

## **Claire Wolstencroft**

Claire and her husband Graham moved into Lane Head Farm near Longnor in 2005. 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 2. Higher Level Stewardship**

CW: 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 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 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. 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 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 about how they are under the financial cosh of food prices and particularly 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.

CG: So, you've got this High Level Stewardship agreement which carries on for another five years or so, do you know other people around here who've got corners of land in High Level Stewardship like you?

CW: I know quite a few who've got corners of land in High Level Stewardship and I know quite a few of them who say when the agreement finishes 'we're not going to do it again'.

CG: Environmentally, this is kind of catastrophic for biodiversity in this corner of the Peak?

CW: I don't think it's a good thing. The goalposts change. We've been here for ten years and since we've been 'farming' or as the local farmers say 'hobby farming', the paperwork, regulations, they change every year. And you do not have time to read every bit of paper. Actually, it's not paper that comes now, it's PDFs. And when I look round, some of the most beautiful farms are managed by farms that aren't in stewardship anyway, they've done it that way for hundreds of years and they aren't going to read the PDFs online. It's bureaucracy gone totally insane. Don't know how you do it though, it's a lack of the wholeness, it's people not seeing the whole story. Too many different departments all deciding and making their own inter-departmental rules.

CW: Another thing that really makes me angry is that it's prescriptive. You have these prescriptions for managing your land. Those prescriptions are the same throughout the UK, and they don't work.

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 got a grant to build a disabled access footpath through our woodland and a boardwalk and a pond-dipping platform, 'cos we've got a little pond down there. We got a grant to do that. 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 then 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 put it on Twitter. 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.

CG: So, shall we move back on to the future for stewardship schemes in this area?

CW: Somebody not so far from here has just said 'I will never do stewardship again and I am not even claiming Single Farm Payment, because I don't want to be beholden to the Government. I don't think they have yet realised that actually, whether you claim Single Farm Payment or not, you have some legal obligations to keep certain records and it is not dependent on Single Farm Payment. It's actually a legal requirement to

keep those records. So, what happens when you're not taking a Single Farm Payment. People are thinking, if I don't take my Single Farm Payment, especially smallholders, people with a small amount of land, I don't have to obey the rules. Actually, you still have to obey the rules. But I'm not quite sure what stick they're going to beat you with.

CW: I think there have been too many changes and too much paperwork, too quickly. I just sorta think you get used to one thing and it all changes and I don't know, well I know from conversations in the pub, I am not the only person that feels like that, and I hear 'I am not going to do stewardship again'. I just sorta think am I the only person that feels like this? I don't think I am because I've been in the pub and you hear 'absolute waste of time' and I know somebody locally he's only done it because he's had about five miles of drystone walling now. And he's had a lot of drystone walling and it's really, really, really good.

CG: So, what do you think this means in terms of this landscape and the creatures that live in it?

CW: I think we're gonna get less hay meadows because I know that when we come out of stewardship, my hay meadows will go. And it will upset me. I will probably keep that one and I will probably insist that whoever rents my land leaves that one as a hay meadow, because it is really rich in flowers now. But the other ones will just get managed along with the rest of their farm. They will get muck on and they will get mown whenever.

CG: I'm just thinking about in terms of the ninety-seven point whatever percent of hay meadows that were lost in the 1980s and 1990s. In the Peak Park I think we're down to about three percent. So, we are now talking about the tiniest last percentages. I bet an awful lot in the Peak District are around here. So, what happens around here is critically important. They are going at a rate as of now, aren't they?

CW: I know one that's about to go. Walked through it the other day and I thought, this is absolutely gorgeous, but they come out of the stewardship and she says 'That's it, now we can mow it whenever we like and we can put as much muck on it as we like'. And you think, that's gonna go. It's gonna go, and I know my hay meadow up there won't, but I doubt I'll be claiming any payment on it because I'm not going through all the hassle. Me, who is usually on top of all the paperwork, I don't know what's going to happen, because I don't get Basic Payment Scheme anymore. What will happen when we go out of stewardship this time? How easy, given that I'm not a proper farm anymore, how easy it is for me to persuade them that actually, that field still needs stewardship? Because without it, there is no point in me keeping it as a hay meadow, because it's got to the stage where for health reasons, farming it, trying to be productive isn't worth it anymore.

CG: How much financial incentive do you think you and other people around here would need if the bureaucracy were less onerous?

CW: Probably slightly more than you're getting now. I don't know what I'm getting - is it two hundred and fifty or something two hundred (per hectare), I can never remember.

It's barely enough, it's barely enough. I would probably want about five hundred, because for me, it's the insurance. I hate getting my insurance bill, because my insurance is more than the income I'm ever getting from the land. Possibly, what you're needing is double the amount without all the paperwork. But it's not going that way.

Julia: Do you think that any muck is bad?

CW: No, not at all. And they muck the meadows and they still get loads of flowers. It's the type of muck you put on. Slurry doesn't help enormously. But what's really annoyed me, we had that field at the back and that field. That field had loads of flowers in. They both had loads of flowers in when we moved here, well not loads but quite a lot. Now they've just got hay rattle. Because we've always mowed late, hay rattles allowed to flourish. If you have odd years where you mow early, the hay rattle gets chopped off and it goes away again and it allows other flowers to come in. Hay rattle's taking over at the expense of other flowers. And there was a paper written by this guy up in Durham Dales who's, actually said that since stewardship's come in, the diversity of flowers in some meadows has gone down and they'd got far more hay rattle, but they haven't got as many of the other flowers. And he wrote a really good article on it. And my management scheme would be to mow randomly, because that's what people did, with the weather, and it worked. That's how you created the hay meadows. They didn't go 'Well we can't mow until the 15th of July'.

CG: To be honest, that's to do with ground nesting birds. So, the latest possible point at which they can have a last possible second brood of this species. Do you know what I mean?

CW: But most farmers don't like disturbing the ground nesting birds. Some of it's about what seeds when. I hate seeing the curlews losing the babies, they do every year don't they? They're in dire straights throughout Europe, aren't they? I don't know how you bring it back, 'cos actually I don't think people are interested. It has to be made ever so much easier. You need something about that size [demonstrates]. You don't want tons of paper.

CW: I've had the Young Farmers round and walked through the hay meadows and had one young lad say, 'I never even thought of it like that'. And I said 'You know, you have the flowers and you have pollinators', and talked about food changes, and I said 'without these flowers, we won't have these species and they are a really important part of the food chain and the soil cycle, because you need certain microbes in the soil for things to grow really well and that's something that you're losing as well, and you don't see what's going on under the ground'. And he said 'We didn't know'. And I sort of think, no you're gonna lose it cos that isn't what farming's about. They're gonna listen to the how to fix my tractor, how to grow more, go faster. The young lads that I hear want bigger, faster, better.