

Claire Wolstencroft

Claire and husband Graham moved into Lane Head Farm, near Longnor, in 2006. They farmed their smallholding under Higher Level Stewardship, an agreement which ends in 2019. As part of this agreement Claire has worked with parties of schoolchildren helping them to build a connection to and understanding of the countryside. Claire first spoke to us in 2015.

Part One. Life as a small holder

CG: Could you just start by telling us how you came to live here?

CW: We lived at Macclesfield, but we were cavers and climbers and we'd wanted to move out closer to the Peak District for a long time. We were actually looking for somewhere nearer to Castleton, and we picked up the estate agents' details for this, dismissed it because of where it was, 'cos Graham didn't know this area of the Peak particularly well. I did because I grew up in Stafford, so I knew it a little bit better. So, we drove down the lane and we just pulled up there, where the van is now and I said 'don't care what it's like inside, I want to live here'. It's the place; the views; it was the sort of remoteness; the fact that when I got out of the car we couldn't hear any traffic, because there are so many places in the Peak District where you can hear the A6; the unspoiltness; the feeling that it hadn't been invaded by the BBC workers and Waitrose brigade.

CG: So, you came here and you thought that's it. Can you describe the landscape features that immediately got you going, made you think this is it?

CW: The combination of soft hills, dry-stone walls, trees, the moors on the top. The not total remoteness, but you know, the sense that it was fairly isolated. Not too close to noise and bustling. Quietness, views. It moves up to a bleaker landscape. You can see the sort of changes in it as you look out. I think the trees as well, 'cos I like trees. That's why we've planted some. Changed the landscape. See, we've made our impact on it. We've got just over 5.4 hectares, 5.48 hectares I think. We were looking for a couple of acres so I could keep a horse. And this place just happened to come with fourteen acres and I remember sort of thinking that's not an issue. I want to live here 'cos I want that view when I wash up, it just feels absolutely right. And we moved in and all of a sudden, we had fourteen acres and I went 'oh my God'. My husband actually, his uncle was a farmer, but a farmer in Kent. It was arable farming so a little bit different but he does know how to do things like drive tractors and move implements which was helpful. We've got fourteen acres, what are we gonna do? And someone said 'well you can rent it out to a local farmer'. And I thought but I don't know the local farmers yet. And we could rent it out to the wrong person and I want to feel that I control the land myself, so I thought we'd better learn what to do quickly. So, I bought some hay making machinery without telling Graham and I bought two cows one night when I was slightly tipsy in the local pub from one of the local wheeler-dealers. Graham came home and went 'what are them in the field?' I said 'cows'. 'Where've they come from?' 'I bought them'. They weren't milk cows they were beef. I did think we might

have a house cow and they were Dexters, which you could use as a dual purpose. Little ones. So, I thought I might be able to handle little ones, but I discovered little ones have vile tempers. One of them was seven and actually we bought one from the guy in the pub and we bought two more from our next-door neighbours who were in calf with calves at foot. So that was quite nice. So, I got two little calves and knew that I was gonna get two calves born and we had one that we bought from the man in the pub.

CG: So, when you got these animals did you do a lot of reading to figure this out?

CW: Fair bit of reading, sort of, Mr. Google is quite useful actually. Talked to local people, pretended I knew what I was talking about and then suddenly thought 'oh my God, the grass is growing', cos we moved in in January, 'we're gonna have to make hay'. 'Graham, do you know how to make hay?' 'No,' 'what do we do?' 'We'll have to mow it and dry it'. 'Yeah, but we've got this machinery, how do you use it?' And with a little bit of help from my neighbour just sorting out how to fix the mower up properly and make it work properly. We watched a local farmer mow so we thought right, must be a good day for mowing, so let's put the mower on and mow it. Then we watched him ted it and thought right, get the tedder out. Let's ted it. And we copied everything he did. That was ten years ago. It was a very steep learning curve. It was quite good fun and it was very satisfying when we'd got all the hay in and actually managed to make fairly reasonable hay and do everything without killing ourselves or breaking anything. Got people to help us, and it was quite good.

CG: And you'd got all the buildings that you needed?

CW: It came with quite a lot of agricultural buildings so yeah, we had to use them, didn't we?

CG: How did you feel as a newcomer, was it easy to make connections with people?

CW: Really easy. We moved in and nobody knew anything about us except that our name's Wolstencroft. And one of the local names is Woolecroft. And everybody just heard Woolecroft and assumed we must be related to the Woolecroft family somewhere. And because we'd got cows and because we'd got a tractor and because we were making our own hay, they all assumed that we must have been a farming family. So, they assumed we were farmers and it was about four years on when I'd asked Richard Gould to come and help us bale, 'cos we'd got some grass down and it was raining. It was forecast rain and we needed it baled before. He said 'someone tells me that you weren't always farmers'. And I said 'no'. 'Oh, we all thought you were farmers, 'cos you knew what to do'. So, he said 'how did you know what to do?' I said 'cos I looked it up'.

CG: But you found people positive and friendly?

CW: Incredibly friendly, incredibly helpful, incredibly welcoming and I would say our closest friends now, and some of the closest friends we've ever had are local farmers who've lived here for a long time. It's really nice.

CG: You've got to know the area very well. You've come into a sharing experience haven't you with the local farmers? Can you tell us what your current operation is in terms of the farm?

CW: My current operations, I've actually got a share farming agreement with a young lad, because two years ago Graham and I both hurt our backs within a few months of each other. And we had a very poorly cow. And we had to milk her every day and neither of us could physically milk her every day. And we had to get one of the local farmers to come down and strip her out every day because we physically couldn't. And I suddenly thought, if we're in a situation where we're having to..., you know. We're only smallholders, it's not important to us. We've got them because we're doing conservation grazing. We've got them because we're caring for the landscape. But actually, if we're having to involve other people and put pressure on them, it's not fair. So, we sold the cows and we asked Matthew, who is the son of one of the local farmers, if he would like to share-farm the land with us. So, I do the stewardship and conservation, I do educational access. I have groups of school children coming round for visits. And I trained as a Forest Schools practitioner as well to enhance that, because one of my big interests has always been trees, flowers; the environment; why smallholdings are really good for the environment. And Matthew grazes it with sheep but between us we discuss which field needs to be grazed and we're trying to manage it so that the sheep aren't wrecking the flowers that we've already got. He operates within our stewardship agreement and it works really well. I've got a few of my own sheep running with his sheep. So, he does most of the animal side, I do most of the people side and the conservation side, and between us it works quite well now. I've got a few Shetland sheep and Matthew's got about forty odd.

CW: I do educational access and I have really struggled to get the visits. We can have up to twenty-five visits a year under our High Level Stewardship Agreement for educational access. Actually, I have about twelve a year, I get about one a month, 'cos we don't do any over winter. Not many over winter, do a few. We have wheelchair access now. And our boardwalk, it goes through our rushes, past a hedge, through a growing hazel coppice, past some dry-stone walls and onto a pond. You've got a stream habitat, a dry-stone wall habitat, a wetland habitat, a tree habitat, a coppice habitat, a pond habitat, all within this short area that anybody doing environmental studies in a wheelchair can access that habitat. I've had two wheelchair users, that's it, and I know that it could be used so much better. So, I've had that money and it won't actually ever get used because if I want it to be used, I have got to go out and I have got to aggressively market it myself. I've now, through Facebook, I got in touch with the Home Education group and I got in touch with Woodcraft folk and I got a group of people. And somebody else said 'how much would we have to pay to meet here every month?' and I said 'You wouldn't have to pay anything'. All you would have to do is meet here every month and fill in a feedback form and as long as it's for two hours and there's at least six of you, I can claim on my educational access.

CG: So, you are completely committed to this. Can you tell us why small holdings are good for the environment?

CW: Well, I sort of realised very quickly that we were only ever going to make a loss if we were going to breed Dexter cattle. It wasn't gonna make us a profit and it was going to be a lot of hard work for nothing. And when we first moved here, I knew nothing about flowers. Well, I knew a daisy and a buttercup and a dandelion, foxgloves, that's probably about it, bluebells, all the ones that everybody knows. Went for a walk with one of my old towny friends round the back of the Roaches and came across so many flowers and I said, 'do you know what, I'd really love to know the names of all these flowers'. So, I sort of set about trying to identify all the flowers on the farm and then suddenly thought I'd like to know a little bit more about conservation. So, I enrolled on an HMC course in Countryside Management and Conservation at Reese Heath, which taught me exactly what I wanted to know. And realised that one of the quickest ways, or the best ways for us to make this profitable, as opposed to costing us money to run. Because land costs money to maintain. Unless you just let it out and lose control of it, land costs money to maintain.

CW: There were dry-stone walls that were tumbling down and I like dry-stone walls, and we wanted to rebuild them, but didn't have the money. And I suddenly realised, actually there are grants that you can access but you need to be in some sort of stewardship scheme. So, I did a little bit of reading, found out about High Level Stewardship and Entry Level Stewardship and I applied for High Level Stewardship and I didn't get it. Interestingly, started my HMC and realised what environmental features they were looking for, rewrote my application saying 'we've got this, this, this, this and this' and got High Level Stewardship. And the money from that actually, along with Single Farm Payment, made us a very slight profit and it also meant that we could get funding to rebuild the walls. So, we built quite a lot of walling and we got some funding from the English Woodland to plant the trees. You drove through them when you came down the drive. And what's interesting, I don't think we'd have got the planning permission to plant them now.

CW: This happened in about the first three years. We moved here in 2005 and got the stewardship in 2009. The stewardship is a ten-year agreement. I've got 'til February 2019. Without that, we would've just rented it out to a local dairy farmer and he would've managed it how he manages everything else. And what I find sort of sad, some of the fields round about have got bigger, because the walls have gone and the trees that were along the walls have gone. And you can look over there and that used to be a field that was divided up and since we've been here, the wall's gone and the trees have been taken out and it's managed as one big field. Which, when your profits are cut, your milk price is going down and down and down and down, you don't want to fanny about not being able to mow up next to your walls and you want to just be able to get in your fields and mow it. And I can understand why it happens. It's people who are on smallholdings, I guess and people who aren't dependent on farming for their main income are the ones that have the luxury of being able to concentrate on

conservation. Because a lot of farmers round here - it's not a rich farming area, you know, they're not rolling in it. You don't have time to fanny around building dry-stone walls that you don't need and if it's gonna be easier to, you've got a large herd of cattle, it's easier to take the wall out and manage that whole field for silage and plough it up, manage it for silage.

CG: Have you engaged in this discussion with the farmers around here, how they are under a financial cosh of food prices, especially dairying, it's horrendous now, isn't it?

CW: If you talk to the lad that's tedding our field at the moment, he would say that you don't make enough from the stewardship. It's supposed to compensate you, but actually, you just want to put muck on, get the grass growing, get the grass in. The reality is, no you need to make life easier for yourself and make it easier to make a profit. You don't want to make it harder. He's right. Government is supposedly behind encouraging small businesses but it certainly doesn't encourage small-scale farming. The way it's set up in this country now, it's encouraging large-scale farming because it is only large-scale farming that's going to be profitable.

CW: I'm not gonna get Basic Payment Scheme anymore, because although we have 4.48 hectares, you have to have five hectares to get Basic Payment. I've got woodland on some of mine, so it's not agricultural anymore and I'm getting farm woodland payment on it for another three years. I now am not a farmer anymore. And quite interestingly, I've been told in the pub, I used to be considered a farmer and they called me a farmer. They now tease me and call me a hobby farmer because I don't get Single Farm Payment. That's been really wrong, making the limit five hectares. I mean for me, it's totally dis-incentivised me, because why would I want to carry on with stewardship? It's made the difference between me making a paper profit and a paper loss. And if I'm farming it and doing High Level Stewardship, I have to insure it as a farmer, whereas if I let it out to somebody else, they're responsible for the insurance. And the insurance costs me about two thousand pounds a year. I am paying the same insurance as a large dairy farm because the risks are more or less the same. Your acreage doesn't matter. We have the same buildings; we've got a large shippen. We have the same buildings. You have the same risks. We've got public footpaths which immediately shoots your insurance premiums up. If I let that land out it's his problem, not mine. I hate getting my insurance bill because my insurance is more than the income I'm ever getting from the land. I've got to have that public liability insurance and I've got to have employers liability insurance. I have to pay employers liability insurance because if you decided to come and help me move some hay bales, because you saw me and Graham struggling in the field moving hay bales, even though you're a neighbour you are still my employee.

CW: So, I think now it will be Matthew. At the moment we have a share-farm agreement, but as soon as my stewardship comes to the end, he will just operate on a grazing license. And it'll be his land to do with what he likes. However much I try and persuade him that hay meadows are good, he's not having it. So, you know, other than saying to him 'You can have a grazing license on the condition that you always

manage that field up there, which is really pretty as a hay meadow, you can do what you like with the rest'. That's what I'd do, that's what I'd do. It's what I have to do. Don't want to cope with the bureaucracy. Next door but one's just said 'We're gonna do what we like with the land, we cannot cope with the bureaucracy anymore. I am not prepared to fill in the forms', he said 'it is just too much, I do enough of this at work'. And sadly it is people like us, it's the smallholders. I think I'm right, I don't think I'm the only one that feels like this.