

The Land that Made Us is the story of eighty years of farming in the South West Peak. Christine Gregory and Sheila Hine have collated the personal accounts of local farmers and land managers, many of whom have lived and worked in this often challenging landscape for generations. In their own words, the farmers recall the changes to traditional farming in this remote and rugged landscape in the decades since the Second World War. The interviews also reflect the much bigger national story about the changing priorities in land use and food production.

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John and Janet Stone - Onecote Grange Farm

PART TWO – Conservation activities at Onecote Grange Farm

John and Janet Stone farm at Onecote Grange Farm. They have a large dairy herd and some ground in Higher Level Stewardship. Their son, Andrew Stone, has also contributed to this oral history of the South West Peak.

In this second section, John and Janet talk to Sheila Hine about the ground they have in the Higher Level Stewardship scheme and the beneficial effects this has had for wildlife and plant species on the farm.

John: We went into the HLS schemes when we sold the cows. We've got about 20 hectare in HLS. I am very interested in wildlife and conservation as my wife will tell you, with all my stuffed birds about the house. In HLS we have fenced out all the streams that we have got. We have two streams that come down, one called the Hamps and one called the West Brook; they both converge at Mill Lea and then run down to Waterhouses. We only graze those areas once or twice a year. There has been a significant increase in flowers and I absolutely love it and I wouldn't be without it and I get paid for it and I am interested in it, so it has not been a problem for me. I wouldn't like to think the payments will end, I don't think they will on the HLS but the belt is tightening and those schemes on the periphery, ELS and the new UELS, seem to be getting knocked down.

I would still do it without funding but financially it wouldn't be worth continuing with it, it wouldn't make sense, so I think the vast majority wouldn't do it if there was no funding. We do need these incentives. We need a mosaic, a patchwork of different species of grass and different environmental schemes so they can be joined up. It's no good having one designated area for wildlife and the rest of it just a biological desert. Many species would be able to leap frog areas, so the species, any species, that seems to like a particular area would be able to go into another area, so a mosaic of environmental areas is a must.

Sheila: So, what have you got on farm that has really improved?

John: Well, four years ago we started growing whole crop. That's really done well because our soils are really strong although we are 1000ft and above. We grew whole crop for the first year on the coldest field on the farm; it did absolutely marvellous. We have done that for 3 years since and we get paid for that on the scheme. The benefit of it for me is that we don't spray it, we fertilise it so weed seeds do come in to it eventually throughout the summer while its growing. We have fat hen, chickweed and red leg. Those are the beneficial seeds for ground nesting birds like Skylark, Meadow Pippit, Linnet, Goldfinch and other finches. They really love those weed seeds, once the crop's been cleared.

Sheila: So, you're growing this whole crop, you're not spraying it and yet you're finding it satisfactory for your use and also it has a wildlife benefit?

John: Yes. We treat it well with fertiliser to get it off to a good start. We only set the corn in the spring, we don't do it in Autumn, we have to leave it fallow in the winter for those particular species; that particular aspect that we are talking about, wild weed seeds for over wintering birds. While we try to get it in by the end of April, we harvest about the end of July which coincides with second cut silage or third cut as the case may be; we try and make it between first and second or second and third so no vermin can get at it. But while that crop is growing for three months ground nesting birds such as Lapwing, Curlew, Meadow Pipit and Skylark find a really good use of the whole crop because, they are undisturbed for three months and I think they are successful with their nests. The whole crop gives good shelter from predators for them because, it's too dense for them. In the open pasture there are a lot of predators, badgers and other predators, and they would just mop up, whereas in the whole crop, it starts growing prolifically, growing heavily in late May, that's just when the ground nesting birds are getting into nesting.

Sheila: What other species have done well while you've been in the scheme?

John: Skylarks have done absolutely fantastic, we must have twenty pairs of Skylarks. It must have been the number one benefit to the skylark. Meadow Pippits have done just as well. In the spring when we were ploughing the ground, we had four or five pairs of Wheatears. They don't always stop, but one pair nest on our farm. We've seen more wheatears now in the summer and definitely got more hares through the whole crop habitat.

Sheila: And then you've got pretty fair of barn owls?

John: We did have barn owls, they took a bit of a dive about four years ago. I'm sure you can remember that very late winter, that very late snow and ice and frost came with high winds for two days in mid-March. It wiped out most of the kingfishers and barn owls round here, but I think they will come back eventually. Round here our farm was called the hotspot of the moorlands; Staffordshire Wildlife Trust rung 15 Barn owls every year.

Sheila: Have you had an increase in predators?

John: No, I don't think so, we have a few more buzzards, maybe a few more foxes. The Jackdaw population has gone manic, Carrion crows the same and we've got three sets of Rookeries on our farm. Rooks are not usually a problem with little birds, but I think they would take an egg if they came to land on the floor and an odd chick if they come across one. They're normally grub hunters. They probably help with the ploughed fields. They love leather jackets.

John: Touching on the rest of our HLS, we obviously have lots of orchids and those have definitely increased with the areas that have been managed. I am left to manage them; I am given guidelines what to do by the Peak Park and Natural England but I don't always go with the letter of the law. If we do get an area that is heavily populated with grasses and it's got out of control we mob graze it, let big animals in and they get rid of the briers because they rip them to pieces with their feet and we find by mob grazing that opens it up and gets lots of fresh air into the bushes. But our area is punctuated, a pleasure to look at it in spring, with lots of primroses. I think keeping those areas grazed out reasonably well helps primroses and most of the flowers on our property. Last year we found Marsh Valerian that comes out very early in spring, a beautiful flower and we also found a trailing St Johns Wort which is a very small flower like a yellow pimpernel and I'm sure we will find some more new ones. We've got about 150 species of flowers growing in our valleys, which is a very high density of flowers, but if you bear in mind they have been there for thousands of years, when they have been grazed off pretty tightly you don't see them, but now it's managed you do. We get lots of orchids, we've got Common Spotted, also Southern Marsh Orchid, occasionally we see Fragrant but not very often, depends if you are there at the right time.

Sheila: I suppose you wouldn't be able to manage it without cattle?

John: They are absolutely vital. Some enthusiasts seem to think keeping cattle away from managed conservation areas so it can grow wild is just the thing, but it doesn't work, cattle are the basis for encouraging seedlings that come out of the ground. Also, you will have more birds where there are more flowers.

Sheila: Do you see any down sides with the schemes?

John: No not really. If it continues in its present state then payments for HLS are, I wouldn't say adequate, but they are better than other schemes. It's a shame they haven't more money to roll out more HLS areas so farmers could take them on board.