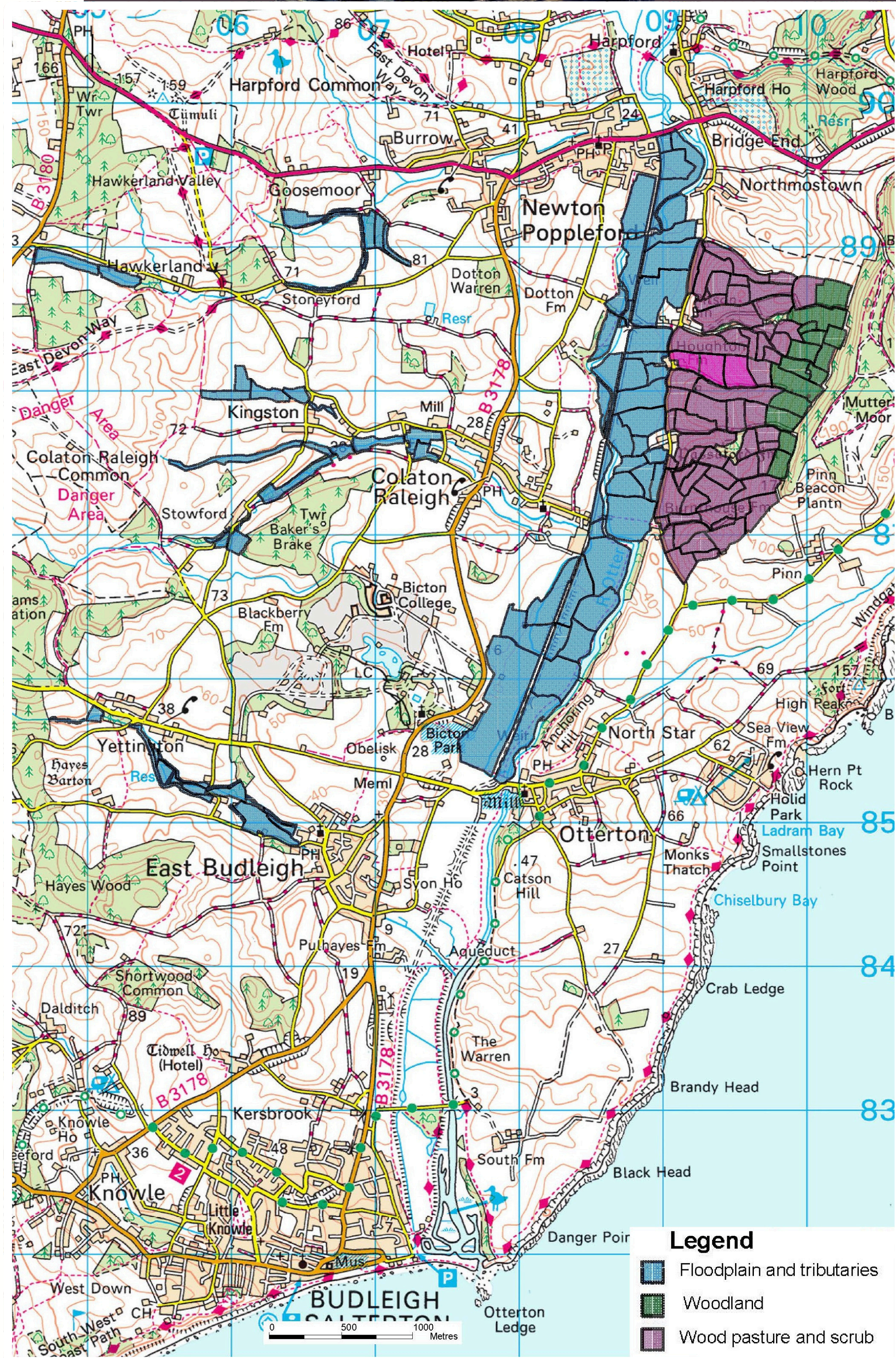
To restore natural ecosystems and support nature recovery, the Heaths to Sea Project proposes large-scale change in land use on up to 555 ha (12%) of the project area. The project aims to create up to:

- 100 ha of productive woodland
- 185 ha of wood pasture and scrub mosaic, grazed by traditional breeds
- 30 ha of hay meadow or species-rich grassland
- 200 ha of wetland, including ponds, wet woodland, and grazing marsh
- 40 ha of riparian and field buffers

The map opposite shows areas of large-scale change identified so far on Clinton Devon Estates Home Farm, and areas of tributary buffer zones across the landscape.

The majority of the remaining land in the project area is fertile and good for agriculture. We will support farms to continue to grow food and support nature through the use of sustainable, nature-friendly agricultural and conservation practices alongside their existing farm model.

Across the project area, we will work with the public to promote access to this diverse landscape that meets human needs while being sensitive to farming and nature systems.



Approach to Woodland



Clinton Devon Estates manages 697 ha of woodland within the project area in East Devon. The majority is managed for timber production, wildlife, and access. Our woodland management approach is moving away from 'clear felling' to 'continuous cover'. This means mature, good-quality trees will be retained and woodlands selectively thinned.

Diversifying species and age of trees within existing woodlands using planting and natural regeneration, where trees grow from fallen seeds, will also be encouraged. This will create a more natural woodland structure and enhance biodiversity.

Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery will:

- Support the sustainable management of productive woodland, including climate resilient conifer and broadleaf species.
- Create up to 100 ha of new mixed productive woodlands, with approximately 6 ha of broadleaf buffer.
- Create up to 185 ha of wood pasture and scrub mosaic habitat, using native broadleaf tree species which are resilient to a warming climate.
- Use native broadleaf species to create up to 50 ha of wet woodland in areas of the floodplain and edges of the tributaries. This will create a 'riparian' buffer zone to slow water, soil, and pollution runoff from farmed fields, and improve water quality in the watercourses. In a warming climate, increased shading in fields and near water will also reduce evaporation and help the soil to keep its moisture.
- Support the management of invasive species (both plant and animal) that threaten long-term woodland development. This includes managing populations of animals (for example, grey squirrels and deer) that feed on saplings or the bark of young trees, killing the trees before they can reach maturity. No natural predators yet exist in East Devon to ensure these animal populations remain in balance.

Approach to Farmed areas

Around 60% of the food that is consumed in the UK is produced by UK farmers*. With increasing pressures on global food production, including climate change, Defra is committed to ensuring Landscape Recovery projects maintain or enhance food productivity.

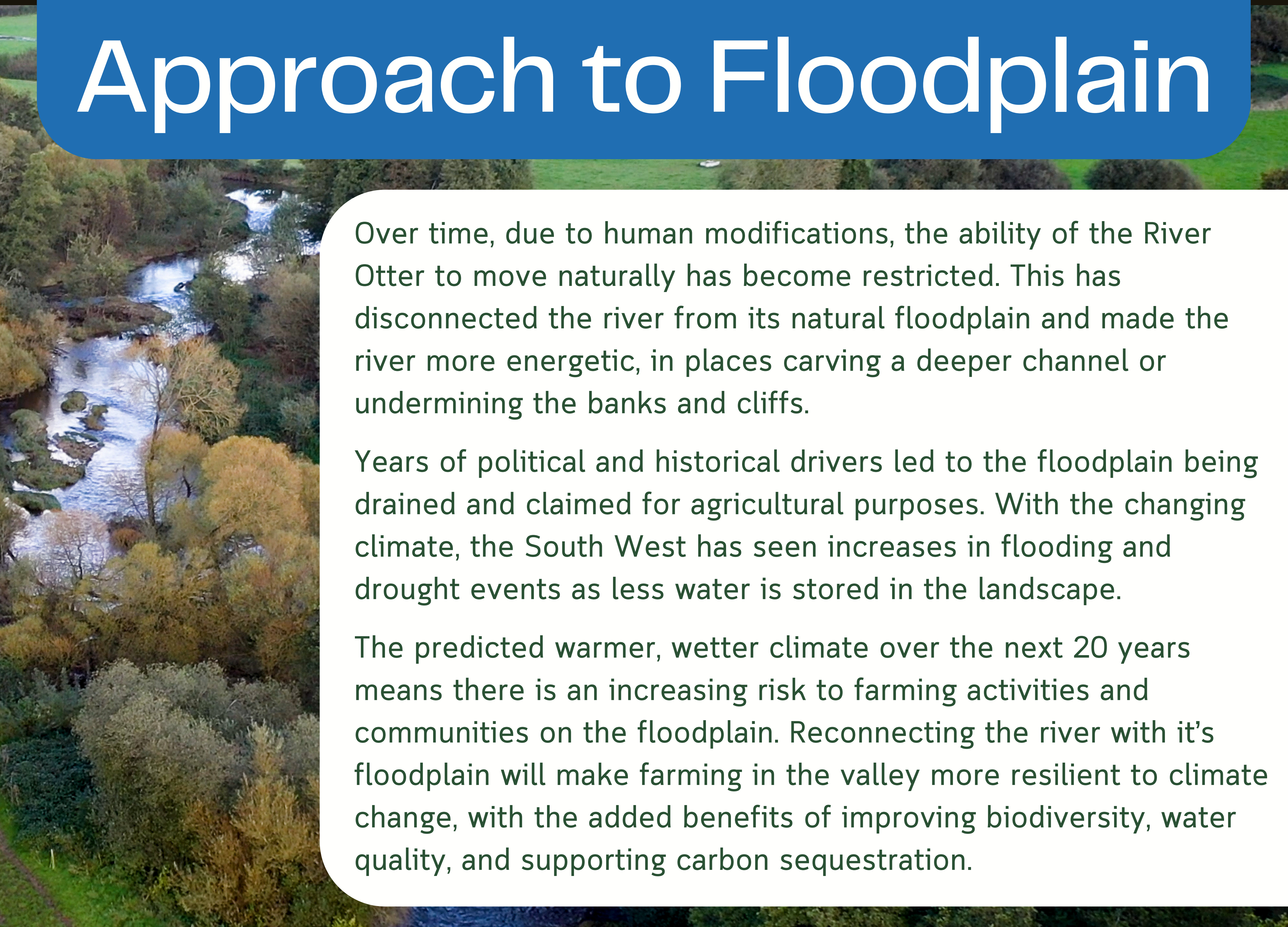
We aim to do this by balancing economically and environmentally sustainable farming practices with conservation actions to restore nature, through 'land sharing' and 'land sparing'.

Land sharing uses wildlife-friendly farming practices that support nature whilst still farming all the land for food. This could include restoring traditional hedgerows, creating wildlife-rich 'buffer strips' alongside fields and waterways, and adopting low-intensity grazing. Land sparing occurs when areas of good agricultural quality land are farmed intensively, allowing other areas of more marginal agricultural value to be set aside for nature to flourish unhindered.

Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery will:

- Work with all agricultural tenants and partners to identify bespoke interventions that are suitable for the characteristics of the land they are farming and adaptable to their farming model. These will be put into individual farm plans.
- Coordinate across the valley to ensure these bespoke interventions form a wider, joined-up approach to economically sustainable, nature-friendly farming. Together, these farm plans will support:
 - **Nature enhancement** through increased areas of flower-rich field margins and meadows, small plots of unharvested crop mixes designed to feed wild birds, and the creation or management of orchards.
 - **Improved water quality** through actions to reduce runoff of agricultural pollution into the water and minimise soil erosion.
 - **Improved water management** through the creation of ponds and wetland areas to store more water in the landscape.
 - **Improved soil management** to increase storage of carbon in soil and reduce carbon emissions from agriculture.

Approach to Floodplain



Over time, due to human modifications, the ability of the River Otter to move naturally has become restricted. This has disconnected the river from its natural floodplain and made the river more energetic, in places carving a deeper channel or undermining the banks and cliffs.

Years of political and historical drivers led to the floodplain being drained and claimed for agricultural purposes. With the changing climate, the South West has seen increases in flooding and drought events as less water is stored in the landscape.

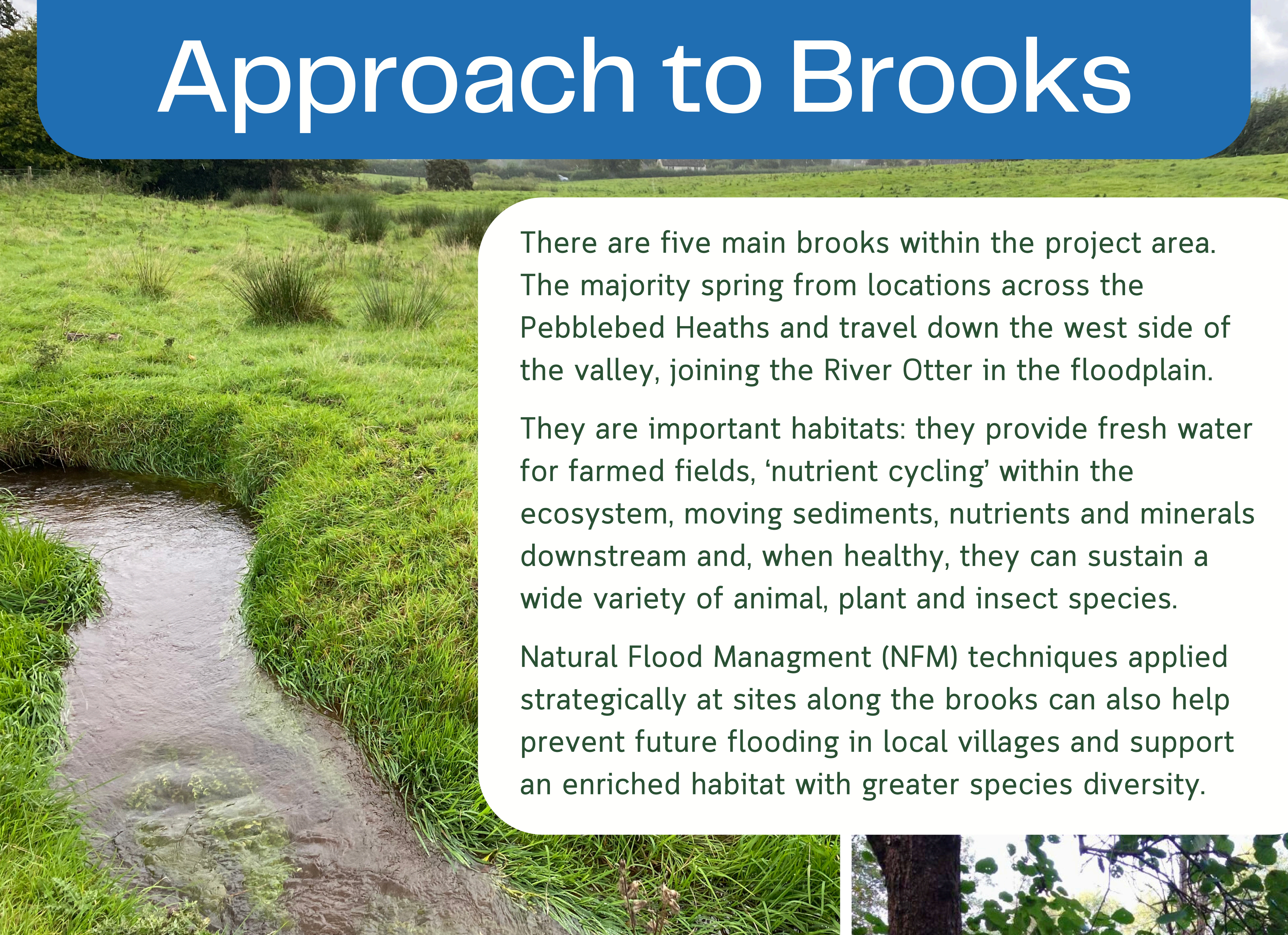
The predicted warmer, wetter climate over the next 20 years means there is an increasing risk to farming activities and communities on the floodplain. Reconnecting the river with its floodplain will make farming in the valley more resilient to climate change, with the added benefits of improving biodiversity, water quality, and supporting carbon sequestration.

Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery will:

- Reconnect the River Otter with the floodplain through a mix of different methods. This includes a proposal to split the Colaton Brook into old paleochannels.
- Put in chute channels and backwaters at strategic locations. These will provide an overflow for the river during times of high rainfall, helping the water spread out across the floodplain and drain into the land.
- Create up to 200 ha of wetland that would include a mosaic of habitats that would support a range of different species including:
 - Ponds and scrapes (shallow standing water)
 - Permanently flowing wetland
 - Beaver habitat
 - Wet woodland and wood pasture
 - Grazing marsh and wet meadow habitats
- Allow the River to move naturally in places where local communities or critical infrastructure will not be impacted.
- Make sure that no actions will cause Public Rights of Way to be blocked off by areas of standing or flowing water (beyond what is currently experienced during times of heavy rainfall).



Approach to Brooks



There are five main brooks within the project area. The majority spring from locations across the Pebblebed Heaths and travel down the west side of the valley, joining the River Otter in the floodplain.

They are important habitats: they provide fresh water for farmed fields, 'nutrient cycling' within the ecosystem, moving sediments, nutrients and minerals downstream and, when healthy, they can sustain a wide variety of animal, plant and insect species.

Natural Flood Management (NFM) techniques applied strategically at sites along the brooks can also help prevent future flooding in local villages and support an enriched habitat with greater species diversity.

Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery will:

- Create a buffer zone on each side of the brooks and streams where they pass through Clinton Devon Estate and project partner-managed farmland. These margins will act as 'wildlife corridors', facilitating safer movement of animals and birds across the valley as they search for food and shelter. The vegetation buffer will also help prevent agricultural runoff from entering and polluting the water. These buffer zones will be a mosaic of:
 - Rough grassland and meadow habitats
 - Scrub habitat
 - Wet woodland habitat
- Provide more space for water in the landscape and space for beavers.
- Work with the Climate Resilience Otter Catchment (CROC) project, funded by the EA, to slow water flow on areas of the brooks. During high rainfall events, these brooks can cause flooding in local villages downstream. The CROC project is working to reduce future flooding impacts through a range of Natural Flood Management (NFM) measures, which may include leaky dams and seepage ponds. CROC will monitor the effectiveness of NFM measures and impact on water quality.



Approach to Pebblebed Heaths

Heathlands support a wide variety of wildlife, including several species that are rarely found elsewhere like Nightjar, Dartford Warbler, Southern Damselfly, and Silver-studded Blue Butterfly. Lowland heath habitats are disappearing across Europe, threatening the species that depend on these specific habitat conditions.

To protect these rare habitats and prevent this land from reverting to scrub and, ultimately, to woodland, the area needs continuous management measures including the removal of scrub through herd grazing, removal of trees, and mowing or swailing to create patches of bare ground for pioneer heathland habitat to form.

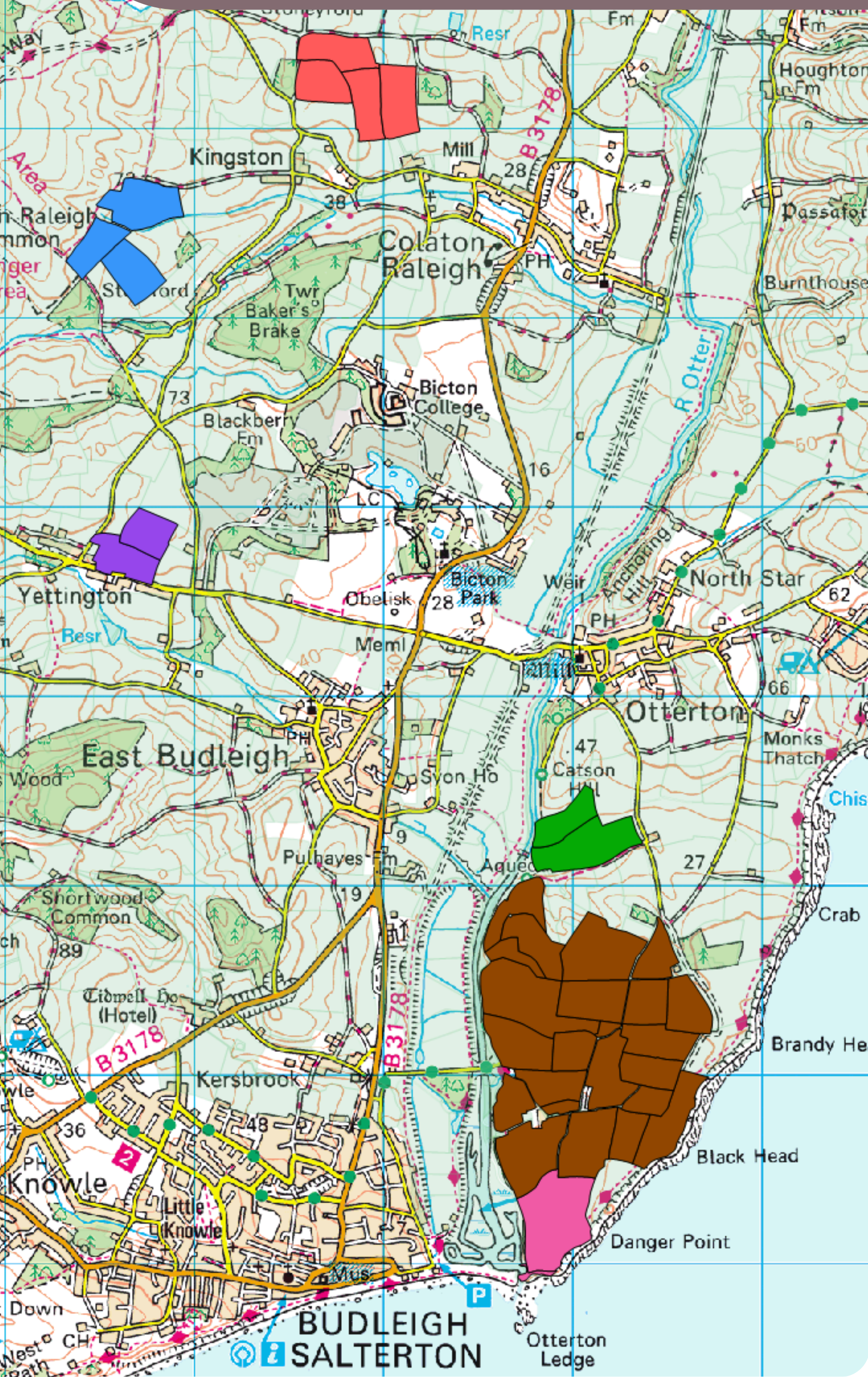


Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery will:

- Increase the area of grazing across the Pebblebed Heaths, using traditional methods to manage the habitat and minimise mechanical intervention.
- Fund the necessary infrastructure to keep grazing stock and visitors safe.
- Secure funding for management of the Pebblebed Heaths for the next 20+ years.
- Support the Pebblebed Heaths Conservation Trust to increase engagement with visitors, provide educational resources, support conservation outcomes, and mitigate visitor impacts on sensitive environments.
- Work to bring scheduled heritage features, such as Woodbury Castle, into good condition.



Approach to Heritage



- 1: Potential Roman Villa, Otterton Point
- 2: Evidenced Prehistoric occupation site at South Farm
- 3: Evidenced Prehistoric occupation site at Colliver
- 4: Potential Iron Age - Romano-British settlement at Yettington
- 5: Potential Iron Age - Romano-British enclosures NW of Stowford
- 6: Possible prehistoric settlement S of Naps Lane

There is archeological evidence of human occupation in the lower Otter Valley from Neolithic era.

To determine the risk to heritage assets from potential land use change, an Archaeology and Heritage assessment was completed for the project area.

This assessment identified six sites of *potential high historical significance* that could be researched or preserved through the Heaths to Sea project. Historic England determines the significance of heritage assets based on their evidential, historical, aesthetic or communal value.

Aerial photography and LiDAR also identified several possible historical sites, some of which are new to the Historic Environment Record:

- Medieval strip fields on Otterton Hill (12 new)
- Post-medieval extractive pits (73 new)
- Barrows, likely Bronze Age (3 new)
- Settlement enclosures Prehistoric - Roman (2 new)



Heaths to Sea Landscape Recovery will:

- Determine a risk rating and mitigation plan for all fields that will be subject to landscape change.
- Investigate potential 'new' heritage features.
- Where possible, remove field areas from cultivation if there is existing evidence of heritage assets at risk.
- Enhance and emphasise the presence of medieval strip field features on Otterton Hill (as pictured). Evidence of medieval strip fields is rare in Devon.
- Develop resources, and where possible access, to share local heritage features with the public.