

Environmental Stewardship

Case study: Cinderbarrow Farm: Best Practice Event



Is your farm in the Entry Level Scheme? If so, why not attend a FREE Best Practice event at a venue near you?



We go along to Cinderbarrow Farm near Levens in South Cumbria to find out more about how to manage ELS options to attract more wildlife while working alongside the needs of the productive dairy herd.

Farmers gathered in a building set high on a hillside with views across to Morcambe Bay and exchanged views on their own reasons for attending a Best Practice Farm Walk.

“I’ve come along today because I want to make sure that I’ve interpreted the rules right and so that if I get inspected, I’m confident that I’ve done everything as I should do. I’ve also got a few questions about dates and deadlines and what records I’ve got to keep,”

explained Mr Metcalfe who farms near Grange Over Sands.

The best practice farm walks are an ideal opportunity for farmers to gain practical advice from expert advisers who have firsthand experience of managing agri-environment schemes. Farmers can also share their own views about option implementation with each other, discovering solutions to problems they may have encountered on their own farms.

Pat Lane, an experienced agronomist and environmental adviser led the event at Cinderbarrow Farm. This 580 acre mixed farm is owned by the National Trust and Mr and Mrs Willison have been tenants for over ten years. Cinderbarrow is an excellent example of a farm that combines efficient milk production with first class environmental management.

Cinderbarrow Farm contains large areas of valuable habitat including limestone pavement grazed by a herd of Galloway cattle, semi-natural woodland and an extensive area of mossland which is now largely down to permanent grassland.

The focus of the farm business is a 150 head herd of Jersey cows which produce milk with a high butterfat content that secures a premium on Mr Willison’s constituent contract with Dale Farm dairies in Kendal.

“This farm is located in an area that has been identified as a priority for aquatic wildlife such as water voles as well as for species rich grassland which is scarce in this area,” Pat outlined at the start of the walk. Pat led the group across the farm yard to look at an impressive old stone barn used for storage that Mr Willison has included in the maintenance of weatherproof traditional farm buildings option (ED1).

“If you’ve got buildings in this option, don’t forget to take photos at the start of your scheme and also keep a record of any maintenance works that you do carry out, together with dates and pictures of what you’ve done. You may need these if you’re inspected at any time.”

Walking down the track towards the mosslands, the next stop was to look at some mature hedgerows growing on either side.



“Most of you will probably have hedges in one of the available hedgerow options. The idea of limiting the frequency of cutting of hedges is to allow them to grow on during the first year and then flower in subsequent years which will produce nectar in the spring and berries in the autumn for insects, birds and small mammals.”

“Ideally, you will cut your hedges on rotation so that you have a variety of ages, heights and structures across the farm. Different bird species like different types of hedges, for example tree sparrows and bullfinches prefer tall, blousy hedges whereas song birds such as partridges and yellowhammers like denser hedges to hide their nests.”

Pat also outlined the importance of adhering to the 2 metre margin required by cross compliance which was required in order to protect hedges from fertiliser and spray drift.

“This margin will also allow the ground flora to develop at the base of the hedge which is vital if it is to provide a useful habitat for small mammals, invertebrates and amphibians that feed and often hibernate there.”

Due to the location of Cinderbarrow on the mosslands, ditches are characteristic of the area and also have provided the Willisons with an opportunity to score points by following the prescription for the ditch management (EB6) option.

“By cleaning your ditches out on rotation during the autumn and winter, and not more than once every two years, you are ensuring that amphibians, aquatic invertebrates and ditch flora can flourish as there will always be suitable habitat available for them”.

Mr and Mrs Willison have also received advice on soil and nutrient management under the Catchment Sensitive Farming (CSF) programme. They have now made an application to the CSF Capital Grants Scheme but also make best use of ELS options to protect streams and open water across the farm.

“Many of you are probably in a priority catchment under CSF and therefore it’s important that you consider how you can help to protect water in ditches, streams, rivers and ponds. Consider fencing cattle out of watercourses or maybe placing buffer strips against them if they run through arable or intensive grassland”, Pat suggested.

Pat led the group to look at an area down to the wild bird seed mixture (EF2) option. As this is a rotational option, Mr Willison will shortly be re-establishing it on another part of the farm as part of his rotation.

“The wild bird seed mixture option makes a big difference to farmland birds as it will provide much needed winter food in January and February when other sources such as berries have been eaten. It can also provide cover for the chicks of ground nesting birds in the spring months. You will need to re-seed it during your agreement to ensure that it doesn’t become too weedy.”

Mr Willison has entered one of his wetter fields into the rush pasture option and he has noticed that this field is favoured by ground nesting birds.

“We’ve had a curlew nesting in here this spring and the lapwings use it as well. I deliberately leave sheep off the field in spring so that it’s quiet for the birds so that they choose to nest here”, he observed.

“I top the rushes in late summer and this does seem to keep them in check although parts of the field are too wet sometimes,” he added.



Pat reassured the audience that the prescription for rush pasture does allow for very wet areas to be excluded from the requirement to cut the rushes.

A number of the farmers present had chosen the permanent grassland with low inputs and also the very low inputs options (EK2 and EK3) and were keen to know more about how they could achieve the differing sward heights required by the prescription.

“A range of sward heights is good for ground nesting birds because it creates different conditions that benefit a range of invertebrates which the birds feed on in spring. It’s ideal for fields that you’re grazing with cattle but probably not appropriate for heavily sheep grazed ground or grassland that is only managed by topping.”

“You can cut fields in the low and very low input options for hay or silage but you need to be aware of the restrictions on cutting dates and you should graze the aftermath. For fields cut in the low inputs option you can apply a bag of nitrogen per acre whereas for the very low inputs one you can apply farmyard manure but not bagged fertiliser”, Pat clarified.

As the group returned to the farm yard for a cup of tea, they discussed how the scheme was working on their farms, exchanging experiences and ideas. Mr Gibson from Kendal highlighted what he had got from the farm walk.

“It’s been a really useful morning – it’s really interesting to get out onto a different farm because I’ve picked up lots of ideas that I can take back home.”

“More farmers should come to these farm walks; they would get a lot out of them. I know everyone’s busy but it’s worth taking the time out,” he added.

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

Where can I find out more?

Please follow this [link](#) for the latest information on Environmental Stewardship.