

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: Lyscombe Farm



Name:	Mark Russell
Region/County:	South West/Dorset
Address:	Lyscombe Farm Dorset
Farm Size/Type:	391.63 hectares (farm and scheme). Extensive mixed farm, semi-upland
Cropping:	400 acres of cereal rotation (organic)
Stocking:	high conservation bias with sheep (rare breeds and other), +/- 90 beef cows (beef shorthorn)
Land features:	open landscape with extensive exposed views of rounded and rolling hills with large-scale fields and woodland strips
Key objectives:	include the maintenance and creation of species rich grassland, arable reversion, arable habitat options for farmland birds, hedgerow and tree-line maintenance and woodland restoration.

Mark Russell runs a family farm which has always been farmed extensively but with serious consideration to conservation. Lyscombe Farm lies within the Dorset Downs and Cranborne Chase in an area of upland chalk grassland, ancient woodland and organic cereals. The land has several designations, and was previously in a Countryside Stewardship scheme.

“We have always farmed extensively, and with a considerably large Site of Scientific Interest (SSSI) within the agreement, it was a natural progression to join the Environmental Stewardship Scheme in 2006.

Mr Russell chose scheme options that would significantly improve the conditions of Lyscombe and Highdon SSSI which is within the agreement area. The main option adopted by Mr Russell, was the restoration of the species-rich, semi-natural grassland on the SSSI. This option is targeted at grasslands that are potentially rich in plant and associated animal life. They are often on difficult ground and may have suffered from management neglect or they may have been selected for agricultural improvement.

Situated between the River Piddle and the Devils Brook, the chalk slopes which form this site have the complete range of aspects and support an important example of the rich and attractive chalk flora of central Dorset. Large areas are generally close-grazed by a herd of Hebridean sheep to keep the scrub down and support swards which are botanically varied containing several grasses, notably heath grass which is only found locally on downland.

The diversity of this site is increased by the presence of scrub and ancient woodland. The woodland is mostly ash with hazel and small amounts of oak and field maple. A notable feature of one of the woods is the occurrence of the uncommon meadow saffron and the very local lichen, which occurs on old holly.

Mr Russell in accordance with the HLS agreement carried out hedgerow restoration, reverted arable to wild flower meadows to encourage a large range of farmland birds and insects and introduced six meter buffer strips on his organic rotational land, which have a wide range of benefits, including creating new habitat for small mammals, invertebrates and birds and protecting habitats from sprays, fertiliser and cultivation.

The woodlands have been divided into managed and fenced coppice stands and unmanaged (non-intervention) woods. Successful coppicing of old ash stools has been undertaken and further management will continue for the next couple of years. Those areas of non-intervention have many veteran trees of oak with important lichen flora and dead wood which is an ideal habitat for lower plants, such as lichen, invertebrates and fungi.



“I am totally reliant on the scheme and income to let me carry on with my personal commitments to the land.” said Mr Russell. “It is great to be a ‘green zone’ seeing the classic Dorset grassland taking over the farm in the middle of some fairly industrial farming.”

The HLS options chosen suited the topography of the land and it enabled them to carry on farming the way they were doing anyway – but ‘with tweaks’. It was not a dramatic change, but enhanced the conservation rather than the commercial activities of the farm.

Sean Cooch, Mr Russell’s Natural England advisor said “The Russell family have gone that extra mile in delivering environmental and nature conservation management on their farm. It’s obvious to anyone visiting their land on the footpaths that cross the Dorset Downs that this is a great place for wildlife. Skylarks thrive here along with flower rich grassland and abundant butterflies.

Views from one of the highest points in the county are enhanced by a landscape of mixed farming with British breeds of cattle and sheep reminiscent of a bygone age. This is, however, a farm that has looked at ways to manage their land sustainably and may well be a model for other farms to go in the future”.

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