

High Weald Anvil ²⁰¹¹

A **free** guide to one of England's finest landscapes



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HIGH WEALD

AREA of OUTSTANDING NATURAL BEAUTY



Welcome to the 12th edition of the High Weald Anvil
an annual newspaper for residents of, and visitors to, the High Weald Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB).

We are experiencing significant, perhaps fundamental, changes in our lives resulting from the financial crisis, public sector cuts, global energy and food concerns, moves toward a low-carbon economy and changes to our climate.

Change can be unsettling but, as any historian knows, it is nothing new and the High Weald, a nationally important landscape, has to evolve if it is to thrive. It is our life support system – it has provided for basic human needs: food, shelter, fuel, water over centuries and has the potential to continue to do so.

Innovation has the power to benefit an entire community. Our feature *The Fattening Land* recounts the heady days in the late 1700s when a housewife found a way to fatten her farmyard chickens and get extra value for them. Her methods would be frowned upon today, no doubt, but her idea caught on helping to make Heathfield a veritable powerhouse of chicken production!

Return of the Native is a heartwarming story of the resilience of the natural world. Buzzards, hunted to near extinction by the Victorians and decimated by the widespread use of pesticides such as DDT, in the 1950s and 1960s, are a prime example. Thanks to more environmentally-friendly land management methods the Buzzard is a familiar sight once more, soaring majestically in the sky above the High Weald.

One thing that hasn't changed is our fondness for the delights of afternoon tea, with mouthwatering Kent or Sussex cream teas a particular favourite. It is heartening to note, therefore, that even in these recessionary times the great British tea room is not only surviving, but thriving.

As a farmer I am delighted that in this issue we focus on the people who work, or have worked, the countryside of the High Weald. Through their eyes we see how we may be able to find an environmentally responsible, yet economically sustainable way, to provide a living wage for those working the land.

Lydia Tidy

The High Weald Anvil is published annually by the High Weald Joint Advisory Committee (see back page).

The High Weald Joint Advisory Committee:

- furthers understanding of the High Weald
- advises on its management and
- enables action to conserve it.

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The changing f



Looking down on Lamberhurst in the 1940s



...and in 2008

As we say farewell to the first decade of a new millennium, what does the future hold for the High Weald? The character of the landscape is essentially the same as it was 600 years ago; it is considered to be one of the best preserved medieval landscapes in Northern Europe. But will its special character be evident 600 years from now? Or will the pressures of a growing and globalised society prove too much?

Residents and visitors marvel at the High Weald's rolling, wooded landscape, forged by our ancestors during a long history of collaboration with nature to provide basic human needs: food, shelter,

fuel, water, trade and community through farming, hunting, animal husbandry, timber production and not one, but two periods of large scale iron production. What will be the activities of the future? Will they protect our rich heritage of ancient woodland, heaths, wildflower meadows, hedges and archaeological features? Neglect is already a serious threat to these features.

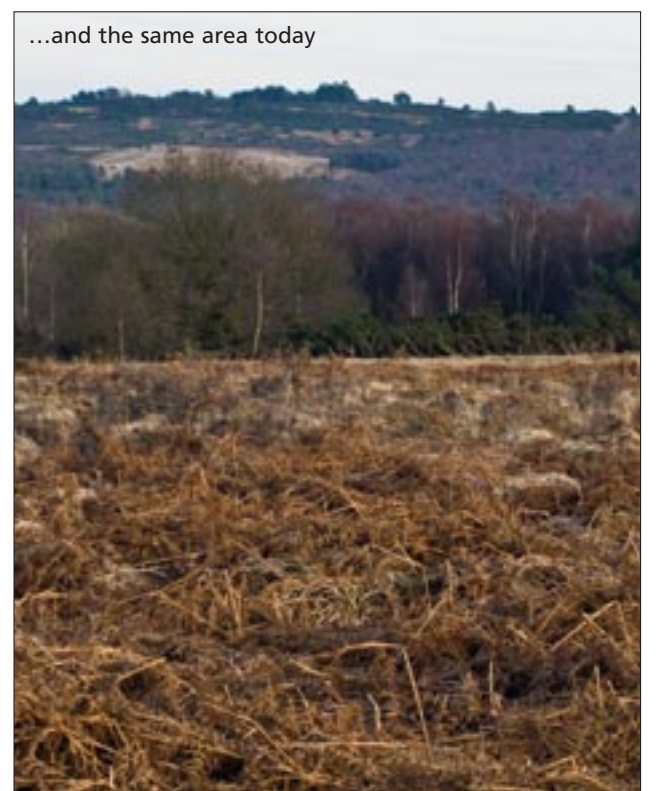
Farmers are under increasing pressure to produce more for less money. Can they continue to manage the land for food and make a living? A growing interest among consumers for quality food produced locally offers hope. Can we harness more of the area's woodlands to meet our energy

needs? The demand for logs has increased but still only 8.6 per cent of our woodlands are managed. As farms and woodlands are gradually sold off as small plots will the landscape evolve to primarily service our leisure needs or does it pave the way for new systems to achieve productive land management?

The crux of the matter is that if we want to make the most of the resources that the landscape provides there needs to be a viable market for whatever is being produced. To that end all of us play a part in the future of our rural landscape every time we make a choice about where to buy our logs or our meat for the Sunday roast.



Gill's Lap from Coleman's Hatch in the 1930s



...and the same area today

Coleman's Hatch, Fishdown Forest

Face of the High Weald

Forest guardian

Hew Prendergast has lived on Ashdown Forest for 21 years and was on the board of Conservators of Ashdown Forest for three years. During a career in plant science he worked for The Botanic Garden Kew at Wakehurst Place in West Sussex. When an opportunity arose to work full time for the conservators, he seized it, and was appointed director eight years ago.

Ashdown Forest covers 6,500 acres and is the largest free public access space in South East England. It receives national and international protection because of its

“The greatest threat to Ashdown Forest is the cessation of sustainable human exploitation”

wildlife value – two thirds of the forest is open heathland, a rare habitat of nature conservation concern.

“Our role as conservators covers all aspects of the care and administration of the Forest. Grazing livestock is as much a part of the Forest as the heather and wide open views. In the 1940s the Forest comprised 15 per cent woodland but by the 1990s woodland cover had reached 40 per cent.

“Today we have just one commoner grazing a significant number of animals on the Forest. Unless his son carries on, when he retires there will be none. The greatest threat to Ashdown Forest is the cessation of sustainable human exploitation of the land. That is what has created the Forest, without it the Forest will change beyond recognition.”



Living off the land

As in the past, the people who live and work in the High Weald today are as much a part of its character as the landscape itself. Some of them have worked the land for decades, others are newcomers. **James Sharpe** meets some of them to discover what, if anything, has changed during their tenure and what they think the future may hold.

Alpacas and wildflowers

Vicki and Chris Agar bought Spring Farm at Fletchling, near Uckfield, in 1998 as a 47-acre livery yard. Since then they have restored hedgerows, planted species-rich wildflower grassland and bought two neighbouring plots of land including 38 acres of former floodplain on the Ouse, which is being restored to traditional wet meadow. Their land holding now comprises 110 acres, mainly wildflower grassland with a high nature conservation value.

Vicky says: “I studied fisheries management at university but then worked for Barclays Bank in London for 15 years. In 1998 we had the opportunity to buy the farm and I now run Spring Farm Alpacas full-time, employing three part-time staff. My husband, Chris, also works on the farm and part-time in the City.

“We have 103 alpacas; we bred 37 in 2010 and sold 30 of those. We also sold 30 fleeces last year. Alpacas produce highly prized fleece with a quality to rival cashmere. Our next step is to develop the market for this premium fibre product.”



“Alpacas produce highly prized fleece to rival cashmere”

Facts of the land

- 45.8% of farmers are part-time
- 15% of farm holdings are in an environmental stewardship scheme
- 43% of farms are less than 5ha, 25% are 5-20ha
- 24.6% of the High Weald is woodland
- If 50% of High Weald woodlands came under sustainable management they would produce 21% of our total energy requirement
- Grassland covers 43% (63,616ha) of the High Weald AONB
- 53% of farms are classified as ‘other’ – a reflection that many are enterprises that don’t fit neatly into standard agricultural classifications



Living off the land

Master of change

As a boy, **Keith Datchler** helped out at the dairy farm across the road before school. He has just celebrated his 41st year at the 2,000-acre Beech Farm Estate near Battle, working his way up from dairy herdsman to estate manager.

"In 1947 Sir John Wells bought the 200-acre farm to convert into a country home but developed a passion for the land, and forestry in particular, and the estate grew to include the addition of 1,200 acres of forestry land.

"The biggest change has been our decision to stop farming the dairy herd 13 years ago. Milk quotas had been falling and we were worried about the viability of the business. The risk was too great. The dairy herd went, we converted buildings to office and workshop space and

let the workers' cottages. As a dairy farm we employed 13 people, today we employ one.

"The other change is that we converted all our pasture to biodiverse, flower rich grassland so the estates are now registered organic land. Today we sell the rights to graze but maintain control over land management. I regard managing for biodiversity essential – biodiversity equals food security, but we'd struggle to do it without stewardship payments.

"I worry that farming has lost a generation, so many of the people I deal with are my age, I see very few young people coming into farming and land management. If we don't have the skilled, knowledgeable people choosing careers in land management who will do it?"



"I worry that farming has lost a generation"

Woodland wonder

Gill Hernon owns 10 acres of woodland, Tannin Wood in Waste Wood, near Buxted, with her husband, a carpenter by trade. They bought the wood because of a long-held appreciation of woodland and a desire to contribute to nature conservation. The wood comprises oak standards over old sweet chestnut coppice stools with some beech.

Before 2008 the 150-acre Waste Wood, was owned privately as part of an investment portfolio (the average price of agricultural land has doubled over the past five years), then it was sold as 18 plots from 5 to 15 acres.

"I think Waste Wood is an excellent example of how well small woodland ownership can work when all the woodland owners work together," said Gill.

"One of the main things that has brought us together is our involvement with the Historic Environment Awareness Project, which has supported us in exploring and mapping the archaeological features in the woodland – features such as ancient charcoal hearths and remnants of iron-making industries from centuries ago. We also share advice, knowledge and contacts. The Forestry Commission has been very helpful, advising us on managing the wood."



"Waste Wood is an excellent example of how well small woodland ownership can work when all the woodland owners work together"

The 'Oil Baron'



Alex Ball runs his forestry business from Udimore and supplies birch for jumps to race courses including Ascot and Cheltenham. He does not own land but buys the rights to harvest wood by the acre. He has worked in forestry for 16 years and sold a marquee hire business last year to invest in forestry full-time. He has bought new machinery, including a saw mill, with grants from the South East England Development Agency (SEEDA) and the Wealden and Rother Rural Partnership (WARR).

"A lot of people say there's no money in forestry, but I've never held that view. It's about identifying value in a parcel of timber and finding the right market for it, whether it's birch saplings for race jumps, hazel for beanpoles, wood for building, furniture or firewood."

"Demand for quality firewood is the best

I've known it. I liken myself to an oil baron! In my imagination, obviously, which is quite vivid!" Alex says, roaring with laughter.

"My concerns for the future are changing ownership of our woodlands. When a wood is lotted into small plots it is no longer productive and erodes what is left of our rural economy. I think it would be a disaster if Forestry Commission land was sold off.

"The more involved I get the more opportunities I see for wood product. At the moment I'm interested in the use of chestnut as a building material."

"The more involved I get the more opportunities I see"