

Geoff Tunnicliffe

Geoff and Margaret Tunnicliffe farm together with their son Andrew on Manor Farm in the Dane Valley. They also keep stock on the Roaches by agreement with Staffordshire Wildlife Trust, in addition to the stock kept at Manor Farm.

Part Three. Schemes, Subsidies and Conservation

GT: How we surviving? Well, we wouldn't survive without the single farm payment. We would be struggling without the environmental payments. We've taken those environmental payments, we shouldn't have done, we should have told them to get stuffed, we want to farm properly, because they've made us farm, do things that we shouldn't be doing. See that's what gets me about these experts, they find something on your land whether it be a bird or a flower and the first thing they tell you, we want the gate shutting. You've probably put your cattle and sheep on, well the sheep on, the cattle on the 1st of May and we've one patch of land now that we can't put anything on until the middle of July. So, by the middle of July the grass has got up, gone rough and whether it's ground nesting birds or the plant life will be smothered out, because a peewit won't nest in deep grass, it likes bare land. But they find something there. Why is it there? It's there because it has been farmed for hundreds of years how it has. And the first thing they want to do is to change the regime totally. That is the biggest problem with these schemes. You can only be on a lot of these fields and the moorland for five months. It's what you do with them the other seven months is the worrying bit. On your own farm, it's bad enough sustaining those animals, but when we took the Roaches over, we'd not only Manor Farm animals, we had Roaches sheep had to come back, and for quite a few years we sent a lot of sheep away into Cheshire for the winter, which helped. You paid for it, but it was a viable thing to do. But, there's not as much of that land now, because the Cheshire farmers have gone into this New Zealand method of milk production and a lot of their cattle stay out all the year round so there's no sheep grass and it's made it very, very hard. My farm, the original farm gets very over-grazed in the winter, because you've got to have those sheep at home because you aren't allowed to put 'em on the moor. And the thing about this is, traditionally you used to bring the sheep down for tugging and then put 'em back on the moor for up to a month before lambing and then bring them back for lambing. Now once you've brought 'em off end of September we can't go on again till the 1st of April. And we can't go on the 1st of April, because they don't lamb till the 15th of April. So, we can't go on till the 1st of May. And we're having a struggle trying to get them to allow us, this is Natural England, to now allow us to leave our hogs on in the winter, because if you leave the hogs on we'd have less mither at home, plus the hogs would get used to being on the hill, because they get what they call hefted. Because when they do go on, all the road sides round the Roaches is green grass and they never do get into the heather, because there's enough green grass to keep 'em going three or four months of the summer. Plus, years ago they used to burn the heather in strips and there was always young heather coming, now it's the heather that's degenerate, a metre deep. Nothing will go in that, neither sheep nor cattle. There's no green grass up there in the winter. The hogs would spread out and get used to living in certain parts of the moor and when you put 'em back, years to come, they'd remember where they came from and go there.

CG: So, the hefting is no longer possible because they're not allowed to have that first year up on the hills, is that what's happened?

GT: That's right, that's it basically.

CG: What about the general sense in the Peak Park has been to cut the numbers down, because the numbers of grazing sheep were enormous. In the seventies, they got enormous for a short time, they hit the top.

GT: A private farmer, he bought the Roaches and I'm not sure on numbers, but well over a thousand ewes on it. Well of course it got hammered, and then the Peak Park bought it off him and cut the numbers right down. I think we're only allowed to put 200 on now, on 600 acres. As I say, there isn't enough on it to graze the rougher bits. And we also put cattle on it now. We put ten cattle on it, beef shorthorns, and there's even enough grass for them without going into the moor, much.

CG: So, do you think you'd like to get more up there, really?

GT: Not particularly more, but they should be up there for a longer time. Keep them up there over the winter, especially the hogs. The worrying part about not managing the Roaches more properly, as in burning strips, some clown, some day, is going to drop a match and the lot'll go. There's a road runs through it and some dry summer day it'll get on fire and nothing on earth will stop it.

CG: I was talking to someone from the Peak Park, they were talking about if we think about the landscape in a slightly different way, the uplands as not being just about food production; not being even necessarily just exclusively about upland species of birds and stuff, but critical for water storage and flood protection. These are different ways that we have to think about the landscape. So, what are your views on that?

GT: Well, I think it's been taken out of context the flooding. We've always had floods. We've had some wicked floods. We had a wicked flood in the fifties, and I think that the work involved to make much difference would be out of all proportion in cost than what it was worth.

CG: I think a different understanding of it, people who used to build dams and conduits and all the rest of it, which obviously takes water out fast, and it's when that fast movement of water can be very disruptive, actually and if you've got a fast run off off the uplands, what this bringing the moorlands back to what they were as a soak, a great sponge, a giant sponge that's what the Pennines always were, but once their capacity to be that sponge, that is, you get drying out then you lose...

GT: The thing is, on the Roaches there is no chance of drying that out. The Roaches is such a big area with no drains in it. Yeh, it is a big sponge. I don't think that anything has been done that makes it worse than it's ever been.

CG: Burning of heather though is a particular issue that certain amounts of controlled burning are obviously very beneficial, but certainly the shooting people used to burn it and gradually drying out, drying out too much.

GT: The worst thing they can do is, rather than burn it is mow it, because if you mow it, it doesn't come back, it kills it. You get the, is it linear, what do you call that grass, is it linear? Yorkshire fog, that's what comes back and nothing eats that.

CG: So, in terms of going into agri-environment schemes, when did that get going for you here?

GT: Well, we used to have the sheep subsidy, didn't we? The hill sheep subsidy, that was the start of the rot. That was the seventies. It was the beginning of going into the European Union. That was a bad thing in a way, because that encouraged people to

keep more sheep.

CG: There have been so many different schemes, haven't there?

GT: Well, whatever it was, they came and they said are you willing to go into this scheme on a certain piece of land? And of course, they offer you money and you go in, which we shouldn't have done, and then there's certain fields you've no option, because they're triple SIs. We've got maybe 30 or 40 acres, I suppose in triple SIs. That's not counting the Roaches, that's separate. We rent that from Staffordshire Wildlife Trust.

CG: So, what's on the triple SIs?

GT: Well, they come and they say that there's a certain plant there, I can't remember what name. And they said we'd like to preserve it, so we'd like you to keep the stock off. And that's the biggest bugbear I have. Why is that plant there, you tell me? Hundreds of years, it's the way it's been managed. It's been grazed from the first sign of any grass being there, all green grass, to when there was none at the back end. So, the first thing that they want to do is cut that grazing period down by 50 percent. Well, that grass, we're talking about plants now, that grass will smother that plant and in ten years time they'll come back to us and say that plant's not there now. And they spend an absolute fortune on fencing it off, if it's a patch they think wants preserving. They give you so much money and you think oh that's another thousand. We shouldn't do it, but on triple SI you've no option. But in ten years time that plant will be gone and it'll be my fault, because I'm the farmer. The person who told me will have gone on somewhere else.

CG: Right then, let's talk about the other stewardship measures that you're in. Obviously, you've got the single farm payment now, but in the earlier days did you get higher level stewardship or was it the entry level stewardship?

GT: It was the entry level to start with. That was part of our income. Once you start down the slippery road, you keep going. Once you start accepting money, I mean as I say, you've no option on some of it, but these other fields, we bought land, poor land that hadn't been farmed for years for various reasons. Either the farmer had got old and worn out and didn't farm it particularly well or in one case, the farmer lived down in Cheshire and he used to send cattle up here just for the summer. Well, that never got properly farmed as in liming and slagging it. So, we bought this land thinking we will improve it and they come straight away, well within a very short time and say "oh we don't want that land improving, we want to cut the grazing down even more". Well, whatever was there, has gone, but you can always find some bright spark who'll come and say "oh yes I've found it, I've found one of these plants or birds". I mean, they talk about a decline in the waders. I don't think there is a big decline. I think the decline is, they aren't on the sites that they used to be. They've moved on to different fields.

CG: They've certainly emptied out of the White Peak. There are very, very few curlew.

GT: Well, there is quite a few round here. But last lambing time, we'd done a drain down the middle of a field and two peewits nested on the drain, on bare soil, in a green field. Me grandson, Jake, he goes round with me, well he's nine now, and we kept going past these nesting birds, not disturbing them, but saw they were there and one day he brought his mate with him, and he was dead chuffed to see these birds nesting, and they just got about to hatching and the badgers cleaned them out. Those birds normally wouldn't have nested there, but the field that they had used to nest in had got overgrown. You won't get a peewit nesting in overgrown ground, they like to nest

on something like that mat with a bit of cover round 'em, tufts of grass round 'em. Because, the biggest thing round here has gone worse is rushes, too many rushes and all you can do with them, is mow them, a third a year. Well, you might as well sit in't house and warm your feet as mow em, because they just come back harder than ever. They should let you drain the rushy bits and there's enough rainfall round here to keep the ground wet enough for other things.

CG: Where are the specific measures then by Natural England where you're saying that the experts will come in and tell you to do a thing and they don't understand?

GT: They've been brainwashed, the experts, that they want wet boggy land. Well, nothing lives in wet boggy, rushy land, only vermin. The birds don't live in rushes this deep. How are they going to get in em? It's totally ridiculous. They should let you drain the very wet bits and lime em, make em sweet. And if you've got grass growing there, that takes the moisture out of the land, grass does. Rushes don't and it'd be better for the bird life and the farmer and everybody, but they can't see that, you know. The best wildlife ground, barring the silage field, I find is that which you are allowed to farm properly.

CG: So, you find there that you get the species you'd expect, curlew, snipe and all those?

MT: And we don't intensively farm.

CG: So, do you feel that there's a lack of understanding about your intentions and your operation, because between you, you've got like a hundred years of farming experiences between the two of you?

GT: That's what gets us. That is what gets us in't it? They come, and I'm not decrying age of whoever they are come. But they come with the attitude that we know what we're talking about, they know what they're talking about rather. And you, anything I say "you would say that wouldn't you?" We want somebody, an overall view as can say yep, the farmer he's wrong there, but also say the guys, he's wrong. Because these experts, they've all got a different opinion, but some of them have got tunnel vision. They can't see the whole picture.

MT: And then they won't be there in so many years time, will they?

GT: No, but the farmer's still there.

CG: There's an old phrase that used to be, 'ask the fellow that cuts the hay' if you want to know. I know we've moved on, but do you know what I mean. Do you feel that people don't listen then?

GT: Oh, no they don't, because we're only thick farmers. They've been to college and got a degree in whatever and they know everything.

CG: Has it given you a lot of grief this?

GT: It has. I'd hate for me Dad to come back now, to see the fields, the state they're in, some of the pastureland. He'd be totally disgusted.

CG: How can we move forward so that there is a greater level of understanding and co-operation between farmers like yourselves and the conservationists?

GT: We're conservationists, they are interfering with our way of life, because they're the boss. We take their money, have to take their money, they give us the money and you do as you're told. If I ring up over something, I have a good Natural England person

I speak to, she's very understanding, but generally they act like we're asking for something we shouldn't be. If you want to put some sheep on a field or whatever, I'm not doing it because I'm trying to pinch anything, I'm doing it because I want the good of the land or the good of the animals. You see the worst thing is, all this land you can only go on five months. Well, there's twelve months in the year, that's the killer. What are you supposed to do? The thing is, it's very localised. If you go a mile down the road, he's got all green land and you go two miles that way into Meerbrook, that's all green land, virtually. Totally different than this side of the hill. Alright, we've got a good view, but you can't make money out of the view. But the view won't stop like this unless the farmers allowed to farm properly.

CG: This is obviously terribly important to you and one of the first things you wanted to say when I rang you up, that you feel that you're interfered with and that you really have the local knowledge, your understanding of this land intimately, because if you're in it all the time you get it, don't you?

GT: Course you do. They think we aren't interested in the bird life and we're going to farm intensively, but you can't farm intensively up here. If you farm as hard as you could, you still wouldn't alter the bird population.

CG: You're not intensive people at all, but some people round here are, are there?

GT: No, the guy down the road milks quite a lot of cows, about hundred and odd I think, but he's got good land to do it. But he's not doing any damage to that land, because either side of the farm there's rough ground where bird life can survive and look down on the green land. Some of that is his land and he hasn't attempted to improve it, well you can't, it's like that, you know. That's why I said it is very, very localised this problem. But I mean, we've done all sorts. We had a while in a scheme when we were collecting plastic. It didn't last long, but people used to bring it here and we used to bale it up for recycling. Well, we tried it, but it was too much. There was a lot of work involved, but it made a mess, we had to stack it in the yard and we couldn't operate the farm because of it. We were a central collection for it. We operated the scheme for two or three years. The schemes still going on, but we're not doing it here.

CG: You've been involved in the various stewardship schemes and the single farm payment. Is there even more bureaucracy involved in that? It sounds pretty bad to me?

GT: On a lot of land, you draw your money and you don't really do a thing, because you couldn't do a lot anyway. Like on the Roaches moorland, apart from like I say, it wants this burning of strips, but we can't do that. On some of these fields, proper farm fields, I think we should have been allowed to bring them up to the standard of a decent pasture, and it would have done no harm to the wildlife, it would have improved the wildlife and they've been stopped doing it. They give us so much money and they think "well you're having the money what are you moaning about?" But it's wrong.