

Environmental Stewardship

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South Downs farmer celebrates 25 years of environmentally friendly farming

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

Orchids, grey partridges and corn buntings are thriving on a farm on the South Downs thanks to 25 years of farming in an environmentally friendly way.

Harry Goring of the Wiston Estate was 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.

The Goring family have owned Wiston Estate since 1743, which includes Chanctonbury Ring and surrounding farmland. Harry said: "I was very happy to sign up to the ESA scheme straight away as it reflected the way we wanted to look after the land. I remember seeing clouds of lapwings over the South Downs when I was a boy, and I was keen to do what I could to maintain and restore the landscape and habitats it supports."

Harry explained: "We run an 800 hectare mixed farm on the South Downs, with arable land, sheep and cattle. Through the ESA scheme we were able to take steep slopes out of arable cropping and revert them back to traditional chalk grassland. By limiting the amount of fertiliser we use, we've been able to provide the right conditions for rare orchids and other species to thrive."

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".

The first ESAs 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.

In the South Downs, the first tranche of ESAs were developed to improve and protect species-rich grassland on the chalk downland. Arable reversion in this area returned land to grassland and had an immediate and positive effect on the landscape. Much of this land is now moving into the successor scheme, Environmental Stewardship (ES), with the opportunity to re-create valuable biodiverse habitats aimed at halting and then reversing the decline of farmland birds on the Downs.

Harry considers it important to maintain a patchwork of habitats to support different wildlife. He explained: “Under the ESA scheme the focus was just on the grassland. Now under our Higher Level Stewardship (HLS) scheme we’ve been able to provide nesting and food sources for various farmland birds. It’s been wonderful to see increased numbers of lapwings, corn buntings and grey partridge.”

The estate land encompasses Chanctonbury Hill SSSI, including ‘Chanctonbury Ring’, an iconic ring of beech trees which walkers, runners, cyclists and horse-riders on the South Downs Way National Trail will recognise. The trees were planted by Harry’s great-great-grandfather in 1760 on the site of an ancient Roman encampment. Harry commented, “The sides of the hill are quite steep so it is difficult to graze. HLS funding has enabled us to clear the scrub and trees from around the monument to maintain its visual presence in the landscape. By carefully managing the grassland, we’ve also been encouraging butterflies like the Duke of Burgundy back to the area.”

Rick Goring was only nine when his father Harry signed up for the ESA scheme, but he has now taken on the management of the estate from his father. Rick said “The nature of farming has changed over the last 25 years: it is much more intensive than when I was growing up. There is more of an expectation on the land - the drive for higher productivity had meant increased mechanisation and much bigger machinery.”

Rick went on to explain: “One of the challenges facing farmers today is the volatility of grain prices. However, being in a long term agreement with Natural England means we are rewarded with a stable income in return for our commitment to the environment. I can see the results and it is amazingly positive. It is a wonderful legacy to take on and look after for future generations.”

Harry added: “Being in the ESA and HLS schemes has also given us the opportunity to open up the farm to the local community. Through the Steyning Downland Scheme, we run a programme of events aimed at encouraging young people to get involved in looking after the landscape. It’s been a wonderful success.”

Phil Belden, Director of Operations at South Downs National Park Authority, was involved in the original campaign to have the South Downs registered as an ESA. Phil said: “The campaign quickly drummed up public support – the value of the landscape, habitats and archaeology, and the impact of modern agricultural policy, was clear for all to see. Farmers were keen to get involved in a scheme which provided funding to support traditional grazing and encourage arable reversion to restore the downland landscape. After the first few years, the scheme was modified, to include sympathetic arable management, to make it even more attractive and viable for farmers.”

Phil added: “The unique combination of geology and microclimates of the South Downs has created a rich mosaic of habitats that supports many rare and internationally important wildlife species. Sheep-grazed downland is the iconic habitat of the chalk landscape. You can find rare plants such as the ound-headed rampion, orchids ranging from the burnt orchid and early spider orchid to autumn lady’s tresses, and butterflies including the adonis and chalkhill blues. The support which has been provided to farmers over the last 25 years has been key to maintaining the habitats for these rare species. The extensive farmland of the South Downs is also important for many species of wildlife, including rare arable wildflowers and nationally declining farmland birds, including corn bunting, skylark, lapwing, yellowhammer and grey partridge.”

The South Downs ESA scheme reversed the neglect of abandoned downland slopes which were fast scrubbing over and began the process of restoring the Downs, which continues to this day with the successor HLS and Nature Improvement Area (NIA) status. The ESA campaign re-ignited the farmers’ and the public’s passion for the South Downs. The latest development in the story was the 2011 designation of the South Downs National Park.

Sue Simpson is Harry Goring's Natural England adviser. She commented: "25 years ago Harry Goring had the foresight to see that the support provided through the ESA scheme would enable him to maintain the traditional landscape and have a viable farming business. This was at a time when many other farmers felt the way forward was to increase the use of fertilisers to make their businesses work. Harry led the way and showed what was possible. Harry's current HLS agreement was drawn up in conjunction with the South Downs National Park, the RSPB and the Estate gamekeeper. The result is an agreement which works very well for both conservation and game management."

Sue added: "Studies undertaken in 2011 on farms in the area showed that returning some of the grassland to arable had fantastic benefits for corn buntings, hares and rare arable plants. For other parts of the Downs it's crucial that the grassland is retained to maintain the important habitats this provides and to protect the archaeology. The chalk downland is improving for both flowers and butterflies such as chalkhill and adonis blues. Natural England is delighted to work with farmers like Harry and Rick Goring to ensure the continued delivery of such valuable and important environmental benefits on their farms and for the wider community".

There are currently 232 live ESA and ES agreements in the South Downs committing over £6 million annually covering more than 55,000 hectares of land, the equivalent of almost 90,000 football pitches.