

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: Vicarage Farm



Name:	J.F. Watkins & Sons
Region/County:	South West/Dorset
Address:	Vicarage Farm Dorset
Farm Size/Type:	720 hectare. Mixed arable, beef and sheep farm on the Weld Estate
Cropping:	312 hectare combinable crops (wheat, barley, rape spring oats and 65 ha of maize to fatten beef)
Stocking:	800 beef and 450 North Country mules
Land features:	Open, cultivated chalk hills with areas of steep, species-rich chalk grassland
Key objectives:	hedgerow restoration, maintenance and restoration of species-rich chalk grassland, the protection of historic interest (maintaining grassland and removing scrub), resource protection in terms of soil erosion prevention from arable fields, arable farm bird options and the maintenance of wet grassland for wintering waders and wildfowl.

The Watkins family farm a large mixed tenanted farm on the Weld Estate close to the Dorset Heritage coast. As well as 312 hectares of arable land they have large areas of chalk down land which is part of the South Dorset Coast Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI).

The farm is very much a commercial enterprise. Alongside the combinable crops is an 800 head winter-housed beef rearing unit and a flock of 450 North Country mules that graze the Downland and are sold on at 12 months.

By his own admission, Mr Watkins would, "love to see 2,000 acres of wall to wall wheat. Everything on the farm that can be economically put to the plough is."

The remaining grassland on the farm is either too steep or wet to cultivate. As much of this is a SSSI, there was pressure for Mr Watkins not to make any agricultural improvements. He wanted compensating for this and entered a Wildlife Enhancement Scheme on some parts of the land and Countryside Stewardship Scheme on other parts.

Being part of these schemes, demonstrated to him that they made sound economic sense on land of limited agriculture potential. When the schemes ran out, Mr Watkins joined the Entry Level Stewardship scheme (ELS) and the Higher Level Stewardship scheme (HLS) in 2006.



Although his motive is primarily financial, Mr Watkins takes pride in managing the land for the environmental outcomes and is making a good job of it. The Weld Estate has its own wildlife ranger who, informally helps and guides Mr Watkins on the HLS management.

The main options taken up by the farm focussed on grazing and scrub control with advice and recommendations on how to address and find the right balance for each of these.

Care and maintenance visits in 2007 to October 2009 highlighted the progress already made under HLS management with good progress being made towards meeting the schemes' Indicators of Success'.

Cattle grazing is essential for control of the over dominant Tor grass and David Charman, Mr Watkins' Natural England advisor remarked:

“Tor grass is now less dominant and a scrub/gorse control programme has been implemented. Generally the overall standard of land management has been better in the first three years of Environmental Stewardship than in the whole of the previous ten years of CSS. The combination of spring and summer cattle grazing followed by autumn/winter grazing by non-lambing sheep has reduced the dominance of Tor grass.”

“Mixed grazing has been a benefit to both grassland and livestock conditions, it makes sound financial sense with a beef enterprise” said Mr Watkins.

The location of the farm is also important for migrating birds, in addition the combined crop range of Vicarage Farm and adjacent farms makes them highly valuable for farmland birds.

The farm hosts a number of key species including lapwing, snipe, corn bunting, water vole and yellowhammer. BAP habitats and species are listed as: Adonis blue, chalk hill blue, Lulworth skipper, small heath, horseshoe vetch, skylark, stonechat, linnet, Dartford warbler, lowland calcareous grassland and grassland for invertebrates.

“The success of the Higher Level Stewardship Scheme at Vicarage Farm demonstrates that effective environmental management can be achieved on even the most commercial farming units.” said David.



Where can I find out more?

Please follow this [link](#) for the latest information on Environmental Stewardship