

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 worked with parties of schoolchildren helping them to build a connection to and understanding of the countryside. Claire first spoke to Christine Gregory in 2015 and then again in 2018 about the changes that had occurred in the intervening years and her plans for the future.

Part 5 – Three years on (2018)

CG: Right Claire, so a lot has changed since I spoke to you three years ago. Can you tell me what the biggest things are that have altered in your land here, in your holding?

CW: Well, we are just letting the land now. We haven't got any livestock of our own and I'm really looking forward to coming out of stewardship, because we will manage our fields differently. We will still manage them for conservation, but we won't be hide bound by regulations that seem to be the same for the whole of the country, whether you're in Lincoln, Pembroke, East Sussex or Northumberland we're all treated the same and that just can't work, because even around here the best way to manage a meadow will vary from here to the farm over there, because the land is different.

CG: You've been here for how long now Claire?

CW: Twelve years.

CG: What would you say are the big things that you've learned about your patch of land in that time?

CW: We had a big meadow. It's interesting talking to the Natural England officer, he's agreed that they have learnt. Over the last ten years of stewardship, people who started their agreements ten years ago, a lot of us have had the same experience. Actually, rather than ending up with meadows that are full of beautiful flowers, we've ended up with meadows full of docks and thistles, and Natural England said, 'actually, we've learnt from it to, so our prescriptions and the way we suggest that you would manage it would be different now'. So, they are always being informed by what's happened, and he said 'if you'd come into stewardship three or four years later, your prescriptions may well have been different'. Which I thought was quite interesting.

CG: So, this is a juggernaut that's a bit slow to turn?

CW: Yeah. Because we were only allowed to top one third of the field and because I think probably there was quite a big seed bank of thistles, what's happened is that we haven't been able to get on top of it, so the thistles have got on top of us instead. If we'd been able to top the whole field a couple of times a year to get rid of the thistles as they come through, I think we'd have ended up with a better pasture. But I don't know, but that is what we're going to try, so come back in ten years time and we might have slightly less thistles.

CG: Have you seen farms nearby here that are doing what you think are the perfect thing?

CW: There's a couple of lovely older farmers just across the road and they've got beautiful meadows. And we're not allowed to mow ours until the fifteenth of July, and they'll mow theirs in the middle of June, and yet theirs are flower rich and there's hardly any weeds anywhere. So, it's obviously not when you mow that's making the difference. We have less flowers now by mowing later. This year we got a derogation to mow early and we had some very young pheasants, not that they're a particularly important species, but the lad that was mowing carefully ushered them into a safe area and we still see them, so they're fine. I think people are aware that there are ground nesting birds and they will leave the area around it.

CG: They can do that if they've got small tackle, little tractors, little trailers, little mowers.

CW; Yeah, that's true, but most of the people who've got the sort of land where you're going to get ground nesting birds tend to have the little tackle and the smaller trailers. Whereas most of the people who've got fields that are rye grass monoculture and big tackle don't have the ground nesting birds, 'cos the ground nesting birds don't want to go live in those fields, it's not right for them. So, I don't think it's as much of a problem. I think people who want to keep hay meadows as traditional hay meadows are the sort of people that are going to notice 'ah, we've got some birds nesting there, we'll avoid that bottom bit of that field'. But we're not getting the ground nesting birds anymore anyway. There's nothing like as many. When we first moved in, there were so many curlews. It must have been about eight or nine years ago, I can remember going for a walk with a family that came to visit us, and just watching and listening to well tens, twenties of curlews flying around, and this year there's been one solitary one going around. That makes me quite sad, that change. But I also know that it's changed on the coast, so it's not necessarily what we're doing around here. The curlews aren't there on the coast to come over here and nest, are they? So, there's something bigger afoot. I don't think it's to do with the farming practices here.

CG: The RSPB are convinced that the whole picture does relate to farming practice across the country in terms of the loss of farmland birds. But that's the picture nationally. If you don't have a large population forever, they might be moving around.

CW: Not convinced, not convinced. Because, I think round here things haven't changed a lot and we haven't got as many and they would have come back here, because it's a good place. The make-up of birds has changed.

CG: Obviously, one of the big issues with waders has always been about drainage, hasn't it?

CW: Yeah, I guess so. But quite interesting, our fields are wetter now than they have been for years. But, because we weren't allowed to top our rushes, they've got so rank that no self-respecting ground nesting bird is going to nest in them, because they would be threatened. What they want is little clumps so that they can see their predators, and what we've got is a very wet field with rushes so close together that birds can't nest in it.

CG: So, obviously this has been a freakishly dry summer hasn't it, in terms of extreme weather. What impact has that had around here that you've seen driving around? Not just on your own land.

CW: The obvious impact has been there's not an awful lot of fields to graze. A lot of fields haven't been mown, because the cows have gone in and grazed it, because the grass in the field they're supposed to be eating hasn't grown fast enough. And interestingly enough, that maybe combined with some farms that have been shut down for TB, they've also been really stuck for grazing. I know somebody who's not been able to mow because he's had to graze it, because he can't sell his cattle, because they're shut down with TB and the cows have got to eat something. I think we've been able to get onto our rushes and we've been able to mow them, all of them for the first time since we moved in here. We strimmed nearly all of them one year and the first time we strimmed them, the following spring we got ragged robin, loads of it, which we'd never had before. It just suddenly came back and a lot of bugle and as the rushes have got closer together that's actually got less. Now I'm wondering, this spring it's going to be really interesting to see if we get even more, because that ragged robin had obviously come from the seed bank that's been exposed. A bit like when we coppice trees.

CG: I remember one of the things that you talked about a lot was the assistance you'd given to farmers about the NVZ. Have you still been involved with that?

CW: No, because we don't get basic payment scheme anymore and we're not considered a farm anymore, there hasn't been the compulsion to do the same paperwork, because we're not going to lose anything by not doing it. They can't take our basic payment scheme away from us, because we don't have any. So, I'm not really up anymore. I was always a bit of a paperwork nerd, which is why I'd help other people. But I don't need to do it now. One job less.

CG: So, what about your other projects and what you're doing here, because you are working as an educational centre, aren't you?

CW: Yeah, I did educational access as part of my Higher Level Stewardship, so I've been having groups of children on the farm. I have to do at least four visits a year. I usually end up doing about ten. But, because my stewardship is coming to an end, I won't be doing it anymore, because I'm getting older too. And they come for a visit of two hours or an afternoon and it takes me a day and a half to prepare for it.

CG: So, what's going on on your farm now, on your small holding? What is happening?

CW: At the moment we let the land to a young farmer, but we try and manage it for conservation as much as we can. But next year, because we're going to be able to top as much as we can, we're going to try and get on top of the thistles in the permanent pasture, and what we might actually do is..., we'll top it aggressively for a year or so and then we might sort of rotate the hay meadows a bit more, because we haven't been allowed to let the grass grow as a hay meadow either. So, it's all just become really strange in there, it's not right.

CG: From talking to you before, you've learnt an awful lot about grassland management. How do you see the future of what it is you want to do, now that you're free of the stewardship?

CW: One of the things that's happened, is that we have far more hay rattle, but the hay rattle seems to have come at the expense of other flowers, so we haven't got such a variety of flowers as we had before. We might have more of some particular flowers. And I think that's got a lot to do with always mowing it after July 15th. That allows some flowers to grow and seed, but if every now and again, like this year, we could've mowed really early, we could've mowed in the middle of June, that actually allows some of the later flowers like scabious to grow and seed and I think you end up with a wider variety of flowers. So, it will be quite nice to see what happens when we mow the meadows when we think they're right to mow and when the weather's right, which is what they used to do. And it will be interesting after having ten years of having what will inevitably be a random mowing pattern, because the weather is a fairly random pattern, whether we end up with more flowers. I think we will, so it's just going to be an interesting comparison. We have woodland that we're managing as well. That's changed a lot, because we've got ash die back now. It's not a major problem, not all of the trees have got it, some of them have, some of them haven't. Some of them are obviously still really healthy. We've got to thin them anyway, so we are just thinning the ones that are dying. So, it's just a natural process and we've re-planted an area with very diverse species. We put some eucalyptus in. Why not? I went to some seminars on tree diseases and talking to people from the forestry commission, one of the things is, the more diverse range of trees that you have, the more resilient you're going to be to disease. But because of where we live and the type of soil we've got, not everything will grow happily here and I was going down the list of trees and thinking what might grow here and what will be happy here. And I know eucalyptus grows, because somebody's got some in their garden down there, and it grows really well. And I thought, why not. It caused a few raised eyebrows with some naturalists, because it's not a native species. I said, 'yeah, but our climate might not be a traditional native climate for much longer and it's providing some resilience'. We're not planting a eucalyptus forest, we've got about twenty-five eucalyptus trees, some of which will obviously not survive. But, in all of this dry weather, the native species that we have planted have really struggled. The beech hasn't liked it being so dry at all, but the eucalyptus have gone absolutely mad and they're the ones that have really flourished in the dry weather. And I think that says a lot. We're trying to increase resilience with a little bit of lateral thinking, really.

CG: So, I was going to ask how do you feel about climate change and the extreme weather?

CW: I don't think we know what it's going to be like. We've always had freak summers and hot dry summers and climate change we don't know what it's going to mean really do we? I don't know enough about it really.

CG: Got lots of people saying about all the business men buying up these farm houses and it being a different trend now about country properties.

CW: Yeah, I think what worries me a lot is partly planning policy and partly much more complex transport policies and things, and that we're not getting young families out here. Young families can't afford to come out here. But for example, a house straight across the valley, that ought to be a family house, it's a lovely house, has been turned into a party house that guests go to for fun and one only about two hundred yards

away is also a party house and that should have been a family house, and it should've been a small holding with people living there, and that's inevitably going to change. We have a holiday cottage there, that we would have liked to turn into a house for our son, but planning won't let us and he can't afford to buy a house here. My neighbours say that their daughter's moved into Buxton, because they can't afford to buy a family house out here. It's cheaper to buy a family house in town. So, I think that's got all sorts of implications for schools and services and whether it will come full cycle in the end.

CG: So, it's turning the countryside into a playground, not a working place.

CW: I think the countryside is still a working place, but it's a different working place isn't it? I mean, lots of village schools round about have closed or are struggling for numbers and I suspect that if you come back in ten years you'll find more have closed. I am thinking of Flash school when that closed, because there aren't the children to go to the schools and they used to be thriving. It's changed and services have changed, transport has changed. If we had much, much better public transport maybe we'd get...., but they still couldn't afford the houses.