

Neil Richardson

Neil has spent over thirty years farming at Big Fernyford Farm, Reapsmoor between Longnor and Warslow. From 1968, Big Fernyford was farmed by Sylvia and Michael Woolley, who also contributed to this project. Neil is a former champion sheep shearer and with his partner Dorota and youngest son is now a specialist sheep breeder. Neil spoke with Sheila Hines in May 2017 about his farming activities and the environmental work that he does on the farm, which is jointly owned by Natural England and the Peak District National Park.

Part Two. Environmental Activities

SH: So, tell me a little bit about the farm then and how you work the environmental stuff. You've got a lot of restrictions you said?

NR: Yeah, the farms heavily restricted, but the main argument is I've been here 30 years and the first Natural England guy, who we named Dr Doom, he had all his ideas about the farm and how it should be, then he eventually had enough of the earache from people and moved on. Then we had another girl for ten years, who got all her ideas and how she thought it should be run. And we have to keep changing and adapting, and changing systems. Now we've got another girl started this last 6 months who's got her ideas, so we're going to have to play along with her now.

SH: So, you seem to be farming and having to farm to people's whims? Or is that unfair?

NR: They're cracking down on us a bit more now. The restrictions and enforcing the restrictions and inspections and different things. We've had a few sleepless nights thinking that they'd come and say that this is bad and that's bad, but when they come along, they said it was all looking absolutely spot on, so I asked if they could leave us alone and then let us farm it the best we could and look after the environment, but they said they can't do that because of the European HLS funds or something. They've got to give us all the restrictions and inspections and we've got to try and work with it. We will have to try and work with it, but we'll have to try and encourage them to relax a bit.

SH: Work with you basically, they've got to work with you if they want it to work, haven't they?

NR: If they think it looks alright and I think that a lot of the agreements have been abused and I think that there is a need for someone to police them, but if it's working and going well, you know, just relax a bit and let us get on and do our best.

SH: What are there, what's this farm special for in their sight?

NR: Breeding waders and the moorland they want to get it all back to Sphagnum Moss. So, they're not that bothered about heather and they certainly don't like sheep.

SH: But I thought heather, this country is valuable in Europe for the amount of heather it's got, you'd think they'd be wanting to...

NR: What do they want heather for? They want Sphagnum Moss to lock up the carbon, so they can all drive round in their cars having meetings and use central heating in their offices and then store the carbon in the Sphagnum moss.

SH: It isn't just the carbon, its water isn't it, holding the water back as well?

NR: They want to hold the water back to make it wetter for the Sphagnum Moss and wading birds, that's the only reason. They're not bothered about flooding the downstream people.

SH: So, what waders have you got?

NR: We've got plenty of Snipe and we've got a couple of pairs of Curlews nesting on the farm. This is the first year we've had no Lapwing, because we're too overrun with predators. They've got a pretend gamekeeper on their books, who they pay an absolute fortune to, who does practically nothing. If you can tell by my tone, I don't get on with the gamekeeper. I don't think much of the Peak Park either, because they've just got too much money to spend that they shouldn't have. The more they spend, the more they get the budget for the following year, so it's a vicious circle really. They should be tightened up on and it should be properly run and properly policed.

SH: What are the benefits of the environmental stuff on this farm? What's good and what do you enjoy about it if anything?

NR: The farm originally was famous for the black grouse; it was the largest flock of black grouse in the south of England in the field next to the house, but due to an ageing population of black grouse, which some people have mentioned and due to all the restrictions put on when Natural England and Peak Park took over the place, we think that the predators took over and some of the fields got over grown, because they thought that was best and the black grouse died out within a few years and we were very sad for that really. It still upsets us that we've no black grouse here, because they were amazing.

SH: Were they here when you came then?

NR: They were here just in this field over the wall and they were amazing, because they were here 365 days, every morning on their mating arena, the Lek site.

SH: How many did you see?

NR: I think the most I saw was about 12 black grouse and then half a dozen females, because the females were not so conspicuous, they would hide in the outskirts somewhere and the black grouse were well proud of themselves would come and lek every morning. We actually had one or two in the garden here feeding on the berries. They were brilliant to see.

SH: They haven't tried to re-introduce them?

NR: There was talk about it, but they said they'd got to get so many things in place and so much habitat sorted out before they could do that and it never happened, so they decided against it and Natural England said no all the time to the people that wanted to do it. They've concentrated this last few years on Lapwing, Curlew and Snipe. And now I'm a hundred percent certain that the lapwing have died out here or left here because of the predators, because we've got, like them or not, two pairs of buzzards nesting on the farm that mainly live on lapwing chicks. Then we've got no end of crows, magpies, foxes and badgers. You're just trying to keep the lapwing going. You're banging your head against a brick wall. So, if things evolve and predators take over, then if you don't do anything about it that's what has to happen, otherwise you have to do something about the predators, if you want the other things.

SH: Are you allowed to shoot any vermin?

NR: We can shoot as much vermin as we want if it's legal vermin, crows and foxes and magpies. But obviously we don't actually do any game keeping like farmers used to. We have shot a few crows lately and foxes, but obviously we don't do anything about the badgers or buzzards or anything like that. The buzzards are actually really nice to see, they're cool, cool characters those buzzards. There were two yesterday. There were two crows chasing a buzzard round and round right on its tail all the time trying to scare it away from their nest but the buzzard wasn't too worried, he just flopped about and just went his way. And probably wait for those crow chicks to be born maybe, because there's no lapwing he'll have to eat something. And the buzzard will have a nest shortly, so they're going to want to feed chicks, so I don't know whether I'll have to go and fetch some lapwing chicks from Flash, because that's about the nearest. Both neighbours have got no lapwing chicks this year either, for the first time ever. And they're both neighbours that have got no sheep, because the lapwing recovery project are trying to say that sheep are a major problem and they only want cattle on the farms. But the neighbours have got no sheep, so that doesn't stand up. So, it's got to be the predators.

SH: How do you see the way forwards now, your kids coming up and taking some of the workload off you?

NR: The main worry is the restrictions and the inspections and telling you, you can't put sheep on a field and you can't put four cows on a field if it's supposed to have three cows on and all these dates for different things, because he's already saying "why don't you just ignore it and put some in there. There's no grass in here, you've got sheep in here. There's loads of grass in there and you can't put your sheep in, why don't you just ignore it". And I say, "well you can't do that really, and we're in a HLS scheme". They've already told me, Natural England, that if we come out of the scheme we'll still have to follow all the same restrictions because it's all SSSI, but the only reason its SSSI is because of the Black Grouse, thirty years ago. That's why all the SSSI's were put on this farm, because of the Black Grouse breeding project.

SH: So, you haven't got any special plants or anything?

NR: No, only rushes. The SSSI's were for Black Grouse and a couple of the neighbours on our boundary have got certain fields that are SSSI because a Black Grouse was spotted in there thirty years ago. So, they put SSSI's on them as well. There's no real need for the SSSI's, we've got quite a few fields that are 90% rushes and bogs and it wouldn't make any difference, farmers wouldn't do it, but it wouldn't make any difference if you put three hundred sheep in that field or thirty. The field would look no different at any time of the year with three hundred sheep or thirty in it, because it's nearly all rushes. So, you're not going to abuse the restrictions by putting five extra sheep in.

SH: A farm like this, is there any way it could survive without the environmental subsidies?

NR: I don't think subsidies are a brilliant idea really. If farms are going to rely on subsidies, I think we could probably manage. You'd have to tighten your belt and I think a lot of farms should tighten their belts and just stop relying on the subsidies and do the work.

SH: But I'm thinking environmental stuff wouldn't get done would it, without payments?

NR: Well, pay for specific environmental projects, rather than paying a blanket payment, because some farmers are environmental, doing environmental work and some are just taking the money and doing nothing at all.

SH: Yeah, I wasn't thinking of the single farm payment, I'm thinking of environmental subsidies really.

NR: So, that'd be the best way

SH: Yeah, so you're thinking we should, in the South West Peak because we've got special things.

NR: Well Lapwing, Curlew and Snipe and things like that?

SH: Well, I'm thinking of the species rich fields as well. We've got species rich pastures and meadows, if they're going to be preserved.

NR: I think this new Natural England girl, her speciality is, well her degree is in something dealing with grumpy farmers and flowers and plants and soil. So, she's quite keen to increase the number of flowers in the hay meadows and I think she's going to concentrate on trying to help us improve the hay meadows and secondly the Curlew and Snipe and things, because I think the lapwing are finished now because of the predators. They're never going to control the predators. They keep talking about doing survey's. They've done a survey or two or three surveys here every year for the last twenty years and they've got enough data collected from here to last a lifetime, but they don't do anything about the data they've collected, so I told her that's a waste of time.

SH: Have you got anything positive to finish up with?

NR: It can be an absolutely lovely job working on the farm every day, and the farm it's a beautiful location and we're not really living in the real world, because we're sheltered down a long driveway. If you don't go up it, you don't see what the real worlds like, so you could enjoy yourself working here, I enjoyed it for long enough. It's only the fact that I'm, I'm too old to work my bollocks off every day now, so it's making me think, why am I doing this and why am I doing that and why am I listening to a lot of this crap that they keep telling me, when I could be doing something really useful and I could be doing a lot of environmental work if they weren't so restrictive on everything else, because the nature's fantastic, the birds are fantastic, the black grouse were amazing, the lapwings were fantastic after that, but there's just too many people. Did you mention that the HLS compared to the ESA, was it ESA 80% of the money went to the farmers and 20% went on bureaucracy, now it's totally opposite?

SH: I believe so yes.

NR: 80% on meetings in Brussels and people riding round telling you what to do and only 20% actually going to the end product.

SH: That's what I've been told, yeah.

NR: So, that just shows you how ridiculous it is. How can people look after the environment by just sitting around in meetings talking about it? Natural England have come here and they think that Fernyford looks like this because of nature and because of their meetings and they're not here 365 days a year knapsack spraying and fencing and walling and creosoting and looking after everything and keeping an eye on things, so.

SH: Well, all I can say is Neil that the farm actually looks ..., it's a credit to you and your family's hard work, so well done.

NR: Thank you.