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# Agriscanner

*A low cost IoT weather station design and linked  
weatherforecasting webapp*

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By

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# Executive summary

## Dedication and acknowledgments

## **Author's declaration**

# Table of contents

|  |     |
|--|-----|
| <b>Executive summary</b> . . . . .                                   | i   |
| <b>Dedication and acknowledgments</b> . . . . .                      | ii  |
| <b>Author's declaration</b> . . . . .                                | iii |
| <b>1 Introduction</b> . . . . .                                      | 1   |
| 1.1 Aims and contributions . . . . .                                 | 1   |
| 1.2 Layout of dissertation . . . . .                                 | 2   |
| <b>I Background</b> . . . . .  | 3   |
| <b>2 Microclimates</b> . . . . .                                     | 4   |
| 2.1 Microclimates in agriculture . . . . .                           | 4   |
| <b>3 LoRa</b> . . . . .  | 6   |
| 3.1 What is LoRa? . . . . .  | 6   |
| 3.2 How LoRa works . . . . .   | 6   |
| 3.3 Benefits and limitations . . . . .                               | 8   |
| <b>4 Internet of Things</b> . . . . .                                | 9   |
| 4.1 What is IoT? . . . . .   | 9   |
| 4.2 The layers of IoT . . . . .                                      | 9   |
| 4.3 IoT enabling technologies . . . . .                              | 9   |
| 4.4 Studies using LoRa IoT weather stations in agriculture . . . . . | 10  |
| 4.5 Commercial IoT agricultural solutions with LoRa . . . . .        | 10  |
| <b>5 Microclimate forecasting</b> . . . . .                          | 11  |
| 5.1 Microclimate prediction using machine learning . . . . .         | 11  |
| <b>II Hardware development</b> . . . . .                             | 12  |
| <b>6 Overview of hardware</b> . . . . .                              | 13  |
| <b>7 Design</b> . . . . .  | 14  |

|                             |  |           |
|-----------------------------|--|-----------|
| 7.1                         | Nodes . . . . .  | 14        |
| 7.1.1                       | Components . . . . .                                       | 14        |
| 7.1.2                       | Programming the nodes . . . . .                            | 18        |
| 7.1.3                       | Repeater node . . . . .                                    | 18        |
| 7.2                         | Gateway . . . . .  | 18        |
| <b>8</b>                    | <b>Development and testing . . . . .</b>                   | <b>19</b> |
| 8.1                         | Range tests . . . . .                                      | 19        |
| 8.2                         | Battery tests . . . . .                                    | 21        |
| 8.3                         | Solar panel testing . . . . .                              | 22        |
| 8.4                         | Hardware assembly and weatherproofing . . . . .            | 22        |
| 8.4.1                       | Sensitive electronics . . . . .                            | 23        |
| 8.4.2                       | Soil moisture sensor . . . . .                             | 24        |
| 8.4.3                       | Other external components . . . . .                        | 25        |
| 8.4.4                       | Gateway . . . . .  | 26        |
| <b>9</b>                    | <b>Deployment . . . . .</b>                                | <b>27</b> |
| 9.1                         | Test deployment at home . . . . .                          | 27        |
| 9.1.1                       | Challenges and solutions from test deployment . . . . .    | 27        |
| 9.2                         | Deployment in the field . . . . .                          | 28        |
| 9.3                         | Placement of nodes . . . . .                               | 28        |
| <b>III</b>                  | <b>Software development . . . . .</b>                      | <b>29</b> |
| <b>10</b>                   | <b>Programming the hardware . . . . .</b>                  | <b>30</b> |
| 10.1                        | LoRa settings configuration . . . . .                      | 30        |
| 10.1.1                      | Compliance with regulatory limits on radio power . . . . . | 31        |
| 10.2                        | Sensor nodes . . . . .                                     | 31        |
| 10.3                        | Repeater . . . . .   | 31        |
| 10.4                        | Gateway . . . . .  | 31        |
| 10.5                        | Remote diagnostics and error handling . . . . .            | 31        |
| <b>11</b>                   | <b>Overview of software design . . . . .</b>               | <b>32</b> |
| <b>12</b>                   | <b>Backend: Database and SQL API . . . . .</b>             | <b>33</b> |
| <b>13</b>                   | <b>Frontend: Agriscanner webapp . . . . .</b>              | <b>34</b> |
| <b>14</b>                   | <b>Forecasting with machine learning . . . . .</b>         | <b>35</b> |
| <b>IV</b>                   | <b>Evaluation . . . . .</b>                                | <b>36</b> |
| <b>References . . . . .</b> |  | <b>37</b> |
| <b>V</b>                    | <b>Appendices . . . . .</b>                                | <b>39</b> |
| <b>A</b>                    | <b>Breakdown of costs . . . . .</b>                        | <b>40</b> |

|          |                               |           |
|----------|-------------------------------|-----------|
| <b>B</b> | <b>Next section . . . . .</b> | <b>41</b> |
|----------|-------------------------------|-----------|

## List of Figures

|    |   |    |
|----|---|----|
| 1  | Traditional radio modulation with frequency symbols . . . . .   | 6  |
| 2  | LoRa symbol showing changing frequency ("Up-chirp") . . . . .   | 7  |
| 3  | Comparison of frequency shift and LoRa modulation . . . . .   | 7  |
| 4  | iLabs Challenger RP2040 . . . . .   | 14 |
| 5  | Low range PCB antenna . . . . .   | 15 |
| 6  | iLabs whip style LoRa antenna (868mhz) . . . . .  | 15 |
| 7  | Waveshare DHT11 temperature/humidity sensor . . . . .   | 16 |
| 8  | The Pi Hut capacitive soil moisture sensor . . . . .  | 16 |
| 9  | DFROBOT wind speed sensor . . . . .   | 17 |
| 10 | Waveshare solar power management module (left), solar panel (right) . . . . .                                 | 17 |
| 11 | Raspberry Pi 5 (8GB) . . . . .  | 18 |
| 12 | Google earth image of data collection points . . . . .  | 20 |
| 13 | Elevation profile of test area (ignore large dip at start) . . . . .  | 20 |
| 14 | Graph to show signal loss from different receiver and transmitter configurations (higher is better) . . . . . | 21 |
| 15 | Open junction box showing internal wiring . . . . .   | 24 |
| 16 | Soldered soil moisture sensor . . . . .   | 25 |
| 17 | Table of component costs . . . . .  | 40 |
| 18 | Chart to visualise relative cost of components . . . . .  | 40 |

# 1 Introduction

In this report, I describe an online tool called Agriscanner, which collects and displays microclimate data from an apple orchard via an IoT weather sensor network that I designed and built. The tool aims to enable microclimate specific forecasting and provide farmers with accessible, location specific climate data to support decision making and enable microclimate specific forecasting. The IoT hardware was built using off-the-shelf components and housed in hand made enclosures. The deployed system consisted of four components: two field sensor nodes capable of reading weather data and transmitting it using a modern radio protocol called LoRa; a repeater that boosts received LoRa signals; and an internet connected gateway that uploads the weather data to an online database. The sensor nodes were placed at two locations on the farm that the owner identified as having distinct microclimatic conditions. This allowed for the collection of weather data tailored to specific areas of interest, which was then displayed on the Agriscanner web application.

## 1.1 Aims and contributions

The main aim of this project was to develop a low-cost, low-maintenance IoT solution that helps farmers monitor microclimate conditions and make better informed decisions. The final hardware system needed to be physically robust to survive outside while the software needed to present relevant information in an intuitive way, ensuring that users can easily make use of the data.

Weather is of critical importance to farmers, as it is an important factor in final yield and helps to predict the optimal time to harvest, the likelihood of disease growth and irrigation needs. However, weather forecasts are typically based on data from distant weather stations and large scale models which fail to capture variations that exist within a single farm. These local variations, known as microclimates, can differ significantly even across relatively short distances due to differences in elevation, tree cover, or soil conditions.

The key contributions of this paper are:

- The development of a low cost, ultra long-range remote weather station system with superior range and value to current solutions on the market.
- A publicly available web application that visualises live data from multiple field locations.
- A method for enabling microclimate forecasting by comparing local sensor data with broader regional weather forecasts.

## 1.2 Layout of dissertation

This dissertation has four parts. Part 1 provides the technical background to understand the project, including an overview of the core technologies used and a review of related work in the field. Part 2 details the hardware development process, covering the rationale behind component selection, the testing of hardware, and how the IoT nodes were deployed in the field. Part 3 focuses on the software aspect of the project, outlining the design and implementation of both the backend infrastructure and the frontend web interface. Part 4 then offers a critical evaluation of the system, discussing its performance, usability, and limitations, as well as highlighting opportunities for future development improvements and research.

# Part I

# Background

## 2 Microclimates

A microclimate is generally understood as a set of distinct climatic conditions within a small, localised area [1]. The maximum size of a microclimate is debated, but the World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) regards it as occupying an area of anywhere from less than one metre across to several hundred metres [2]. In practice, microclimates can occur in spaces such as gardens, valleys, caves, or fields. Even human-made structures can generate their own microclimates; for example, tall buildings can create *street valleys* that reduce wind flow and lead to the formation of localised pockets of warmer air, which also trap higher concentrations of pollution from vehicle emissions [3]. Vegetation plays a critical role in influencing microclimates. The addition of trees to an urban environment can reduce air temperature by as much as 2.8 °C [4].

### 2.1 Microclimates in agriculture

Microclimatic variations have profound implications for agriculture, as the climate that crops are exposed to has an enormous impact on overall agricultural yields. Indeed, farmers have modified the microclimate of crop fields for millennia, a clear example of this being the use of fencing to reduce soil erosion and damage to edible plants [5]. Therefore, the relationship between microclimates and agriculture has been the subject of extensive research, particularly as climate change introduces new threats to food security.

A Danish study by Haider et al. investigated how agricultural pests and diseases are influenced by microclimatic conditions. Temperature sensors were installed in six different pathogen habitats (such as hedges and cattle fields). The data revealed that the daytime temperature in these microenvironments was significantly higher than those predicted by Danish weather forecasts. Using these measurements, the researchers then estimated the incubation periods of various pests and diseases, demonstrating that elevated temperatures in microclimates could shorten incubation times and thus accelerate the risk of outbreaks [6].

Another important aspect of microclimates for farmers is how it can affect frost risk - sudden and unpredictable drops below freezing in crop fields that damages plants and are particularly common in spring. A principal factor for this is a lack of "cold-air drainage". In areas with depressed topography, cold, dense air can accumulate to form pockets of cold air where temperatures can be several degrees lower than the surrounding landscape [7]. These local conditions may not be captured by weather forecasts highlighting the need for more precise monitoring and development of effective early warning systems.

There is more limited research on microclimates in the context of apple orchards which is most relevant to this dissertation. A study conducted by Bristol university took sensor measurements throughout an orchard's growing season, revealing that conditions such as

albedo (a measure of solar radiation absorption), humidity, and temperature could vary within an orchard [8]. The bulk of remaining research with respect to apple orchard microclimates is how human modification of the microclimate (such as with hailnets, shading screens and electric wind blowers) affects crop yield and quality of the fruit.

## 3 LoRa

Before analysing IoT systems more generally, I will explain the most critical enabling technology for this project which is the radio communication technique known as LoRa.

### 3.1 What is LoRa?

LoRa stands for **L**ong **R**ange and it is a radio modulation technique invented in 2014 that allows for the transmission of data over very long distances. It is one of several competing low power wide area networks (LPWAN) but the hardware to use it is much more widespread than these other networks. Compared to WiFi, LoRa has a range over 4000 times greater [9]. The world record distance for a LoRa signal is 1336km [10]. This was achieved under abnormal conditions: a fishing boat near Portugal with a LoRa transmitter had one of its packets received on the high altitude Canary islands. This exceptional range is also achieved with remarkably little power.

### 3.2 How LoRa works

As this paper is not a technical study of radio communication I will opt for a brief summary of the principles behind LoRa. With this in mind I have based much of the information from the excellent video lecture in [11] that itself draws upon the paper in [12].

The reason LoRa modulation is different to traditional modulation techniques is the use of a "chirp" as the key to transmitting packets. A more traditional technique might involve a frequency shift key; that is a single frequency represents several bits. These unique frequencies are called symbols as they represent data, like letters in the alphabet. In the below graph we see three simplified symbols that represent binary values, the combination of these symbols makes a packet:

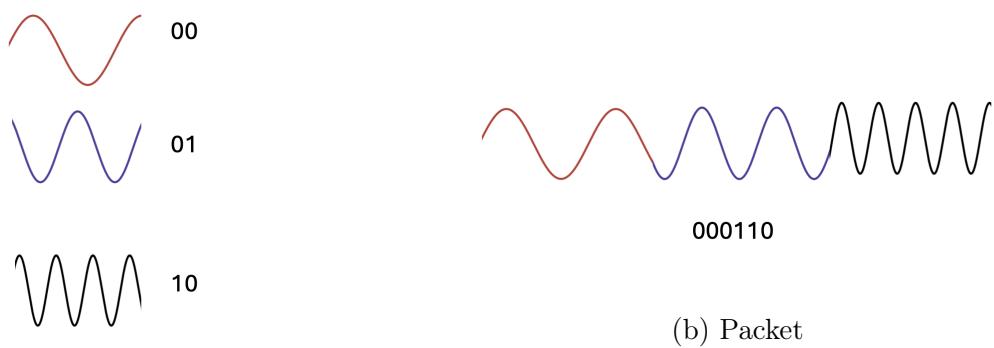
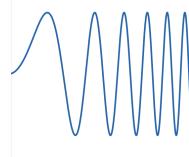


Figure 1: Traditional radio modulation with frequency symbols

In traditional modulation, symbols always have flat unchanging frequency (as can be seen from the fact the wave separation never changes). LoRa symbols instead have changing frequencies that have a waveform like the below.

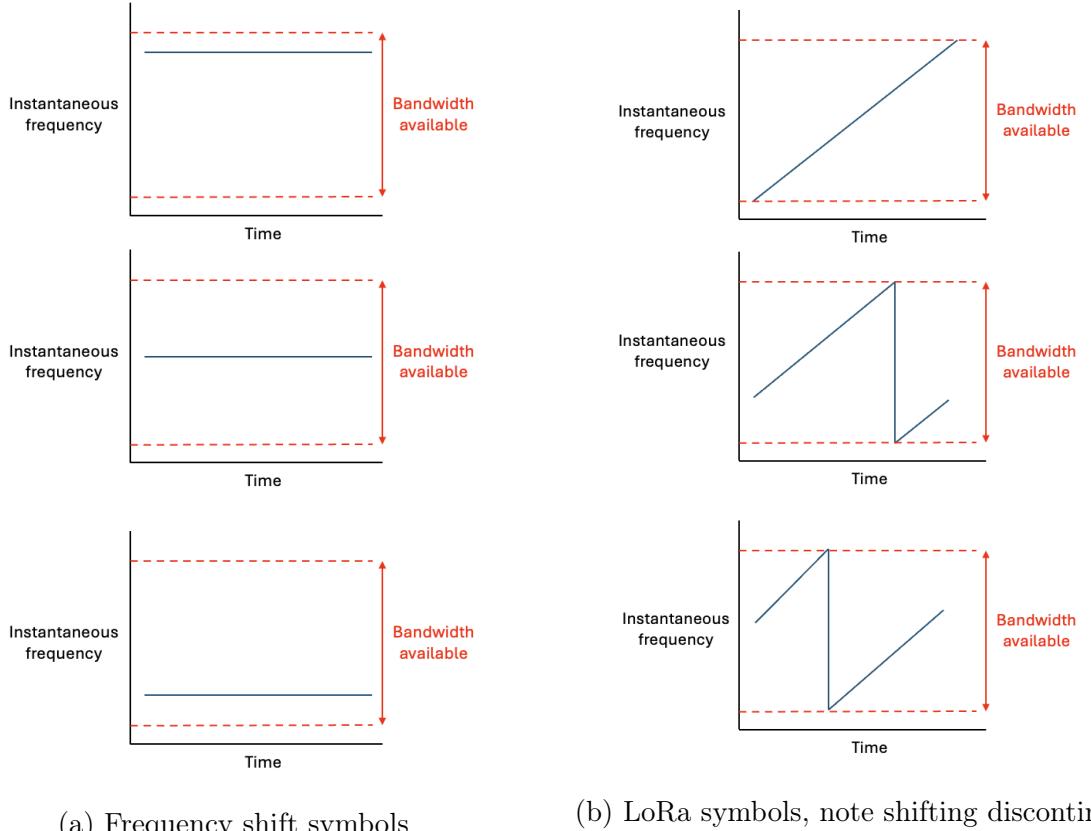


**Figure 2: LoRa symbol showing changing frequency ("Up-chirp")**

This change in frequency is what gives the wave form the name "chirp". If traditional frequency symbols were thought of a sound they would be similar to morse code beeps while LoRa would be more similar to siren or *chirping* bird. LoRa has both rising and falling chirps (up-chirps and down-chirps).

Different LoRa symbols are then distinguished by the point in time of a discontinuity. LoRa symbols are always delivered over a known length of time, so different symbols include a reset back to the starting frequency at a different point in time.

A way to graphically show this discontinuity in LoRa and compare it to frequency shift modulation is by using instantaneous frequency graphs:



**Figure 3: Comparison of frequency shift and LoRa modulation**

Once these symbols hit the receiver, the receiver must work out which symbol it was. In frequency shift modulation this is achieved by performing a correlation test against every symbol received. However this is computationally difficult and requires a low signal-to-noise ratio to work effectively. The benefit of chirps is that due to a mathematical transformation that will not be further discussed (Fast Fourier transform), the correlation can be computed much more easily and with less powerful hardware.

### 3.3 Benefits and limitations

The benefits from the ability of the LoRa receiver to demodulate signals more efficiently is two-fold. First it reduces the power needs on transmitter and receiver: the transmitter sends less powerful signals because the receiver can more easily distinguish signals; in turn the receiver can also demodulate with a lower power budget because of the easier correlation process with LoRa chirps.

The second related benefit is the ability for the receiver to demodulate signals which are below the noise floor (the sum of all interfering signals). Essentially, even when background noise is 'louder' than the LoRa signal, the receiver is still able to distinguish and process the data in the signal. This helps LoRa transmitters to broadcast signals with a far greater effective range despite it's low power.

| Technology | Wireless Communication | Range         | Tx Power |
|------------|------------------------|---------------|----------|
| Bluetooth  | Short range            | 10 m          | 2.5 mW   |
| WiFi       | Short range            | 50 m          | 80 mW    |
| 3G/4G      | Mobile network         | 5,000m        | 5000 mW  |
| LoRa       | LPWAN                  | 2,000–15,000m | 20 mW    |

**Table 1: Comparison of wireless technologies (Source: [13])**

## 4 *Internet of Things*

### 4.1 What is IoT?

The Internet of Things (IoT) refers to the concept of integrating networking capability in a range of devices, allowing for cooperation to reach common goals [14]. A similar but more colloquial term would be "smart" devices.

The number of IoT devices is forecasted to reach 40 billion by 2030 from 16.6 billion in late 2023 [15]. IoT devices are already used extensively in a multitude of commercial and domestic settings.

### 4.2 The layers of IoT

All IoT relies on the existence of three fundamental network layers [16], working from the bottom to the top there is:

1. Perception - This layer contains sensors that collect information about conditions in the world around them. This layer may perform some transformations on the data it receives (e.g. sorting, formatting) or just transmit raw data. An example of this is a smart car charger collecting data on the charge level of an electric car.
2. Network - This layer acts as the bridge between the perception layer and the application layer. It is the medium and protocols associated with the transmission of data and the hardware necessary to interpret this. Following the above example this could be the use of WiFi or a mesh protocol such as Zigby to transmit the car's current charge level to a gateway - such as a WiFi router.
3. Application - This encompasses any software that manipulates, displays or otherwise uses data from the perception layer. This could be hosted on the cloud or locally. In the example above this could be an app that shows the current charge status of the car.

### 4.3 IoT enabling technologies

The surge in IoT for the past few decades has been fuelled by the emergence of new technologies. Here I will explore the technologies that have are most relevant to the weather stations built for this project.

1. Efficiency improvements in microchips - breakthroughs in microchip fabrication have led to smaller more efficient chips with improved performance.
2. Lithium-Ion batteries improvements - continuous improvements in the energy density of lithium-ion batteries has made it possible to power devices for long periods

without mains power.

3. Low-power long-range radio - new radio communication techniques such as LoRa allow for data transmission over several kilometres using a fraction of the power required by traditional mobile or Wi-Fi technologies.
4. Affordability of solar panels - since 1970 the price of solar panels has decreased to 1/500th of its original cost [17] making solar a viable power source for IoT systems.
5. Growth of hobbyist embedded systems - since the release of accessible platforms such as Arduino in 2005, the growth of hobby level embedded systems has lowered the barrier to entry to create IoT systems.
6. Accessible cloud computing and hosting - Cheap and available web hosting has allowed application level systems to be more easily developed.

#### 4.4 Studies using LoRa IoT weather stations in agriculture

The use of IoT in agriculture has become widespread in recent years as it offers the opportunity for farmers to improve yields and cut costs by bringing digital solutions that would not have previously been viable without access to power and internet connectivity. The use of IoT in agriculture is often wrapped up in the moniker of "Smart Farming", which encompasses a range of digital, robotic, and internet-enabled approaches to improving efficiency.

A 2019 review by Farooq et al. [18] reveals the scope of IoT applications in agriculture. These include precision farming (IoT weather monitoring), automated irrigation, pest and disease prediction with machine learning, and even the deployment of agricultural drones for spraying, mapping and imaging.

IoT weather stations like those developed in this project are a growing trend in agriculture.

#### 4.5 Commercial IoT agricultural solutions with LoRa

While IoT weather station solutions are available commercially there are issues with using these.

Virtually all affordable weather stations rely on WiFi to stay connected which is not viable for most farms as there is a large separation between the fields they need to be deployed in and buildings with WiFi access. As discussed in section 3.3, WiFi has just a fraction of the range of LoRa so these types of stations are not comparable to my own.

Limiting the search for weather stations with LoRa then there are a handful of commercial options. The issue with these is cost, the prices of most models (Decentlab Eleven Parameter, Innon WTS506). For a comparison of different models see the relevant section in the evaluation.

## 5 Microclimate forecasting

### 5.1 Microclimate prediction using machine learning

There have been a number of recent studies where machine learning has been used to help predict micro climate conditions. A 2021 study by Kumar et al developed a machine learning framework that is able to predict a variety of climatic variables such as soil moisture, wind speed and temperature. They were able to get up to 90% accuracy with a 12-120 hour forecast range.

## Part II

# Hardware development

## 6 Overview of hardware

# 7 Design

## 7.1 Nodes

### 7.1.1 Components

The first step in the design process was selecting hardware components that could operate autonomously without mains power. This required devices that were highly power-efficient, while also being capable of transmitting small data packets via LoRa. An equally important consideration was ensuring the final devices could be fully weatherproofed to protect the sensitive electronics from water ingress and environmental damage.

#### Challenger RP2040 LoRa

The iLabs Challenger RP2040 LoRa is an embedded computer that uses the Raspberry Pi RP2040 chip that was released in 2021. The RP2040 itself is a low-cost and power-efficient processor with ample power to perform the data encoding and transmission in my use case. Additionally, the chip is extremely popular with over 10 million units being produced in the first two years of release [19]. This popularity means there is ample documentation for developing with this processor and it is compatible with circuit python which was my preferred language for development.

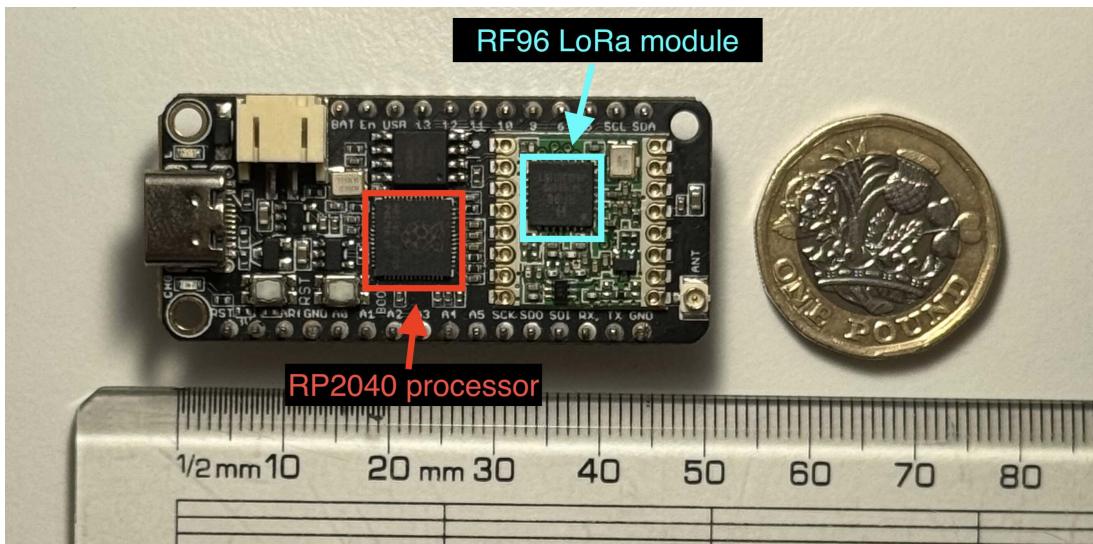


Figure 4: iLabs Challenger RP2040

The challenger board itself is well suited for this project for several reasons. It uses the compact Adafruit feather form factor, giving a board dimension of just 5cm by 2cm, making it easy to mount in a small enclosure. The onboard Hope RF96 LoRa modem

is built directly into the board and the U.FL antenna connector allows for the swapping of antenna's to different varieties. This board's LoRa module is also set to transmit at a frequency of 868mhz which is a standard UK frequency for LoRa and gives a good balance between range and bandwidth.

Another useful aspect of the board is the abundance of GPIO pins (20 in total) allowing for a large number of sensors to be fitted to the board.

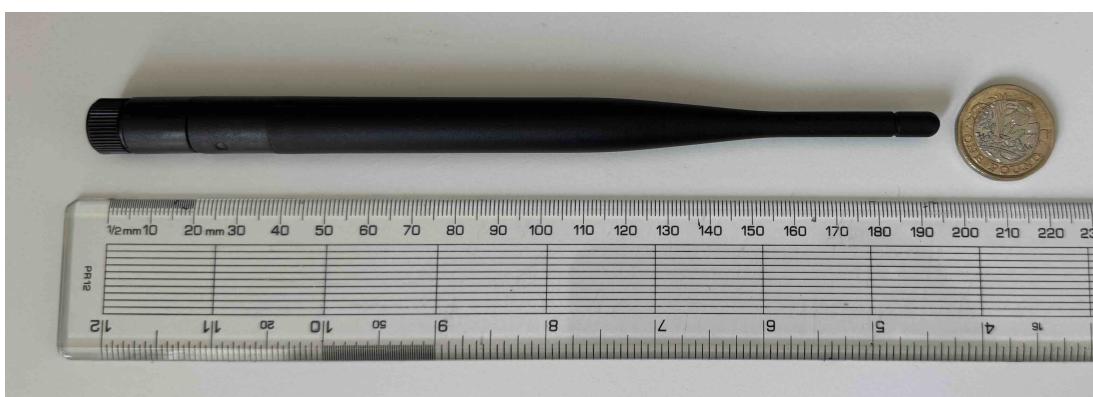
### Antennae

The selection of antennae is one of the largest determinants of range and reliability in the context of wireless communication systems [20]. Initially I used a simple PCB antenna as shown in Figure 5, however as explained in the next chapter, the range of this was insufficient for my use.



**Figure 5: Low range PCB antenna**

To improve overall range I switched to a more capable omnidirectional whip antenna that was made specifically for the Challenger RP2040. The antenna is tuned to perform best at the 868mhz frequency range - which is the range I was using.



**Figure 6: iLabs whip style LoRa antenna (868mhz)**

### Sensor selection

#### Temperature and humidity sensor

I used a DHT11 temperature/humidity sensor for each node to provide basic readings. It was chosen for it's low cost, availability and compatibility with both the RP2040 Chal-

lenger and CircuitPython (via libraries). The sensor can be connected to the microcontroller using a single GPIO pin as well as the usual power and ground pin.

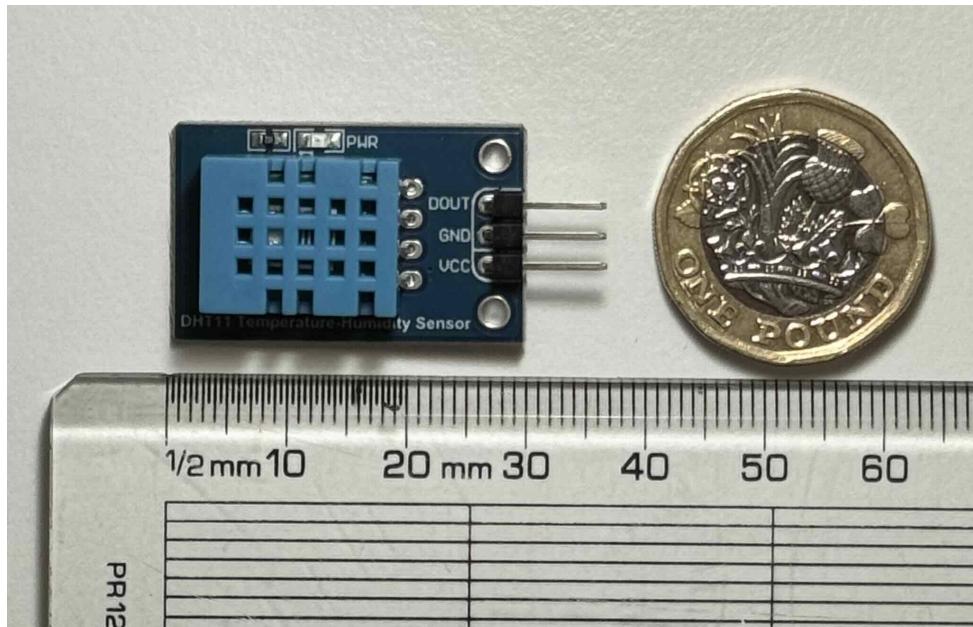


Figure 7: Waveshare DHT11 temperature/humidity sensor

### Soil moisture sensor

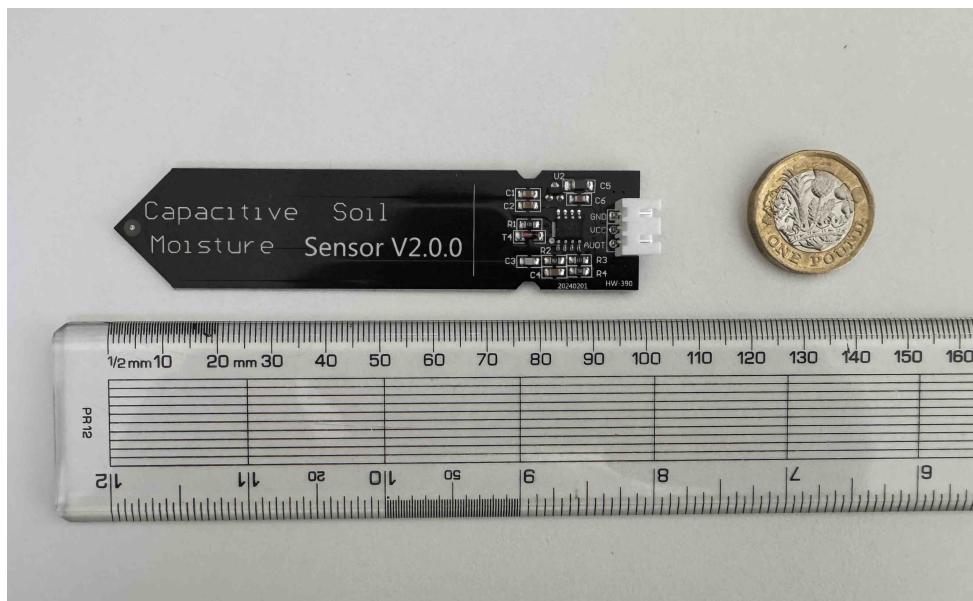


Figure 8: The Pi Hut capacitive soil moisture sensor

### Wind speed sensor



Figure 9: DFROBOT wind speed sensor

### Powering the node

To allow for continuous operation away from power sources, I set up a 6W Monocrystalline Silicon Solar Panel to each of the nodes. As the output from the solar panels was at too high a voltage to directly power the nodes, and as power was required overnight, I also installed a solar power management module onto the Challengers. This module uses the solar panel to charge a battery that is installed on it which can then power the challenger board.

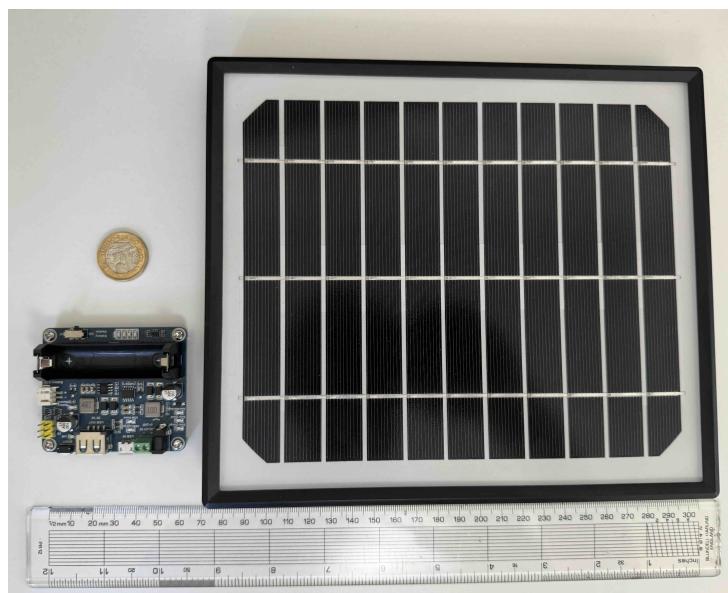


Figure 10: Waveshare solar power management module (left), solar panel (right)

## Weather proofing

I 3D printed a water proof enclosure and a separate Stevenson weather shield for the temperature/humidity sensor to allow for accurate outdoor readings.

### 7.1.2 Programming the nodes

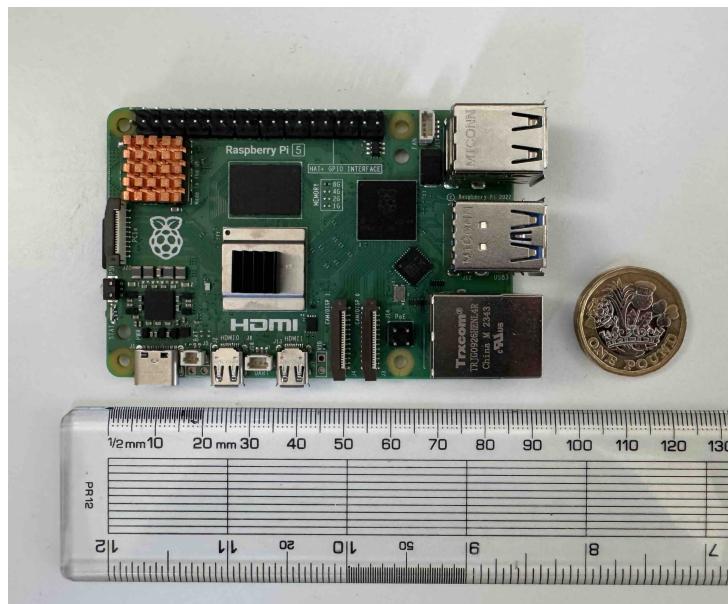
On each challenger I flashed the drives with CircuitPython, an open source interpreted language similar to Python but simplified for use in microcontrollers.

### 7.1.3 Repeater node

To improve range I made one of the four challengers I used act as a repeater. This meant it did not require sensors and instead it just had a solar panel and battery connected up to it. The repeater would receive signals from the two nodes before relaying them to the final gateway. This had the effect of significantly boosting the range.

## 7.2 Gateway

The gateway consisted of a fourth Challenger RP2040 connected to a Raspberry Pi (TBD version). The challenger only received messages from the repeater and then would transfer these to the Raspberry Pi. After receiving data the Raspberry pi uploaded this to the internet.



**Figure 11: Raspberry Pi 5 (8GB)**

# 8 Development and testing

## 8.1 Range tests

One of the most important tests to carry out prior to deployment in the field was testing the range of the devices.

In this experiment I took four challenger RP2040s to The Downs, a large public park in Bristol. Here I tested four different antenna configurations to compare how well the signal travelled across an increasing distance. Signal strength can be measured using the received signal strength index (RSSI), a measure of the difference in signal from the transmitter to the receiver and measured in decibels (CHECK THIS).

For the test, two challengers were programmed as transmitters, sending an example data packet similar to the data that would eventually be used at the farm. One of the transmitters used a simple PCB antenna (Figure 5) while the other used a higher range whip style antenna (Figure 6). Then I programmed two challengers as receivers, again one had a low range antenna and the other a long range one.

This meant that four different antenna configurations could be tested concurrently, as the receivers could pick up the signal from each transmitter. An estimate of their estimated relative performance before testing is shown below:

1. Whip antenna to whip antenna (Likely best result)
2. PCB antenna to whip antenna
3. Whip antenna to PCB antenna
4. PCB antenna to PCB antenna (Likely poorest result)

The reason PCB transmitter to whip receiver will likely outperform the whip to PCB configuration is that generally it is more important that the receiver has better "hearing" capabilities than the transmitter can "shout".

Nine different distances from transmitter to receiver were tested, in 200m increments starting from 0m as a baseline to a distance of 1600m (Figure 12). An important aspect in getting a successful LoRa connection is whether there is line of sight between the transmitter and receiver. Figure 13 shows the elevation profile of the test area, with the initial large dip being an inaccuracy from google earth's topology data as the 0m point is near a cliff edge. The lowest elevation point is at the starting point at around 83m above sea level, while the highest point was at the 1km mark at around 94m making an elevation range of 11m. My hypothesis was that signal would likely drop off or stop entirely beyond this point as points beyond 1000m would be below the hill line. This would effectively mean that the receivers would be in a signal shadow point where the

transmission waves would not be able to reach them. The only possibility for signal to reach this area would be from reflections either from nearby buildings or topology. However the effects of reflections are virtually impossible to account for in the real world and therefore no accurate predictions could be made.



Figure 12: Google earth image of data collection points

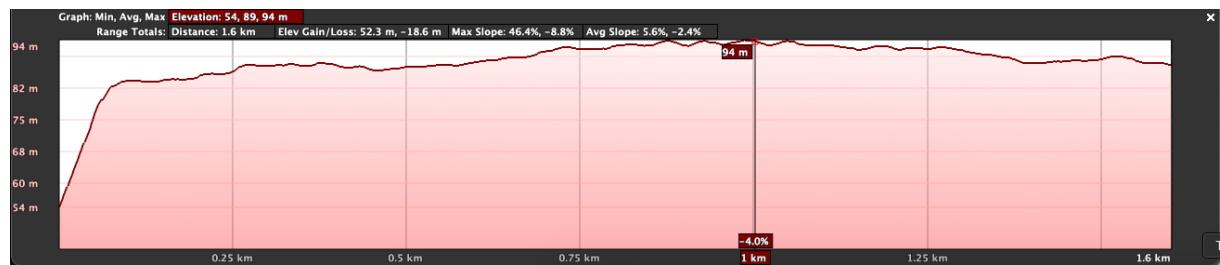


Figure 13: Elevation profile of test area (ignore large dip at start)

At the time of the actual test however a festival was being run between the 1200m and 1400m mark. The festival had a number of large tents and temporary buildings constructed which almost certainly blocked the signal. Therefore tests past this point should be heavily caveated. It is likely this contributed to the lack of signal past this point. Final data below:



**Figure 14:** Graph to show signal loss from different receiver and transmitter configurations (higher is better)

## 8.2 Battery tests

There is no mains electricity available in the apple field so the nodes must be able to operate without an external power source. Even with the use of a solar panel the node must be able to work through the night and during periods of dense cloud coverage where the solar panel will not have sufficient power to keep the node running. This is where the use of a battery is particularly useful as the solar panel can charge the battery with excess energy during periods of excess solar radiation, such as during midday hours, and then store this energy for periods of low or no solar radiation.

However, while daylight will be of little concern during the summer months when this dissertation is being written, there will be far fewer days of usable sunlight over the winter period. As the UK has very high latitude, there is large seasonal variation in the length of a day. For the town of Crediton (the nearest town to Small Brook Farm), in the summer there are 16.5 hours of daylight while in winter it receives only 7.6 hours; making one night 16.4 hours long. Therefore the node must have a battery sufficiently large to power it for a minimum of 16.4 hours with some additional charge to account for high cloud cover during the early evening and morning period.

To see if the battery solution was sufficient for this environment a test was run on a fully charged 18650 battery that was then connected to the solar power manager to allow the voltage to be regulated up to the challenger's 5v input voltage.

A digital multimeter was installed between the solar power manager and the challenger's usb c input to view the voltage and current in real time as well as running a timer for the test and a calculation of the number of watt-hours consumed by the node. The node was then run with a full suite of sensors attached. During the test the node used 80ma at 5V for a wattage of 0.4W.

The node ran until the battery would no longer discharge, with the final battery life of the node being 19 hours and 17 minutes. The meter showed that the node consumed 7.96Wh of power. Considering the battery capacity is 9 Wh it may seem that the battery ran out too quickly. However, the solar power manager documentation tells us that the battery boost efficiency - being the conversion of battery voltage from native 3.7V to 5V output - is only 86%. With that in mind effective battery capacity is roughly 7.74Wh, which is very similar to the actual result.

The achieved result of 19 hours should be sufficient for running the node continuously for much of the year as this compares to the longest night period of 16.4 hours. However, during periods of heavy cloud cover in winter there is a chance the node would not be able to charge the battery sufficiently in the day to allow the node to run over night.

### 8.3 Solar panel testing

The solar panel is rated for 6W maximum power. This however would only realistically be achieved under optimal conditions with a clear sky and full sun around midday. This power rating was first verified using a multimeter on such a day where a voltage of (INSERT VOLTAGE) and amperage of (INSERT AMPERAGE) was measured for a wattage of (INSERT WATTAGE).

As explained in the battery section above, the node consumed about 7.96wH over a 19 hour and 17 minute period. We can therefore determine that the node requires roughly 10wH of energy per day to able to run continuously. It would be tempting to then say that the node would need less than 2 hours of ideal sunlight to operate for an entire day (being  $6W * 2h = 12Wh$ ). However we must also account for the energy loss when converting from raw solar output to the regulated 5V input that challenger accepts.

The solar panel manager rates it's conversion efficiency for solar at 78% meaning for each watt of solar energy received 22% of this will be wasted as heat when converted to the correct voltage. If we adjust for this loss we would need effectively 12.8Wh of energy just to power the node for a day, which equates to 2 hours and 8 minutes of ideal conditions.

An additional 9Wh is needed to charge the battery which if we adjust again for solar efficiency factor we get 11.5Wh. This is an additional 1h:55m of ideal sun, leaving a total sunlight requirement each day of 4h:03m.

### 8.4 Hardware assembly and weatherproofing

Since most of the hardware in this project contains exposed electronics, the final assembled devices needed to be made wind and water resistant to prevent failure. However the sensors and solar panel also needed to be exposed to perform their function effectively - e.g. a solar panel must have a clear view of the sun throughout the day. The final design therefore needed to balance multiple conflicting purposes:

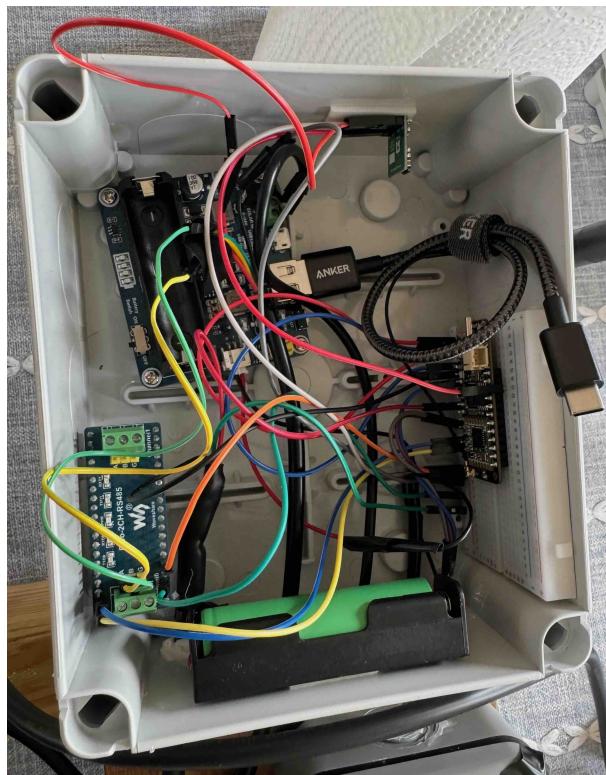
- The core electronics (challenger, solar manager, battery etc) must be kept dry, cool and away from wind which may damage electronics.
- The wind sensor must be exposed to the elements and securely fastened to withstand intense wind, it must also be kept high off the ground for more accurate readings.
- The solar panel must be exposed to the elements and be south facing at an angle of 30-40 degrees to optimise solar efficiency.
- The soil moisture sensor must be inserted into the ground and as it has exposed electronics must be made waterproof.
- The antenna of the challenger must be placed as high as possible (at least 1.5m from the ground).
- The temperature/humidity sensor must be exposed to the elements to ensure accurate readings but cannot be exposed to rain due to the exposed electronics on it.

Due to the conflicting nature of some of these needs. The final device would need to allow for positioning of different components at different heights.

The final design therefore was to place most of the sensitive electronics inside a waterproof box with cut-outs for the external component wires. This could then be mounted onto a 2m pole to allow for a good antenna signal and more accurate wind speed readings.

#### 8.4.1 Sensitive electronics

An IP65 waterproof junction box was selected to house the non-sensor portion of the electronics. An IP rating measures the Ingress Protection of a devices housing against water and dust defined by the International Electrotechnical Commission. The first number of an IP code is a measure of dust resistance while the second number is a measure of water resistance. An IP code of 65 therefore means the box used here has perfect dust resistance and can withstand water jets being sprayed at it from multiple directions [21]. This level of protection should be more than adequate to withstand the heavy rainfall it will experience.



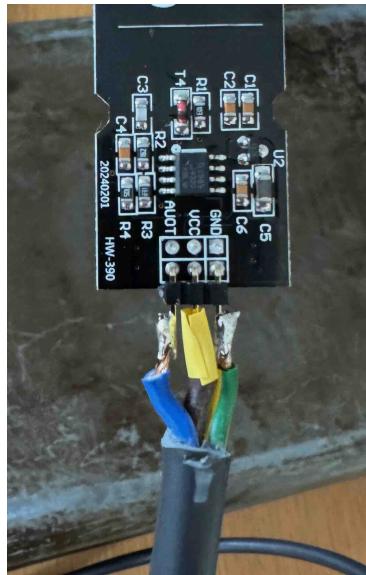
**Figure 15:** Open junction box showing internal wiring

The challenger microcontroller was inserted onto a half size breadboard and then stuck to one side of the box. The antenna cable was routed to the top right corner where a small hole was drilled to allow for the antenna to be mounted externally. All the other components were then wired into the breadboard and stuck down with double sided sticky pads to prevent damage during transport or heavy winds. The bottom of the box then had holes drilled for the anemometer, soil moisture sensor, solar panel and temperature/humidity sensor respectively. To prevent water ingress into these holes, sealant was deposited over the holes.

The entire box was then attached to a plank of wood measuring roughly 25cm by 60cm. This board holds all the sensors with the exception of the soil moisture sensor which must be able to hang freely.

#### 8.4.2 Soil moisture sensor

The sensor that required the most thought as to waterproofing and mounting was the capacitative moisture sensor. The first challenge was the need for the soil moisture sensor to be able to reach ground level while the microcontroller collecting its readings was secured 2m above it. The solution to this was to swap the small included wires with a 2.5m weatherproof cable containing three cores (one for power, one for ground and one for data). Each cable core was then soldered onto the sensor as in figure 16, allowing for the sensor to be inserted into the ground.



**Figure 16: Soldered soil moisture sensor**

Waterproofing the sensor was necessary as while the bottom three quarters of the board are designed to be inserted into soil, the part above this is made up of exposed electronics that must not come into contact with water (Refer to figure 8). This means it was essential to waterproof this part of the board.

To achieve this I followed an online tutorial on a hobbyist website [22]. and painted the electronics using nail varnish. While this sounds unconventional, nail varnish is a non-conductive compound that can be easily painted over electronics using the brush included and so is quite a popular low-cost method for waterproofing electronics. After this is applied the portion of the board with the electronics is covered in heatshrink to form a tight seal over the board, with a layer of nail polish on the edges to reduces the chance of water ingress under the heat shrink's plastic.

ADD FIGURE HERE

#### 8.4.3 Other external components

The DHT11 sensor was mounted inside a smaller IP55-rated junction box, which provides the same resistance against rain as the larger box. To allow for more accurate readings, small holes were drilled on the bottom panel of this so the air temperature inside the box would better match the external temperature/humidity. To further improve the sensor's accuracy, the box was painted white to reflect sunlight, and a solar shield made from a cut and reshaped aluminium can was mounted to the south facing side. . This shield helps to prevent the sensor being exposed to direct sunlight, reducing temperature distortion while still allowing airflow from the sides.

The solar panel was mounted below the main enclosure using the included adjustable gimbal mount. It was fixed at an angle of approximately 40° from horizontal, which balances solar efficiency throughout the year. This angle is steeper than the optimal summer setting but allows for improved performance during winter months when the sun is lower in the sky. The gimble allows for rotation in all planes which is useful in case the box itself cannot be mounted in a perfect south direction.

The anemometer was secured to a separate length of wood, positioned approximately 0.5 metres away from the main unit. This separation reduces turbulence caused by the box and pole, leading to more accurate wind speed readings. The sensor was screwed directly into the wood and positioned at a height of 2m.

ADD final assembled box on a pole with annotations

#### 8.4.4 Gateway

The gateway node required less careful engineering as there was no requirement for it to be waterproofed or mounted externally. As this would eventually be placed inside a persons private home, the aim was therefore to make a minimally imposing and so a design similar to an internet router was chosen.

The two devices inside the box would be the raspberry pi used to upload data and the challenger which received incoming LoRa packets from the repeater. A plastic box was used with cut outs for the pi's outputs and power cable, with an additional cut out on the lid for the challenger's antenna. The pi and challenger were then secured to the box's base with velcro tape, as both devices would potentially need to be removed for any trouble shooting.

# 9 Deployment

## 9.1 Test deployment at home

Before setting up the nodes at the farm it was important to run the equipment in an area where repairs and updates could be more easily performed. The nodes were therefore placed at different locations in my garden and ran continuously for a period of (ADD PERIOD).

### 9.1.1 Challenges and solutions from test deployment

One of the first challenges from the test deployment was the fact the batteries on the nodes were not quite sufficient to allow 24/7 readings. On the fourth day of the run, after an overcast evening the night before, one of the nodes stopped transmitting at around 6am - just before sunrise. To remedy this another battery was fitted to each of the end nodes (but not the repeater as this had much lower battery consumption from the lack of any sensors). This doubling of battery capacity would make loss of power during the night much less likely. The fact the solar panels could charge the battery fully by mid morning pointed to the fact that solar capacity was sufficient but battery capacity was not.

A related problem was that when the node died it did not start repeating again after this despite solar power returning and the battery getting recharged. I discovered that when the microcontroller detected brownout - being a sudden dip in voltage - the device would enter a safeboot mode. In this safeboot mode the default code.py file would not automatically be run and instead the device would create and use a safemode.py file that without modification would essentially run infinitely unless the reset button on the device was pressed or the device was powered off and on again.

Clearly this behaviour was not appropriate for field deployment where brownouts would potentially occur whenever the battery was discharged completely. Even with the additional battery capacity provided by a second battery there would still be a high chance of this occurring on particularly dark days during winter, where continuous uptime could not be guaranteed.

To remedy this, I modified the safemode.py file using a template I found in the circuitpython documentation. This version of the safemode.py file was made specifically for the case I was using i.e. remote solar powered projects where manual reset of the board could not be achieved easily. Instead of entering an infinite loop this safemode would (DESCRIPTION OF SAFEMODE).

A separate issue was the behaviour of the temperature-humidity sensor when exposed to direct sunlight. While the junction box used to encase the sensor was painted white to re-

duce any heat transfer from solar radiation, the readings taken on very sunny days showed a large delta of around 5 celsius between the sensor readings and local air temperature readings that could not be explained with the existence of a microclimate.

To reduce this effect an additional solar shield was made to surround the sensor. Consisting a wooden frame and aluminium shield to block light falling on the junction box. While this method did help to reduce the delta at midday to around 3 celsius there was still clearly quite a pronounced effect. So to further reduce any warming the solar panel was mounted to the rear of the node. This would allow the temperature sensor to face north instead of south which in the northern hemisphere would result in much reduced solar warming to the sensors box as the sun tracks over the southern area of the sky in the UK.

## **9.2 Deployment in the field**

### **9.3 Placement of nodes**

## Part III

# Software development

# 10 Programming the hardware

Section on programming: 1) The nodes, 2) the repeater, 3) The gateway

The challenger boards can be programmed in a few different languages. The most common of these are C (including C++) and python. I decided to program the boards in python due to the large availability of sensor libraries written in this language. Programming in C, while potentially more efficient, would likely have meant I would need to write my own libraries and functions to get many of the sensors to function properly and therefore was not selected.

The RP2040 processor of the challenger uses relatively low power, so the versions of python for the chip tend to be stripped down to accommodate this. The two main python versions available are circuit python and micropython. They both have extensive libraries and work with all the sensors I have selected. With no major difference in their functionality, I settled on circuitpython as this was the version recommended by iLabs (the makers of the challenger board) and included a library that supports challenger as well as example code.

## 10.1 LoRa settings configuration

The most fundamental part of the program for each of the nodes in the LoRa network was that they could communicate with each other. This required the careful matching of LoRa configuration settings between them.

ADD LoRa settings

LoRa has many parameters that must be aligned for two devices to communicate successfully. These include:

1. **Spreading factor:**
2. **Frequency:** Must match across devices; this project uses 868 MHz, the UK LoRa ISM band.
3. **Bandwidth:** Determines how wide the signal is, I am using 125 kHz.
4. **Coding rate:**
5. **Transmit power:** Affects the power and therefore range. This must be set within legal limits (e.g., 14 dBm in the UK).

### 10.1.1 Compliance with regulatory limits on radio power

The UK has strict regulations on the usage of radio transmitters under the Ofcom ISM band rules. For the 868mhz band, the maximum effective radiated power that can be used is 25mW. This corresponds to a transmit power of roughly 14dB.

Additionally, the UK has rules on duty cycle rates. This is essentially how long radio signals are permitted to be on air. For example at a spreading factor of 12 a message may take approximately 1 second to send. The duty cycle limit in the UK is 1%, meaning you may only transmit for 1% of the time on a given day. 1% of a day is 864 seconds. This means to stay in line with UK regulations only 864 messages could be sent on a given day - or roughly 1 message every 2 minutes.

## 10.2 Sensor nodes

## 10.3 Repeater

## 10.4 Gateway

## 10.5 Remote diagnostics and error handling

Since all the sensors would not be accessible easily errors needed to be reported remotely to diagnose faults and problems. Unfortunately, while the sensor nodes and repeater are technically network connected with LoRa there is no easy way to send firmware updates over the air without developing a program to accept and create new files over LoRa (FACT CHECK THAT), which was outside the scope of a three month dissertation. Therefore instead the nodes would need to have robust error handling written into their programs.

Diagnostics on the gateway node was luckily much simpler as this was powered on 24/7 and network connected. (EXPLANATION OF TAILWIND AND RVC VIEWER)

## 11 Overview of software design

## 12 Backend: Database and SQL API

For the database, I chose Render as a good low cost option for hosting the web service as it offers a free trial period, constant uptime and backups. The free version of web services by Render ([render.com](https://render.com)), provides a limited set of resources at zero cost: 256 MB of RAM; 0.1 share of a CPU and 1 GB of storage. There are also limits on outbound bandwidth, build pipeline minutes and instance hours. A single instance of a POSTGRES database is available on this service - which is free for the first 30 days and then costs \$5 a month. These resources should be sufficient for this project as only small amounts of data are involved.

The web service is running an API I have written, which will receive data from the raspberry pi used as the gateway. The data is sent using a POST request with a JSON body which is parsed, processed and added to the database by the API. Data can be retrieved for display by the frontend using a GET request.

The database design is relatively simple add design here with a single table holding all the data so the choice of database management system is not crucial. Having said that, POSTGRES is a well established and reliable relational database management system that complies with ANSI SQL standards and most importantly for this project is supported by Render.

The 1 GB storage limitation allows for (x) rows of data with the current database design.

This solution should scale well. The database design allows for additional sites to be added with very little configuration. And in the unlikely event that the volumes exceed the Render limits it is easy to pay more for additional resources.

## 13 Frontend: Agriscanner webapp

Overview of front-end

## 14 Forecasting with machine learning

## **Part IV**

## **Evaluation**

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# Part V

## Appendices

## A Breakdown of costs

| Category    | Name   | Units | Cost (£) | Total cost (£) |
|-------------|--|-------|----------|----------------|
| Electronics | iLabs Challenger RP2040 LoRa (868MHz)                  | 4     | 20.80    | 83.20          |
| Electronics | Solar Power Management Module for 6V-24V Solar Panel   | 3     | 9.70     | 29.10          |
| Electronics | RS485 Wind Speed Transmitter                           | 2     | 43.20    | 86.40          |
| Electronics | Capacitive Soil Moisture Sensor                        | 2     | 4.00     | 8.00           |
| Electronics | Monocrystalline Silicon Solar Panel                    | 3     | 9.90     | 29.70          |
| Electronics | 2-Channel RS485 Module for Raspberry Pi Pico           | 2     | 7.50     | 15.00          |
| Electronics | 9V Step-Up Voltage Regulator U3V40F9                   | 2     | 9.60     | 19.20          |
| Electronics | 18650 Lithium-ion Rechargeable Cell - 2500mAh 3.7V 30A | 5     | 3.99     | 19.95          |
| Electronics | Raspberry Pi   | 1     | 33.60    | 33.60          |
| Electronics | iLabs LoRa Antenna (EU868)                             | 4     | 5.53     | 22.12          |
| Electronics | DHT11 Temperature-Humidity Sensor                      | 2     | 3.90     | 7.80           |
| Electronics | Half size breadboards                                  | 3     | 2.00     | 6.00           |
| Electronics | 5 Meters of Black 3 core cable                         | 1     | 5.00     | 5.00           |
| Electronics | Battery storage case                                   | 5     | 1.00     | 5.00           |
| Electronics | Assorted (M-M, M-F, F-F) jumper cables                 | 1     | 6.00     | 6.00           |
| Enclosure   | IP65 junction box                                      | 3     | 12.18    | 36.54          |
| Enclosure   | Small IP55 junction box                                | 2     | 4.20     | 8.40           |
| Enclosure   | Wooden posts (2m)                                      | 3     | 17.00    | 51.00          |
| Enclosure   | Gravel board   | 1     | 8.50     | 8.50           |
| Enclosure   | Steel spur post supports                               | 3     | 8.95     | 26.85          |
|             |  |       |          | 507.36         |

Figure 17: Table of component costs

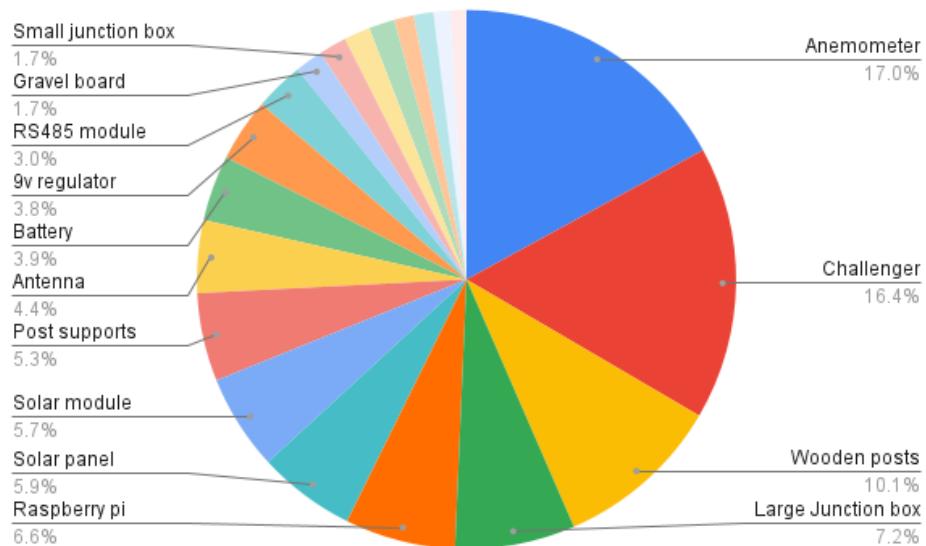


Figure 18: Chart to visualise relative cost of components

## B Next section