

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: Biscathorpe House Farm – Best practice farm walk

The logo for Natural England, featuring the words "NATURAL" and "ENGLAND" stacked vertically in a bold, sans-serif font. The text is white and set against a solid green square background.

Name:	The Wallis brothers
Region/County:	East Midlands/Lincolnshire
Address:	Biscathorpe House Farm
Farm Size:	1,246 acres
Cropping:	including winter wheat, winter barley, spring malting barley, spring oats, oil seed rape and vining peas.
Stocking:	85 single suckler cows plus followers and four stock bulls.
Key objectives:	farming practices that make room for wildlife

Farmers in Lincolnshire are taking advantage of free Best Practice training visits offered by Natural England to help them to make the most of their Entry Level Stewardship Scheme agreements.

Expert advisers are providing one-to-one and group best practice training for farmers that will enable them to better manage the options that they have chosen so that maximum benefits are secured for wildlife and the wider farmed environment.

Biscathorpe House Farm is situated in one of the most attractive parts of the Lincolnshire Wolds. It is farmed by the Wallis brothers who are keen advocates of farming practices that make room for wildlife. Nestled into a shallow valley dissected by bubbling chalk streams feeding the River Bain, the farm is an excellent example of how farming, shooting and conservation can go hand in hand.

Their holding comprises several distinct blocks of land extending to a total of 1,246 acres, some owned and some tenanted. A range of crops are grown across this versatile land including winter wheat, winter barley, spring malting barley, spring oats, oil seed rape and vining peas.

The Wallis's also have a herd of 85 single suckler cows plus followers, and four stock bulls. They graze the blocks of permanent grassland that remain across the farm, some of which has not been ploughed for centuries. The largest meadow which is overlooked by the main house still boasts distinctive ridge and furrow and another field conceals a medieval village.

The Entry Level Scheme agreement is located on land at Warren Top, near Welton le Wold, approximately 1 ½ miles from the main farm. It is farmed under a farm business tenancy by the brothers and the agreement commenced in 2007, just as management plans were removed from the scheme. To replace points that would have come from the plans, the Wallis brothers signed up to an impressive range of in-field options including overwintered stubbles (EF6), wild bird seed mixture (EF2) and 6 metre strips on cultivated land (EE3).

Kevin Wallis explained to Fay that he plans the location of each option carefully: 'We hand pick the ground that will be best suited to overwintered stubbles – spring crops do well up here on this light land'.



Six metre margin next to woodland

Walking around the eastern boundary of the land, Mr Wallis commented on a wisely located 6 metre margin that has been established on the north side of a neighbour's wood at the bottom of a steep slope.

'We put a margin in here because this land never produced much, being shaded by the wood on one side and then lying at the bottom of a slope. It's a sheltered spot too so the wildlife seems to like it.'

Fay agreed; 'It has established well, with a good sward of tussocky grasses – and the location next to the woodland will mean that it provides valuable edge habitat for small mammals, birds and invertebrates'.

The buffer also links to a large area of wild bird seed mix. Once again, the Wallis's have located this in a hollow in a field corner surrounded on two sides by a tall, blousy blackthorn and hawthorn hedge. Mr Wallis described the seed mix used:

"We used a standard mix that includes kale, millet and quinoa – some weeds have since appeared but they do serve a purpose as they are seed producing and the birds eat these too".

He went on to explain his rationale for the choice of location for this option: "We thought we might as well put this area down to wild bird cover; it's out of the way and undisturbed, it never produced much and it works well for the shooting – and the birds love it!"

Fay suggested that when they re-establish these areas, they might consider drilling them at a slightly higher seed rate which would reduce the likelihood of invasion by weedy species.

Kevin was highlighting the variety of farmland bird species that he has observed on the wild bird seed areas just as a flock of lapwings flew over and a grey partridge darted away across the field.

Visiting the farm on a snowy February day, it was a little early for boxing March hares but several were seen lolloping across the stubbles leaving their easily identifiable tracks dotted across the snow. A Biodiversity Action Plan species which has been in decline over the last decade, the brown hares at Welton le Wold are clearly benefiting from the efforts of the Wallis brothers.



Discussing wild bird seed mix at Warren Top

Walking around the farm, the brothers discussed the hedgerow management and enhanced hedgerow management options, EB2 and EB3, which have been the source of a significant proportion of points in their agreement. They agreed that the rotational cutting has worked well for many of the hedges, but elsewhere some have not responded well to the management regime.

Fay advised that this might be something to consider for the future; "It might be advisable to think carefully about which lengths of hedges are entered into which option when you eventually renew your agreement."

"It might be that some of the more mature hedges can be left largely uncut but others are trimmed annually or once every other year. This diversity of height and structure is more beneficial for wildlife anyway."

She added: "Next time around, you may wish to gain a greater proportion of your points from in-field options which are clearly working well on the farm and are benefitting a variety of wildlife species here."

Several fields have been included in the permanent grassland with low inputs option (EK2) as this works well alongside the extensive suckler beef system on the farm. The brothers have made only minor changes to the way that they manage the grassland to meet the option prescription.

Fay highlighted the importance of maintaining different sward heights across this grassland as this creates structural diversity which benefits invertebrates which in turn provide a food source for farmland birds and small mammals.

As well as the ELS scheme at Warren Top, the Wallis's have made good use of several of the Campaign for the Farmed Environment (CFE) voluntary options.

Kevin said that they had decided to do this because it worked well within the farm shoot and also they were keen to do their bit for the campaign, especially on land that is less productive. An impressive total of 5 ¼ acres of wild bird seed mix has been established at Biscathorpe.

They have also seeded over 4 acres of grass margin adjacent to the River Bain. These margins provide valuable habitat for small mammals, invertebrates and farmland birds and also act as an effective buffer preventing any nutrients or chemical entering the chalk streams. The River Bain supports populations of white clawed crayfish so minimising the amount of sediment and nutrients that enter this watercourse is vital if this species is to survive.

Fay urged the brothers to record these options on the CFE website: "You've created some excellent habitat here that fulfils the prescription for the voluntary CFE options so it's critical that its recognised in the campaign statistics as it will make a significant contribution to the county's target"

Fay offered to put them in touch with the local campaign co-ordinator who will talk them through inputting this data on-line.

At the end of the visit, Fay congratulated the Wallis brothers on the excellent work that they were doing at Biscathorpe and Warren Top. They too were pleased with the results of their efforts:

"We're really keen to do our bit for the environment as it's so rewarding to see the wildlife across the farm. We're pleased that our scheme has also integrated well within the farming system. It is a steep learning curve though – we gradually understand more and more about what works best!"

For more details about a best practice farm walk near you, visit Natural England's [website](#)

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