

Environmental Stewardship

Media release - 9th November 2012



West Penwith farming family celebrates 25 years of environmentally friendly farming

2012 marks the silver jubilee of England's agri-environment schemes

Bronze age and iron-age field systems, traditional farm buildings and an ancient landscape have all been protected and restored on a farm in Zennor thanks to 25 years of the landmark scheme that have been encouraging environmentally friendly farming practices.

Agri-environment schemes now operate across the country, with nearly 52,000 farmers signed up. The Nankervis family of Wicca Farm, were one of the first farmers in the country to sign up to the Environmentally Sensitive Area (ESA) Scheme in 1987, which paid farmers to safeguard and enhance areas of landscape, biodiversity and cultural importance.

Wicca Farm dates back to the Bronze Age, 3,500 years ago. The cliff land is a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) notified for its coastal heath and maritime grassland and its butterflies, insects and birds.

Jean Nankervis said: "We have always grazed the cliff land and croft and currently have a herd of Galloway cattle on the cliff. The carefully managed grazing under agri-environment schemes has opened up more of what was a scrubby and bracken dominated area, allowing wild flowers and butterflies to thrive. In spring flowers like squill, violets, thrift and sea campion put on a stunning display, and last year we had some green hairstreak butterflies. We were thrilled when a birdwatcher reported seeing a pair of choughs on the cliff again this summer."

The first ESA schemes were launched in five areas: The Broads, Pennine Dales, South Downs, Somerset Levels and Moors and West Penwith. This was a new and bold way of providing practical support to land managers to retain and protect valuable and threatened landscape, wildlife and archaeology, which might otherwise have been lost to intensification. Conserving hedgerows and field margins, reducing fertiliser use and supporting extensive grazing were among the early priorities of the ESA schemes. From the experiences learnt in the early ESAs came the development of more targeted schemes and agreements to conserve and enhance the countryside, which have helped to bring about and respond to environmental changes.

Farming Minister David Heath said: "Farmers and land managers are the guardians of England's iconic landscapes. Over the past 25 years agri-environment schemes have played a key role in enabling them and environmental organisations to improve the countryside and look after our wildlife".

In West Penwith, the first tranche of ESAs were developed to conserve and enhance the landscape, wildlife and archaeology of the area, particularly the ancient field systems - small field patterns characteristic of the area. Much of this land is now moving into the successor scheme Environmental Stewardship with the opportunity to build on the management to date and to restore valuable biodiversity habitats.

Ann Preston-Jones of English Heritage said: "Before the ESA scheme, we were facing a critical situation in West Penwith with large areas of historic landscape at risk of damage or destruction. The ESA scheme was incredibly helpful as it stabilised the landscape and protected the archaeology by providing support to farmers to continue with traditional farming methods. Environmental Stewardship has built on this by encouraging more active management of historic sites. Significant sites, such as the Nine Maidens standing stones at Madron, have been restored with the help of funding through the ESA scheme."

Jean Nankervis said the decision to enter into an ESA agreement was initially financial: "Our daughter Rose had just come back from college and joining an ESA meant she could stay and work on the farm. The timing was just right, it kept our family together. It also meant we wouldn't have to change our farming practices too much".

Jean added: "The good thing about being in Environmental Stewardship is that the high value landscape has been preserved without being fossilised. We don't look like a museum, all clean and perfect. We have to work hard on the farming side and the environmental side but the stewardship agreement means we preserve the landscape and we are pleased to have it."

The Nankervis family rent the cliff land adjoining their farm from the National Trust. Jon Brookes of the National Trust said "The National Trust cares for around 1,500 hectares of land within West Penwith, and work in partnership with tenant farmers like the Nankervises on the best way to manage the land taking into account the archaeology, landscape and biodiversity, whilst maintaining a viable farm business. The area is well used by both local people and visitors with 20 kilometres of the Cornish Coastal Path passing through the West Penwith ESA. Agri-environment schemes have enabled farmers to re-introduce grazing to abandoned areas of cliff, croft and moorland to maintain and restore native heath and grassland, benefiting many wildlife species. This has created a much more subliminal experience for visitors".

The farm was included in a recent hedge survey conducted by the Cornwall Wildlife Trust – Jean says, "Cornish hedges were in both schemes and we are proud that ours are of higher wildlife value than other areas in the UK."

Ann Reynolds, Senior Archaeologist at Cornwall Council said "The agricultural intensification of the 1970's and 1980's had resulted in the removal of many ancient hedges and field systems. The ESA offered an excellent way of conserving the unique landscape while allowing normal farming practice to continue. It included simple measures to restore and maintain hedges and walls, to reinstate Penwith style iron gates and granite gateposts, and to maintain traditional buildings. The ESA was an immediate success, with very large take-up and a near complete halt on the loss of ancient hedges and rough ground, whilst supporting the vital continuation of local family farms."

There are currently over 110 live ESA and ES agreements in West Penwith committing approximately £1million annually covering around 9,000 hectares of land, the equivalent of 14,000 football pitches.

Vaughan Robbins, Natural England Lead Adviser added “As well as protecting the historic environment, West Penwith ESA was instrumental in halting the loss of valuable wildlife habitats in the area through agricultural intensification. Without pioneer agri-environment schemes such as ESA’s, historic features and semi natural habitat were at risk of being lost. West Penwith has a rich resource of habitat that requires protection, maintenance and restoration. Environmental Stewardship provides new opportunities to further the legacy of ESA schemes not only in special areas such as West Penwith but across the wider landscape, helping to secure and sustain a future for the living, historic and cultural landscape.”