

# Discovering

## Farming and the Countryside

Ever since man first settled in these islands and began farming, his activities have affected the wildlife and the appearance of the countryside. Apart from a few areas there is nowhere in the UK which is truly 'natural' and which has not been affected in some way by man's agricultural and forestry activities.

The countryside has changed over the years depending on demands for food and other raw materials, such as timber and minerals. A rising population, wartime food shortages and demands for houses and roads have all brought about changes. The countryside, as we know it today, has been influenced by three main factors:

- the requirements of farming and forestry
- management for countryside sports such as hunting, shooting and fishing
- the desire for an attractive and accessible landscape.

Farming declined between 1870 and 1939 and the countryside was largely neglected and uncared for. Land was unfarmed and little maintenance was carried out.

The Second World War and the years following saw great changes. Years of neglect were put right, uncropped land was reclaimed and new farming methods put into practice.

Not all the changes were beneficial and sometimes hedgerow removal, drainage of wet areas and change from scrub to arable land destroyed or damaged important wildlife habitats. Nowadays, though, modern farming methods involve careful management to strike a sensible balance between the needs of modern food production and the interests of wildlife and the landscape.

### Some wildlife features on farms

#### Water and wetlands

Existing wetlands are being preserved and managed for wildlife. They are of great interest as they support species including wildfowl, dragonflies, fish and birds of prey. Farm ditches and watercourses can also be managed for wildlife.

#### Trees and shrubs

These form attractive landscape features and are important wildlife habitats. They also give shelter to livestock, provide firewood and fencing materials. It is better to grow trees and shrubs which are native to these islands as native trees support a much greater diversity of wildlife.

#### Farm hedges

Field boundaries are important landscape features and valuable for wildlife, they may also have an historic interest. Farmers need to control the size and shape of hedges and special techniques such as coppicing and hedge 'laying' can maximise their benefit to wildlife.

#### Grassland

Traditionally managed grasslands are described as being 'unimproved', meaning that they have never been treated with artificial fertilisers or herbicides. They are a great benefit to wildlife but have been greatly in decline due to modern farming methods. In some areas these habitats are now being reinstated using traditional farming methods. The interest and value of any kind of grassland will depend on surrounding habitats; trees, hedges, ditches and ponds providing continuity and 'corridors' for wildlife to move across fields and farms.

## Modern farming methods

Pesticides and fertilisers have played an important role in increasing the quality and quantity of the food we produce. By following careful procedures and using other methods of control to supplement crop protection chemicals, farmers can ensure that pesticides do not have an adverse effect on the environment.

An example of this modern, environmentally responsible method of farming is Integrated Farm Management (IFM) which is practised by a growing number of farmers in the UK. This is an approach which demonstrates that farming can be profitable whilst also maintaining and enhancing the natural environment. IFM involves a combination of traditional techniques, such as crop rotation, with modern science, such as growing new varieties of crops which are resistant to disease.

Organic farming is a holistic system which bans the use of pesticides completely and so is good for wildlife. However, production costs are higher than conventional farming and, although organic farming is expanding only just over 3% of our farmland was registered as organic in January 2007.

Farmers get very little taxpayers money to support food production nowadays. Instead they get an annual payment for the whole farm which goes towards the cost of meeting standards of public, animal and plant health and animal welfare. They are also required to protect the soils on their farms and look after landscape features like hedges, walls, watercourses, woodland, rights of way and permanent pasture. They can also apply to participate in 'environmental stewardship' schemes which offer payments towards the costs of further improvements to environmental features.

In addition to the voluntary schemes, farming is increasingly controlled by legislation, designed to reduce its impact on the environment. This includes measures to control the way in which farmers dispose of potentially polluting substances such as farm slurry, silage effluent and farm chemicals and a ban on the burning of straw and stubble.

Some legislation covers areas which are especially at risk. Nitrate Vulnerable Zones, Sites of Special Scientific Interest, National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty are examples of these.

Nitrate Vulnerable Zones are identified across the country in areas with a high risk of pollution from nitrogen from fertilisers. In them farmers are restricted on the crops they may grow and the fertilisers they may use.

There are over 4,000 Sites of Special Scientific Interest in England which protect wildlife and geological features which may be under pressure from development, pollution, climate change and bad management. Natural England works with landowners to conserve and improve these sites.

National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty have also been set up to conserve and enhance landscapes and can influence what farmers do on their farms.

## Sources and more information

Integrated Farm Management – see the LEAF: <http://www.leafuk.org/>

Organic farming <http://www.soilassociation.org/>

Organic farming statistics <http://statistics.defra.gov.uk/esg/statnot/orgeng.pdf>

Support for farmers on the Defra Farming website: <http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/index.htm>

Nitrate Vulnerable Zones

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/environment/water/quality/nitrate/default.htm>

Sites of Special Scientific Interest on the Natural England website at:

<http://www.defra.gov.uk/farm/index.htm>

National Parks <http://www.nationalparks.gov.uk/aboutus>

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