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GUILDFORD ENVIRONMENTAL FORUM *newsletter*

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FARMING WITH CARE IN SURREY

by Angus Stovold

Early April – sunrise at Lydling Farm

Photo by Tiggy Stovold

INTRODUCTION by John Bannister

You see the Stovold name all over our part of Surrey and that's because the family have been farming around here since the 13th century. Angus has won many awards for his herd of Aberdeen Angus cattle. You can find him at the Guildford Farmers Market on the first Tuesday of the month. The key thing is that his animals are local, grass-fed and produced using organic methods. That means few if any chemicals, hormones or antibiotics are used and his approach is very good for our environment and the climate. He is passionate about climate change, the wildlife on Lydling Farm and about his animals, and has a clear vision for making his farm even more environmentally friendly. Read more overleaf.

FARMING WITH CARE IN SURREY

Angus Stovold



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I THOUGHT IT WAS GENERATIONAL, but having just returned from a Farmland Bird walk, I can say from the sheer number of farmers there and the diversity of ages, that my industry is taking climate change seriously. Without exception, we are all hurt by the negative focus on our industry, especially the livestock sectors when we are doing a great deal already.

Our changing farming scene

I'm not a scientist but much of the data that is available from both sides of the road is wholly inaccurate. We are always lumped with South America or huge feed lot systems. However, we are farming in Surrey and over the last 50 years we have seen livestock and farmer numbers fall dramatically. In the past, every village had one or two dairies servicing the locals and large numbers of cows, sheep, pigs and poultry. Today, the farms are mainly filled with people with no connection to farming.

Surrey is experiencing a population explosion that doesn't seem to slow, and there's increasing pressure to build new developments with no regard for our already clogged roads.

As you all know, the Surrey Hills evolved to create a rich tapestry of small hedged fields dominated by woodland. Not a lot has changed except the fields have got bigger, partly due to the war effort to "dig for victory".

Interestingly, food is seldom mentioned in climate change debates and food security is never mentioned. I grew up with vegetables being the main production in Surrey, but as the profits were squeezed out, industry production has moved to rich grade one soils. To put fertility and fibrous structure back into the soil, livestock manure is used. We then plough to blend it with the soil and bury weeds.

This is the basis of organic production today and it has been for the last 2,000 years. We are now told that minimum cultivation (scratching the soil and not ploughing) is the future because turning the soil over releases carbon. To do this, you will need to rely on artificial fertilisers and sprays, so is this really the right advice?

I take climate change very seriously and I'm constantly thinking about how I can do more. I currently rely more on my 30 years of farming experience than the advice I am given. I have a Farm Conservation Officer based in my office and we are endlessly discussing the best way forward.

I'm successful at what I do and fortunately I'm in a position to part-finance the changes I want to make. This is an important point. Farmers are willing but often unable to implement changes due to lack of funds: some can barely feed themselves and environmental schemes are only part payments. Therefore, we need a vibrant working countryside in order to get the best from it.

Judging wildlife-friendly farms

I was Chairman of The Farm Wildlife Advisory Group for many years so I am often asked to judge farm environmental projects. I was lucky enough to judge a multiple project in East Sussex, on and around the South Downs and near the Knepp Estate (which is famous for its rewilding project).

This is an extract from my report.

The four best farms were:

Daylands Farm from Derek Crush. Derek has spent many years restoring hedges and preserving the wonderful swath of his meadows. The whole grass farm is rich in wildlife, but his hedges are some of the best I have ever seen, ancient hedges sympathetically

looked after with a 15-year rotational hedge-laying. I've never seen such a variety of species (and I've judged the national hedgerow competition!).

Will Hextall's farm, Hooklands, does not reveal itself until you step beyond the farmhouse. And what a farm! Will has spent a lifetime restoring this all-grass farm. Plotting his moves from his office with large maps like a military general, he has preserved ancient meadows and restored meadows to similar levels, all done with his determination to farm for the benefit of wildlife. The sheer variety of life in these meadows is breathtaking! He has recreated a gem of a farm.

I then went to the top of the Downs (perhaps two separate competitions for two very different farming environments) to Dom Gardiner's Lee Farm. This is a large mixed farm but predominantly arable. A commercial shoot around the arable block has to be worked alongside Dom's farming and conservation enterprise, in which he has created buffer zones for wildlife around fields and split large fields with beetle banks or flower mixes. He's restoring downland, but it's his mind-set of farming alongside wildlife that is transforming this once barren landscape into a still profitable but diverse venture. Unfortunately some of the wildlife strips had suffered in the drought but if Dom continues on this path the farm will be a serious contender in the future.

Applesham Farm is again a farm on top of the Downs and has been farmed a similar way for generations. Hugh Passmore is the current farmer and continues to farm it as a mixed farm. The farm is rich in wildlife, traditional grasses and wildflowers but is farmed commercially. It highlights to me how the future of farming could look by harking back to traditional rotations, controlling weeds and reducing the need for high inputs, and supporting a diverse ecosystem. Hugh understands this system and the needs of the wildlife it supports, yet it's a high output sustainable farm and the crops and livestock all looked superb.

Interestingly, I saw Turtle Doves, huge numbers of Corn Bunting and a variety and number of birds I can only dream of. Knepp has benefited from this but the local farmer's biggest complaint was the uncontrolled spread of undesirable weeds such as ragwort. On a recent farm walk, the RSPB officer stated that hedges need management. So I believe there is a place for rewilding but it's not the answer.

Now, on to my farm. Over the last 30 years I've been playing with nature conservation. I've put

hedgerows in to link habitats, preserved wetlands, used field margins and farmed in a sustainable and organic way. However, I did not understand the needs of nature. Greta Thunberg shattered my comfortable world and I had what can only be describe as an epiphany!

What I intend to do is better rotational farming, under-sow grasses in spring-cropped arable crops, have permanent six-metre margins around every field, reduce the size of fields and put hedgerows around every one. In some fields, we will put long-term nectar mixes and some grass fields we will only graze every other year. In areas that are unproductive, I will either re-wild (in a managed way) or plant trees. The system is traditional and involves livestock and ploughing. Within 10 years I want to have Corn Bunting and breeding Lapwings.

Coping with canines

One of the problems we all have in Surrey is that every acre is open to dog walkers. At a recent Surrey Hills-led cluster meeting, the RSPB, English Nature and the National Trust all said how important local farms are to the local wildlife because we're able to prevent dog walkers. So my plan is to stock-fence every hedge, buy unclimbable field gates and hedge wide footpaths, giving each field privacy for wildlife to thrive. All my footpaths will be managed in a very sympathetic way, making them wider and putting up educational story boards to explain what is happening and why.

I now have the confidence (after 30 years of farming) to create this. My problem is, I'm currently in Entry Level and Higher Level Stewardship schemes and these prevent me starting now. I will need to apply and be accepted for a stewardship scheme for capital works, as this is extremely expensive.

Again, I'm able to fund some, but not all of the costs involved. I need to make sure that my core business stays profitable. A key part of the end plan when all is thriving is to let people enjoy this



Tiggy Stovold

Coppice protection with deer fencing

haven, but in a managed way. Over the past few years there have been extensive studies into the relationship between nature and mental health/wellbeing benefits. This is an area that I'm interested in exploring.

The 'Green Sands Cluster'

The Green Sands Cluster managed by Surrey Hills so far involves over 10,000 acres from the Hogs Back to Hindhead, Surrey Wildlife Trust, Natural England, Waverley Borough Council, the RSPB, the National Trust and many farms. We are going to work together for the benefit of nature. This is the future! The Surrey Hills brand is going to promote local sustainable production, giving shoppers the confidence to buy responsibly. The key message is "Buy Responsibly". Don't lose the farming community by promoting the reduction of or stopping meat consumption and don't buy Brazilian or American meat (which you can buy in Guildford).

In conclusion (and it's important that GEF understands this), the Surrey landscape is going to change. We've left Europe and the CAP support system. The agricultural bill going through Parliament talks of enhanced environmental schemes – often these schemes are hard to access and are always targeted. This unfortunately means that Surrey farming will probably see a large reduction of income. We're all on marginal ground so fewer fields will be cropped. We'll need all the help we can get.

Protection of downland



Tiggy Stovold

New hedges

We're a willing community and the landscape in Surrey is very important to us all, as is climate change. Diversity of landscape, a successful enterprise working with nature and all of us being responsible is the key to the future of Surrey's countryside. We mustn't make the mistake of throwing the dishes out with the dishwater. We need to develop long-term plans and avoid knee-jerk reactions to create a better countryside for us and the planet.



Tiggy Stovold