

High Weald AONB Unit Report

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## **Interviews with High Weald Grassland Managers**

**Informing a High Weald Nature Recovery Area proposal**

March 2019



The High Weald: an outstanding medieval landscape



### **Tell me about your meadows and their management?**

St Dunstans is my family home. I grew up here and have a love for the fields and their wildlife. My father took on the farm in 1935 and I took over in 1987, moving to the site with my wife June in 2000 when I retired. It has always been farmed traditionally.

Our first adviser was from ADAS and he helped us apply for our first grant which was for hedgerow restoration after the 1987 storm. Designation of the grassland as a SSSI (prior to 1990) triggered an outside interest in the site. We entered into the first Countryside Stewardship Scheme when it became available and have been in it ever since. We were the first site to have seed harvested for use in meadow projects elsewhere.

We have had lots of advisers over the years but see fewer these days. They have all been enthusiastic, showing an interest in the farm, opening our eyes to its wildlife value and pointing out things we took for granted or might otherwise have seen as a weed, for example betony. Specialist surveyors have also visited the site and their enthusiasm has also got me deeper into the meadows.

Over the years we have hosted many educational visits from local wildlife groups, branches and clubs but there are fewer visits now; there seem to be less people keen to survey and find out more. However there has been a massive increase in people walking our footpaths due to development nearby. They spook the deer which crash through and damage the electric fencing needed for the sheep.

Seed harvesting still goes on though it can be hard to co-ordinate with the haymaking, deer eat the scabious before it sets seed and I think next door's pheasant shoot has affected our butterfly populations. TB reactors are an issue as they have to be kept separate from the other cattle and kept close by for the testing.

### **What do you think about Countryside Stewardship?**

Countryside Stewardship is a good scheme in general and the payments have been very valuable, not

just for managing the meadows but the hedgerows too. Without the income from BPS and CS lots of things wouldn't have been done. Together the payments keep the farm going, hedges are cut and the hay-making and grazing regime continued.

CS needs some standards to prevent abuse and to guide people who don't have a track record in land management. But the blanket prescriptions of Countryside Stewardship don't apply in the Weald; local variations are required. I have been cutting hedges for 50 years. The cut-off date for hedge management is at the end of February, I can barely get on the ground then. Derogations mean more form filling. We try and comply with the scheme but we largely stick to what my father did.

### **What have you found hardest?**

Grazing hasn't been a problem but it's becoming increasingly hard. Now that we are older we don't want to look after so many cattle and the fields aren't being grazed as hard as Natural England would like.

We have had sheep on keep (which can be better for Autumn/Winter grazing as they are lighter footed than cattle) but so many farms have packed up that there are large acreages of grassland available to graziers. The convenient sites get grazed and less convenient sites, like ours, are low priority. We also need to install sheep netting or electric fencing which currently CS can't fund. So our long-standing grazier has been lured away...

The hay cut was done by a local agricultural contractor for years but now he can't get to us at the required time. Recently we had a farmer do the cut; he took some of the bales (which encouraged him to come out) and left the rest for us.

### **What were you most pleased with?**

I still have an old meadow which hasn't been spoilt; the people I have met and the friends made.

### **Would you do it again?**

Yes. I have thoroughly enjoyed looking after my grassland and met some really nice people with a genuine interest in it.

### **What would your tip be to others?**

Find practical and local people, a farmer if possible, who know the land and understand how to manage it in a semi-traditional way i.e. through haymaking and grazing. Ensure you graze or haycut at least every couple of years to prevent thatch; stop moles so you can take silage and hay; avoid ragwort; don't listen to experts too much!

### **Any final thoughts?**

I have invested my own money in looking after the meadows, alongside Countryside Stewardship. If I was younger I don't think I could generate an income to pay the way if I didn't get BPS and CS payments. I would be wondering why I was making a pretty place for newcomers who seem to regard the countryside as an area to walk, ride and exercise their many dogs having little regard for wildlife and conservation .....

**Caroline FitzGerald**  
**Conservation grazier**



**Tell me about your grassland restoration projects – what triggered them, what was your aim and what did you do?**

I have been conservation grazing in the High Weald since 2001 and have grazed up to nine small grassland sites at once. I currently graze three, though in my day job as Grazing Officer for the Conservators of Ashdown Forest I am also grazing up to 21 grassland sites from September to the end of April.

In the past I found conservation grazing through the Weald Meadows Initiative but nowadays I use the Wealden Advertiser and word of mouth. A few shepherds exist in this way, keeping a flock without being a landowner.

I hope to graze more sites in retirement. My motivation is the habitat improvement and the

second income. Landowners are really keen on the idea of herb-rich meadows and they need conservation graziers as they often have little knowledge about their management of the grassland and no stock keeping skills.

**How are you managing the sites now?**

It depends on the landowner's objectives but generally I put sheep on the sites in the Autumn. Landowners may or may not have had a hay cut - it is costly and no one wants the hay. I graze a lot of foggage (uncut hay meadow) which the sheep will graze from long to short over the winter. Standing uncut grass is good for invertebrates and small mammals and, if the sheep stocking rate is right, the meadows should have an open sward in spring that allows successful flowering in the summer.

In the High Weald winter grazing can lead to poaching, which can lead to creeping thistle problems. With increasingly unpredictable weather I need to be ready to move sheep around a site or take them off as needed.

I think it is good to change management and not do the same things at the same time each year, as you end up favouring one set of things. It is also good to rest, or not graze a site, once in a while.

Ultimately I need to do what the landowner wants. If a landowner doesn't understand their meadow they can do a lot of damage, such as flattening anthills which are really valuable for wildlife. Educating landowners is a 'big' area.

**Did you need external funds for your project?**

Mostly I give landowners a freezer box of lamb as rent and in some cases I contribute time and pay for

contractor costs. Some landowners would like me to maintain fences etc but as I work full time this is not realistic for me, though I might pay rent in future to secure grazing on certain sites. Countryside Stewardship needs to recognise the real cost of grazing herb-rich sites, particularly if they are in organic management which doubles the cost of any supplementary feed and makes flock management more difficult.

### **What is essential to the success of your projects?**

It works because I know what I want to achieve and how to do it. I don't do formal monitoring. Recently orchids have returned on one site after 5 years of grazing, probably as a result of hard grazing the winter before. Every year is different and sometimes results are accidental. It can go wrong; having sheep in too many places can compromise welfare and though more laid-back landowners can be helpful, if the sheep aren't checked they can die. Many sites need cattle grazing but animal movement regulations and TB tests are making it hard to move them.

### **Would you do it again?**

Yes - because people who understand what they are trying to achieve though conservation grazing are few and far between and it's hard for landowners to find them. Agricultural colleges don't seem to have changed their message, and students seem to understand very little about conservation grazing and sustainability

### **What did you find hardest?**

Grazing lots of sites is time consuming and expensive due to the travel costs. Daylight hours in winter make it hard to check the sheep, especially as I also have a full time job.

### **What are you most pleased with? How do you know it has worked?**

You can remember what it was like, and see and hear the difference. You can't manage without grazing; other methods such as topping don't achieve the same result.

### **What would your tip be to others?**

Keep it simple and doable. Don't do the same grazing regime all the time. Pulse the grazing or mob graze. Disturbance is important as well as damaging. Aim for a diversity of everything. Don't worry about livestock eating flower heads. A good many well-intentioned landowners receive poor quality advice from landscape gardening firms or a land agent.

### **How do you think the grassland will be sustained in future?**

Many of the more species-rich sites are small and will decline if there is just a hay cut and no grazing. Management is costly, even with a grazier, and it is impossible to recoup the costs of fencing with income from sheep sales. All species-rich meadows should be recognised and protected by conservation organisations that have their best interests at heart. And they should receive grants equivalent to their rarity and importance, not their size. They should have the status that we would afford a masterpiece – after all they are national treasures that are easily destroyed.



**Tell me about your grassland restoration projects – what triggered them, what was your aim and what did you do?**

At Wadhurst Park there is a desire to increase grassland diversity across the whole estate. Our first project was in 1999 in Twenty Acre Field. Native wildflower seed was sown, and grew well, but the seed mix didn't reflect the flowers that grow naturally in the area and it isn't a 'typical' Wealden meadow. Since then we have used Weald Native Origin Seed, which has produced some lovely meadows more typical of this area.

With support from Countryside Stewardship (CS) we are converting species-poor, semi-improved grassland into Wealden meadows. We had a good starting point; our soils have low fertility and no fertiliser has been applied since 2009, though thistles have been sprayed in the past (we no longer use any herbicides).

Success has been varied. Our Mayfield College fields were sown with seed in 2013 and are developing well; we will take green hay from them to spread elsewhere. At Chittinghurst our fields were sown in a wet Autumn which wasn't ideal, but it was necessary to meet the conditions of our CS agreement and the contractor couldn't do the work before. They have been less successful so far.

Some of our improved grassland is being allowed to develop into rough grassland and lots of species, such as short-eared owls and barn owls, are responding to the habitat. Where necessary, we cut and remove the rough grass every three to five years.

One meadow is now evolving into a wet grassland and we are also considering how to develop wood pasture.

**How are you managing the sites now?**

We take hay cuts from our meadows, followed by aftermath grazing. A neighbouring farmer grazes

some of our fields, and we have our own small herd of cattle as well (which he houses for us in winter). We also have summer sheep grazing on less diverse fields, and sheep help with aftermath grazing too.

It's tricky managing the grazing with some fields under hay, another on rest and others that need haying late to accommodate late-flowering vetches. We need to have enough land to both graze effectively and economically.

**Did you need outside funds for your project?**

We receive Countryside Stewardship payments but they don't cover our management costs. To secure graziers we only ask for a peppercorn rent and offer free hay, so there is no income from livestock sales. We have bought equipment so that we can hay cut ourselves; we couldn't find a contractor who could come when needed and late hay cuts were affecting the meadows species diversity. We have sold hay, but the more floristically-rich bales were returned as the farmers thought Ribwort Plantain wouldn't be palatable for their animals.

**How do you know it has worked?**

I aim to do a botanical survey every two years, but day-to-day I look out for three to four indicator species that Natural England's Priority Habitat Inventory (PHI) suggests you should expect to see in a lowland meadow. We are hoping that eventually our grassland will have become species-rich enough to be added to the PHI. It is hard to get to that level but we are working towards it.

**What is essential to the success of your projects?**

Understanding what the sward needs - when to cut, when to graze, when to take sheep off, so deciding what management is needed and at what time. It is really hard, as technical advice doesn't always help when each field has its own calendar and each year is different. I try to think broadly and not just about one species.

**What do you find hardest?**

Timing, fitting it all in, and responding to the weather - for example, should I aftermath graze when it's wet and risk poaching?

**What are you most pleased with?** Seeing plants appear in areas where they weren't before.

**Would you do it again?**

Learning about grassland is great and there is still a lot to learn. It is fascinating that two fields side by side can be completely different. I like the idea I took away from a recent training course of taking a 'pocket full of seed' from a field and spreading it in another to see what happens.

**What would your tip be to others?**

Do your research, understand what you are doing and why. Don't give up! Things take longer than you expect.

**How do you think the grassland will be sustained in future?**

Fortunately the owner and her family are very dedicated to the environment so the meadows will always be valued.



Iain Parkinson  
*Living Collections and Conservation Manager*  
*Wakehurst – Kew's wild botanic garden*

### **Tell me about your grassland restoration project**

I've delivered three different types of grassland projects at Wakehurst over the past ten years – a meadow creation as part of the new Millennium Seed Bank landscape, a meadow enhancement in Bloomers Valley to increase plant diversity, and a large-scale meadow restoration project on a five-hectare area of farmland that Wakehurst acquired a few years ago – the aim with this last project was to create a landscape that captured the essence of the High Weald by restoring the meadow, reinstating the old field boundaries, planting new hedgerows and establishing a traditional management approach of hay cutting and grazing – it was an opportunity for me to put everything I'd learnt over the years into practice.

We used different techniques to increase plant diversity including direct seed sowing using Weald Native Origin Seed (WMI), applying green hay, using brush harvested seed collected from a local donor meadow site, a new technique called green seed which has been developed locally, and using plant plugs to introduce species that often prove difficult to establish.

Each project presented a unique set of challenges and opportunities.

Although they now create an ecological network of connected habitats, this wasn't the initial intention – I simply became captivated by meadows – their beauty, tradition, character, ecological value, and the tangible link they provide to the past – and I wanted to create more – to put the lessons I'd learnt into practice. On a professional level I liked the immediacy of seeing the results of our efforts – whether good or bad.

I also started to meet like-minded people – farmers, site managers, scientists, contractors, ecologists, enthusiasts, historians, artists and many more who all shared the same appreciation that I had developed for our meadow grasslands – and they inspired me.



### **What was essential to the success of your project?**

People. I blame Dawn Brickwood, who at the time was the Weald Meadows Initiative Officer (High Weald AONB), for my obsession with meadows.

When I was asked to create the Millennium Seed Bank meadow, I turned to the High Weald AONB team for expert advice - Dawn made a site visit to Wakehurst and her knowledge, experience, enthusiasm, and pragmatic approach gave me the confidence to make a start.

Dawn introduced me to Keith Datchler, who at the time managed some of the finest meadows in the High Weald as Farm Manager of the Beech Estate. Keith was like me - practical, pragmatic, and passionate about meadows – only slightly older and much wiser. Our professional interest in meadow restoration led to a life-long friendship.

I then met Dr Margaret Pilkington (Emeritus, Senior Lecturer at the University of Sussex), who introduced me to the science of grassland restoration – apparently, it was ‘rocket science’. Margaret opened my eyes to a more disciplined methodology to restoring ecosystems which until our meeting had been based on instinct and a ‘just do as nature does’ approach.

I then applied for a travel scholarship to visit the best meadows across the UK. I saw many beautiful meadows, but my abiding memory is of the very knowledgeable people I met. It was this experience that made me realise that behind every ecological network lies a more important network – a network of people.

### **Did you need external funds for your project?**

Yes and no! The Millennium Seed bank meadow was relatively small and so we could deliver the majority of preparation work using staff resources with volunteer assistance - the majority of costs were hidden. The largest outlay was the purchase of seed (circa £450.00 for a hectare coverage of Weald Native Origin Seed).

The meadows in Bloomers Valley are in their last years of Higher-Level Stewardship – we collect an annual payment of £350.00 which is gratefully received but by no means enough to cover the on-going management responsibilities. In addition to using our own machinery we also hired in the help of the Working Horse Trust to help chain harrow the meadows to prepare them for seed sowing and also as part of our annual management plan. By the time we started to deliver the last large-scale restoration project on the farmland, we had purchased our own seed brush harvester, and were essentially self-sufficient.

I soon learnt though that restoring a meadow is similar to starting a family – the financial commitment is for the long-term – success is so dependent on annual management – and this can be measured not just in money but also in time.

### **How are you managing the sites now?**

At Wakehurst we adopt a very traditional approach which involves taking a hay cut followed by aftermath grazing using Hebridean sheep that belong to Ashdown Forest. We have a grazing licence

with Ashdown Forest that enables us to ‘borrow’ their sheep in autumn and winter once the animals have finished their summer heathland grazing duties.

We are always tinkering with the meadows – controlling the weeds by hand – adopting a ‘little but often approach’ seems to work. Mixing up the hay cutting time is essential to avoid favouring certain species that tend to dominate. We also add more seed from time to time from other donor sites to increase the abundance of species and also improve the meadow’s genetic diversity.

Cutting and removing the hay is essential - this helps to maintain low nutrient levels in the soil which gives the more delicate plants a fighting chance against the meadow bullies. Managing the meadow in this way also ensures the annual plants can reproduce – this is particularly important for yellow rattle whose hemi-parasitic properties help to regulate the dominant grasses.

### **Would you do it again?**

Yes. There is always something new to learn and someone new to meet.

### **What would your top tip be to others?**

Get in tune with the rhythm of nature and you won’t go far wrong.

### **What did you find hardest?**

Meeting other people’s high expectations within the short timeframe of their interest – a meadow takes time to establish – you have to be patient.

### **What are you most pleased with?**

I’ve enjoyed seeing the meadows evolve and find their natural balance – increasing their species diversity over time and responding positively to the ongoing management programme – it makes all the effort worthwhile.

### **How do you know it has worked?**

Positive results from our long-term monitoring programme provides the scientific evidence that shows we are maintaining or increasing plant diversity, but success can be measured in many other ways.

Seeing how the orchids are on the increase each year, or the unexpected find of the diminutive adder’s tongue fern, the first sighting of the rare long-horned bee in Bloomers Valley – or simply a noticeable increase in my hay fever symptoms if I walk through the meadow.

Setting your own expectation from the outset and finding simple ways to monitor how things are going is the key.

### **How do you think the grassland will be sustained in future?**

We have management plans the meadows so we’ve already recorded how they should be sustained in the future. A more important question to ask is who will sustain the meadows in the future – this essentially requires me to inspire someone else to care as much about the meadows as I do – in the same way that Dawn and others inspired me at the start.