



# CUSTODIANS OF THE COUNTRYSIDE

*As CPRE publishes its new vision for the future of farming, freelance writer and broadcaster **Caz Graham** reports on the farmers who are championing responsible agriculture and putting the health of countryside and community first*

## WEAVE YOUR WAY THROUGH THE SWAYING

grasses and vivid wild flowers in one of Joy Henderson's County Durham hayfields and you could be stepping back a hundred years. Why? Because she manages these fields in the same way as her grandfather and great-grandfather, so that in June and July they light up in a blaze of colour – the purples, yellows and reds of native upland flora. For Joy, the reason she maintains her fields in this way is obvious – and it has little to do with farm subsidies. 'They're priceless, it's not about the money; just look at them.'

CPRE will shortly be publishing its new vision for the future of farming – aspirations for a farming system, which, if put into practice over the next 15 years, could lead to a more vibrant countryside. It's a blueprint for a healthier rural landscape, environmentally, socially and economically. Over the past 50 years, farmers have often been portrayed as villains of the countryside, ploughing up valuable habitats or asset stripping our flora and fauna for farm-gate profit. But Joy is just one of many farmers with a deep sense of guardianship and responsibility to the land they work on – not only to preserve its wildlife and habitats, but to open it up to people who have only limited access to the countryside, share its secrets and delights, and help build understanding between rural and urban Britain.

Over the centuries, agriculture has played a crucial role in shaping our landscape, from the tapestry of crops and meadows stitched into our lowlands to the rugged native sheep and cattle that add the character to our uplands. But farms are businesses; they'll only survive if they're commercially viable. In the past, farmers have been encouraged to plough up traditional features like hedges and wetlands to increase production, but now the agricultural grant system is starting to work in the opposite way, helping farmers preserve and enhance the environment, as well as stay competitive, and CPRE will be campaigning for more European farming funding to be



Top: Joy's hay meadows. Above: Joy Henderson. Left: Youth project work on her farm

channelled towards rewarding farmers for the range of public goods and ecosystem services they're providing.

## JOY FARMS IN THE HILLS OF WEARDALE, IN

the North Pennines, on a patchwork of fields, divided by ancient dry stone walls, sloping down to the River Wear. There's the usual sward of green grass you'd expect, but it is interwoven with a myriad of colours and textures: the red and purple of self-heal and the delicate blue of forget-me-not, along with pignut, orchids, betony and red great burnet.

Once you could find thousands of meadows like this across England, but now they're one of the rarest grasslands in the country – designated a UK Biodiversity Action Plan priority habitat. Some of Joy's fields are near-perfect examples and now, with the help of a project called Hay Time, run by the North Pennines Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty Partnership, she's helping restore other meadows. Seed is harvested from the best species-rich hayfields, and spread onto grassland that's lost its native flora.

The project started in 2006 and monitoring of plant species shows it's working well. The meadows are managed in a traditional way; hay is cut late to allow the seeds to develop fully, and because the meadows are cut later than usual, it makes them a safe place for birds to rear their young. The botanical richness also provides a great feeding ground for bumblebees, which are declining in number across the UK.

Joy's farm provides grazing for 180 sheep, plus a small herd of cattle, and she supplements her income by producing and selling hay to other farmers. It is tiny compared to many, so she has diversified to increase profits, offering educational visits and accommodation in a 17th-century barn that's been converted into an eco-friendly bunkhouse and environmental study area.

Farmers like Joy can do this kind of work by tapping into agri-environment schemes offered by Defra. They reward farmers who manage their land in ways that enhance wildlife and habitats. Nearly 70% of



Above: The public can view the dairy cows at Low Sizergh. Right: Richard Park with one of his stock



England's farmland is now under agri-environment schemes, which are run by Natural England. Some, like the Higher Level Stewardship scheme Joy is signed up to, require a ten-year commitment from farmers to deliver a tailored range of environmental benefits.

**DAIRY FARMER RICHARD PARK, WHO WORKS**

at Low Sizergh near Kendal in Cumbria, has just met with his Natural England adviser to draw up new stewardship plans for his 341-acre family farm, which has 160 dairy cows as well as young dairy stock. He's planning to create a wetland to encourage wading birds, upgrade the farm trail with wheelchair access and make the farm pond more accessible for pond-dipping school parties. For the Parks, making sure the farm is performing successfully is about more than just keeping the bank manager happy; the ethos underlying their activity is about keeping the wheels turning in a vibrant rural economy. Richard explains: 'A properly run farm can enrich the lives and environment of the whole community, and it's really important to get people out onto the farm. We want people to understand what happens here. We're a bit of a shop window.'

And it's easy enough for visitors to get a front-row seat to watch 21st-century farming. Richard's sister, Alison, and mum, Marjorie, run a farm café with a glass wall that overlooks the milking parlour, and every

afternoon during milking hours there's a clamour for tables with the best view. Their farm shop sells cheese and ice cream made from the milk, and in total this farm venture and its shops provide jobs for more than 60 people. Seven acres of the farm is used by Growing Well, a not-for-profit social enterprise project that grows vegetables while supporting people recovering from mental health problems. Low Sizergh buzzes with activity – it doesn't just contribute to the local community, it's a community in itself.

Low Sizergh also benefits from the huge demand for ethically produced, locally sourced food. With food security high on the agenda at the moment, British farmers would like to produce as much food for the

country as possible.

There's nothing new in this desire for self-sufficiency, but in the 1960s and 1970s, the policies that encouraged farmers to produce as much as they could led to EU butter mountains and milk lakes. And the policies that encouraged this maximum output had a profound effect on parts of the countryside.

**ANDREW PHILLIPS IS A BEDFORDSHIRE**

arable farmer growing wheat and oilseed rape. Back in the 1960s, his father took advantage of grants to rip out hedges, fill in ponds and fell spinneys – part of a generation of farmers who were encouraged to grow as much as they could. But the result for the landscape at Northwood End Farm near Haynes was one vast field stretching over 220 acres; a 'wheat prairie', as some would call it, nearly the size of 150 football pitches. When Andrew took over the running of the farm, in 1995, he wanted to restore the traditional English landscape that had been uprooted. Over the past 15 years, he's gradually replaced lost features. That huge field has been divided into six smaller ones, each with wildlife corridors on their margins that provide nesting space for birds and small mammals. He's encouraging insect biodiversity with a beetle bank and by planting pollen, nectar and wild bird-friendly mixes of seed. Because he's



Andrew Phillips and his greener farm

BARRY HALSTON, NTP/D/DAVID LEVENSON



Left: Kate Palmer (centre), Robert James (right), and their part-time chef, Tom (left), with homemade pasties from the farm. Right: A Leicester Longwool. Below: A Ruby Red Devon



## Find out more

Read CPRE's Vision for the Future of Farming, available from the Resources section of [www.cpre.org.uk](http://www.cpre.org.uk)

enhanced the farm's natural environment, it enjoys lots of visitors and residents: skylarks, buzzards, barn owls and more butterflies than ever before. And people, too – a new permissive footpath across the farm links to other local paths to make a pleasant walk for rambles.

Replacing his hedges and putting the footpaths back in has had a small impact on yields, but the money Andrew gets from agri-environment schemes compensates for this. He says the vast field had to be subdivided to farm anyway because it was too big, so putting the hedges back in wasn't a problem.

Andrew finds it somewhat ironic that he's now using stewardship grants to reverse the damage caused by the grant system of his father's era, but is passionate about conservation and how more farmers are now building it into their businesses. 'We're more aware now that the public want us to work in a way that looks after the environment. If we're getting public money through subsidies, we have to do what the public want.'

His own conservation work has been so successful that he not only won CPRE Bedfordshire's Living Countryside Award for Landscape Improvement last year, but also the Bedfordshire Farming and Wildlife Advisory Group's Farming and Conservation award. 'It's very important we give something back,' says Andrew. 'We're only stewards of the land for the time we're looking after it, and I'm trying to leave it in a better state than it was in when I took it on.'

### THAT BELIEF IS ALSO THE BEDROCK OF

Kate Palmer's way of farming. She's fairly new to the industry, finding her perfect farm after 25 years of teaching art and textiles in secondary schools. It was the conservation potential of West Yeo Farm near

Tiverton that made it stand out. 'It had culm grassland, the "rainforest" of Devon – it's the really highly prized conservation land.' Culm looks like bog or wet pasture, but it's a precious habitat unique to north Cornwall and Devon, and best managed by grazing with native breeds like Kate's pedigree Ruby Red Devons, cattle that aren't too fussy about what they eat. Their varied diet pays dividends when Robert James, Kate's partner, butchers them. 'They eat seeds, brambles, willow tips, nettles, and it turns them into great beef.'

Kate and Robert are convinced that treating their land and livestock with respect rewards them with a

stunning environment, contented cattle, sheep, pigs and chickens, and with superb produce they sell from the farm website, to a local pub, and to guests at the farm bed and breakfast. Kate's passionate about rare breeds and their value for modern-day farming. She has the largest flock of coloured Leicester Longwools in the country – large, distinctive sheep with fringes of woolly ringlets. Their quality fleeces are only worth a pittance if sold on, but the farm has turned the wool into a crucial part of its business by processing around 50 fleeces a year into knitting and weaving yarn, and employs five hand knitters to produce organic blankets and throws.

There has been a farm at West Yeo since at least 1086, and Kate's restoring the pastures, orchards and hedges back to the pattern of the 1850s, with the help of a farm map from that period. The culm grassland has been designated a county wildlife site and the farm has seen its first grey partridges in 30 years. Twelve years of careful management are showing results.

Farming policies drawn up by the EU are pivotal to how farmers like Kate and Robert manage their land – and how much support they receive to do so. Another round of reform of the EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) is taking place over the next couple of years and there are hopes it could lead to significant environmental improvements on farms across Europe. In the meantime, there's a lot of talking to be done before proposals are firm into policy for implementation at the start of 2014.

Back in Weardale, Joy Henderson says politicians can come and go, but they'll have no influence on her passion for hay meadows. Her research shows there's been haymaking in her fields since 1792 and, for her, preserving them is a tribute to her grandad and his skilled husbandry. Would she ever think of ploughing them up, even if Government policy made it worth her while? 'Not for a million pounds. This is my grandad's legacy – he'd be proud as punch. And it's my great-grandparents' legacy, and when I'm not here it's my children's legacy. I want to preserve it for the next generation.'



## What CPRE is doing

CPRE's Vision for the Future of Farming sets out our aspirations for environmentally sustainable farming – here's how we intend to support it:

- 1 Campaign for fairer trade agreements and a reformed CAP that rewards farmers for the full range of environmental work they do.
- 2 Stand up for local food networks and lobbying for a joined-up approach to farming, food and environmental policy.
- 3 Support sustainable farming that enhances the landscape, and campaign against industrialisation and unfair practices by large agribusinesses.
- 4 Press for more resources for agri-environment schemes and champion landscape character.
- 5 Lobby for policies that support farmers across all sectors to become more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable.