

Ryebank Fields Community Group Mission Statement

Introduction

Ryebank Fields is an 11 acre naturally rewilded and biodiverse urban oasis in the heart of Greater Manchester's conurbation. The land has played a significant role in the social and cultural heritage of the area for many years with the local community acting as custodians of the land: trimming back trees; maintaining footpaths and litter picking. The fields have always been well used and are a valuable community resource, used for numerous activities including both community events and individual pastimes, such as themed guided walks, singing, painting, trails and honouring festivals, as well as dog walking and cycling.

The fields are an invaluable community resource, used daily for numerous activities, such as themed guided walks, singing, painting, honouring festivals, walking, running and being in nature.

Prior to the 1930s, Ryebank Fields was used as clay pits for Jackson's Brickworks. Once abandoned, the pits filled up with rain water and local children used the area as an adventure playground until Manchester City Council determined the pits should be filled in due to safety concerns. Subsequently, the land became an unregistered tip from the mid 1940s to the late 1960s when the city council took ownership of Ryebank Fields.

Extensive remediation works were completed in the early 1970s under Operation Eyesore, a publicly funded government initiative. To address the contamination, the land was levelled and capped with aggregate and top soil to make it safe and create playing fields.

At this time Ryebank Fields was gifted by the city council to Manchester Polytechnic, now Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU), under covenant for educational use as a sports facility. The land was formally transferred to MMU ownership in 1992 to comply with the 1988 Education Reform Act, whereby council owned polytechnics were privatised and became universities.

In December 1995 MMU submitted a planning application for the development of 90 houses which was rejected due to concerns over increased traffic congestion and pollution and the loss of open green space.

In 1996 MMU abandoned the fields when they moved their sports facilities to Carrington. Since then, Ryebank Fields has rewilded into a mosaic of natural habitats, nurtured and protected by the public.

In the mid 2000s MMU brought forward more proposals to build on Ryebank Fields, but these were dismissed as they were not compliant with council planning policy.

In 2017 MMU again issued development proposals. In response, the Save Ryebank Fields campaign was launched and the Friends of Ryebank Fields group formed. This is the third time

the community has had to fight to save the land. It remains a well used, much loved and vital community asset and we aim to save and preserve it for posterity.

Ryebank Fields mission statement

We will ensure that Ryebank Fields remains in community use as a community woodland and meadow and that its biodiversity is enhanced, recognising, celebrating and protecting the fields for their unique heritage.

Our goals are to continue to:

1. Harness the potential of the uniqueness of Ryebank Fields to support and enhance community health and wellbeing, by enabling the local community to engage with nature
2. Protect and enhance biodiversity and encourage local nature recovery
3. Contribute to mitigating the impact of the climate crisis
4. Encourage community cohesion, leadership and ownership
5. Celebrate our cultural and community heritage

1. Harness the potential of the uniqueness of Ryebank Fields to support and enhance community health and wellbeing, by enabling the local community to engage with nature

Manchester has the least amount of green infrastructure of all the 10 local authorities. Residents suffer from high levels of poor health and early death. Ryebank Fields offers a naturally rewilded and unmanaged local green space, the only significant such area in the region. It is within a 15 minute walking distance for 25,000 residents, is accessible by public transport, located next to a Green Flag park, and provides a wildlife corridor to Turn Moss and beyond.

Ryebank Fields offers a calm, quiet, untouched space that allows for contemplation, reflection and connection with nature, the seasons and the weather, thus alleviating the stresses resulting from work, family and the current cost of living. It is an exemplar of nature in the city, providing a peaceful safe haven which transports us to a landscape that is evocative of the heart of the untouched countryside. During lockdown the peace and tranquillity of the fields provided a real asset to local residents, and helped them to rediscover the countryside on their doorstep.

It is well evidenced that urban green spaces contribute enormously to health and well being, and walking in nature is said to be more conducive to wellbeing than any other kind of walking, with research indicating that the psychological benefits of engaging with nature increase with the species richness and biodiversity of urban greenspaces. Furthermore, it is proven that nature deficit disorder, a condition resulting from feeling disconnected to nature by not having access to natural environments, can lead to low mental health states and lack of attention span.

To ensure that our community can continue to access and benefit from engaging with nature, we will

- Continue to run guided informative walks on the fields and provide other educational activities in collaboration with local schools
- Continue to provide enrichment, community led and interactive activities, including art, craft, music, singing, tai chi, bushcraft, mindfulness, and celebrating festivals which allow communities to engage with nature and each other
- Link in with local social prescribing services
- Provide seating areas and create new pathways in biodegradable materials such as wood chip to ensure accessibility

2. Protect and enhance biodiversity and encourage nature recovery

Ryebank Fields sustains a huge variety of plant and animal life including grasses, wild flowers, wild raspberries, blackberries, 1400 trees, hedgerows, insects, bats, hedgehogs, badgers, foxes, and over 70 species of birds including tawny owls.

To ensure that Ryebank Fields remains a rewilded space, allowing fauna and flora to flourish and be protected and supported, we will:

- Carry out a monitoring and mapping programme of existing habitats, and create and maintain a central database of ecological data, working alongside universities and community experts
- Develop a local nature recovery plan in accordance with the GMCA initiative, focusing on its identified priority species, with the help of expert advice and conservation groups
- Enhance habitats for amphibian, mammal and bird species with the help of volunteers from the local community
- Establish an interpretation programme to help visitors understand and appreciate the nature that is in the fields
- Create educational activities for schools and local groups, such as scout groups
- Run workshops on conservation topics, such as species identification
- Restore the original pond
- Create a wetland area
- Continually monitor, assess and report our outcomes to the local community and stakeholders
- Continue the process of registering Ryebank Fields Community Group as a charitable organisation to enable us to seek grants to maintain the land and its habitats

3. Contribute to mitigating the impact of the climate crisis

As the only area of unmanaged rewilded land in the locality, preserving the unique qualities of Ryebank Fields can help the local community fight against climate change, by mitigating against flooding and rising temperatures by allowing it to continue to act as a natural carbon sink and green lung, purifying the air. The trees absorb CO₂, and the medium level vegetation can help

mitigate summer exposure to ultra fine particles (Austin Brady, Director of Conservation at the Woodland Trust).

To ensure that Ryebank Fields continues to contribute to mitigating the climate crisis we will

- Seek and apply expert advice on how we can further mitigate the effects of the climate crisis such as further rewilding and woodland conservation
- Hold community events and workshops, providing information to increase the community's carbon literacy knowledge

4. Encourage community cohesion, leadership and ownership of Ryebank Fields

Over the years, many local residents have contributed to the campaign to save Ryebank Fields, to create a vision of how they would like to see it develop, and organised community events on the land. Residents feel it vital that this precious green space is maintained as part of their community, and want to hold on to their feeling of trust that it will continue to be nurtured and protected for the benefit of the local community. This strong sense of shared identity creates cohesiveness in our community, by bringing together people from all backgrounds, and offering a strong sense of purpose and community pride in developing a vision for the fields.

To continue to develop this community cohesion and empowerment we will continue to

- Ensure that our local community are at the heart of shaping and governing the direction of our short-term goals and long-term vision by providing creative opportunities through which ideas are expressed, validated and trialled, ensuring that everyone has a voice and is heard
- Provide a wide range of sustainable accessible activities, both recreational and educational, that allow for people with diverse backgrounds to be involved in all developmental processes
- Build raised beds for shared guerilla gardening
- Establish a Ryebank Fields volunteer conservation group, with regular workdays and guided walks

5. Celebrate our cultural and community heritage

“Cultural Heritage is an expression of the ways of living developed by a community and passed on from generation to generation, including customs, practices, places, objects, artistic expressions and values. Cultural Heritage is often expressed as either Intangible or Tangible Cultural Heritage” (ICOMOS, 2002)

Ryebank Fields is highly valued as a local and living heritage asset, holding many memories for older residents, as well as constantly making new memories for all the age ranges that make up our community.

In 2000 the Millenium Oaks were planted on the site by a local resident. He collected acorns from local trees, which he planted every time he walked his dogs on the fields, positioning them to help combat water logging on the fields. This has resulted in the growth of 150 oak trees.

In 2015 a community orchard was created by a local resident, planting apple and cherry trees, which are at the heart of our annual traditional Wassail events.

The Nico Ditch runs through the fields. This is part of a 6-mile earthwork that dates back to Anglo Saxon times. It is deemed to be a nationally important, although non-scheduled monument.

The Aspen Grove is one of the most spectacular features of Ryebank Field. This small woodland of aspen trees is likely to have grown from the same clone. An aspen tree can live up to 150 years, but the root system can last for thousands of years, and where they exist are widely considered to be indicative of ancient woodlands. It is known by local children as the magic forest. Once inside the Aspen Grove, the sounds of the moving leaves are watery like rainfall, its leaves making a watery and fluid sound as they move which can often be mistaken for rain or running water and has been likened to the sound of fairies.

Enriqueta's trees dominate the eastern skyline. This is a row of 10 tall boundary trees, black poplar hybrids 100 feet high, dated between 1885 and 1892, which it is likely that Enriqueta Rylands planted. She was the first woman to be honoured with the Freedom of the City of Manchester, her greatest achievement being the creation of the John Rylands library.

To ensure that Ryebank Fields is recognised, celebrated and protected for its unique heritage, we will:

- Work with universities, museums, libraries and archives held by members of the local community to research and record the history of the fields
- Collaboratively develop information and educational opportunities, learning from the huge amount of knowledge that local residents have of the fields and listening to their stories
- Offer educational visits for local schools, colleges and universities
- Continue to hold community events on the fields to honour both the heritage of the fields and our relationship with the land
- Continue the process of gaining charitable status for Ryebank Fields Community Group to enable us to seek relevant grants