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Wetlands hold key for wildlife and farming

Helen Johnson meets a man out
to improve life for all in the Vale
of Pickering

TIM BURKINSHAW'S mission is to create wetlands in the Vale of Pickering for the benefit of Yorkshire's wildlife and flora and fauna and to preserve our heritage.

In 2000, when Scarborough Borough Council began creating wet grassland on a small pocket of land it owned at Star Carr, local farmers took an interest, and now a partnership project, Cayton and Flixton Carrs, employs Tim to involve as many landowners as possible in recreating wetland habitat.

At Flixton Carr, Tim told me, "Nationally, there are few suitable sites, and it's a biodiversity priority to restore as much flood plain habitat as possible. The land is naturally wet in winter, but starts to dry out by about April. We want to extend the dampness into May and June, because it's critical for breeding waders.

"We see overwintering lapwing, golden plover and snipe – and we want them to stay on and breed. To do that, we need to tweak the water levels. A few breed now, but they're not always successful."

This is because the chicks need moist ground to feed from. If the ground dries out, the chicks starve. Tim hopes to attract curlew, snipe, lapwing and redshank. He says, "It's also good for farmland birds such as grey partridge, tree sparrow and corn bunting, as well as water vole, otter, kingfisher, marsh harrier and hen harrier. There's botanical interest too, such as water violet. It's scarce, but there's some here, and we hope to

Tim Burkinshaw checks a dip well



increase its range by keeping the ditches wet."

However, he doesn't want a nature reserve. He says, "The wetland will be farmland under grazing. We need to think in bigger terms than just nature reserves. We need to work the land profitably, as well as steward it for wildlife."

Tim's plan is to help farmers to enter Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). Under this scheme, the Government pays for agreed conservation measures, such as wetland creation. In addition, the farmer has any profit he can make from farming.

Tim comments, "HLS is a competitive scheme, but Cayton and Flixton Carr is a targeted area, and farmers who put together a sensible plan stand a good chance of getting an agreement. Cayton and Flixton was targeted because it has the greatest potential for wetland, and the land is less good for arable farming than other nearby land."

The land hasn't always been 'less good'. In Medieval times, it was a mosaic of wetlands: 'carrs' were wet woodland, while 'ings' were flood meadows. However, in 1800, the Muston & Yedingham Drainage Board was created, and began draining the land. Tim says, "They canalised the main river, the Hertford, then added side and field drains. It made good productive arable land, used for growing grain or

potatoes. But now, it's becoming increasingly challenging to do that. The peat is slumping – the level's fallen by at least half a metre. The drainage system is now struggling, and the ground gets too wet and soggy. So grazed grassland is probably what this land can do best.

So far, two farmers have HLS agreements, and Tim is working with them to create wetland habitat. They are assisted by Scarborough Conservation Volunteers, led by Tom Normandale, Scarborough Borough Council's Countryside Technical Assistant. The volunteers have installed fencing, bridges, stiles and 'dip wells' – pipes sunk vertically into the ground, used to monitor water levels.

Tim's predecessor, David Renwick, measured the dip wells for two years, and, says Tim, "There's a big seasonal change, from flooded in winter, to about 75cm (2'6") below ground in August and September."

To hold back water in summer, Tim has to have approval from the Drainage Board, and do it without affecting the neighbours. He says, "Presently, the two HLS sites are separated. It's possible to re-wet them in isolation, but we need to be quite clever about how it's engineered, so it doesn't impact on neighbouring fields. We do it by using ditches, bunds and sluices.

"We also create scrapes in the fields. It's a shallow depression that allows standing water through spring, providing the muddy fringes where chicks feed. All the work follows existing contours and wet areas, it's just accentuating what's here. We're aiming to maintain the water level at around a foot (30cm) below the surface."

Controlling water levels won't just be good for birds, it could be good for archaeologists too. During the Stone Age, Flixton and Star Carrs were islands in Flixton Lake, and digs have turned up signs of Mesolithic settlers.

Star Carr was first excavated in the 1950s, and is important because wood and bone artefacts were found. Tim says, "The important stuff is organic – wood, bone, antler, hazelnut shells. In most places, it doesn't survive, but the waterlogging here preserved it."

However, since the land was drained, says Tim, "Each summer, the peat dries out, and the archaeology decays. Archaeology is ongoing at Star Carr – they dug again last August."

Archaeology is protected by HLS agreements, so Tim is eager to sign up as many as possible. He says, "The project area is around 1000ha (approx 2,475 acre), owned by several farmers. Currently two farmers have wetland restoration areas agreed, and we're in discussion with others.

"There are challenges. With wheat prices rising, if land has potential for wheat, owners might

want to put it back to cereals. My post is about persuading landowners that this is economically viable – indeed, quite a lucrative way of earning money on land which is difficult to get crops from."

Tim is on a two-year contract funded by the RSPB, Natural England, the Environment Agency, Scarborough Borough Council, and North Yorkshire County Council.

He hopes that success could extend his contract. Success, he says, depends on restoring the wetlands, attracting breeding waders – and, crucially, demonstrating that the land can continue to be farmed, and the farmer make a living from it. "Otherwise," he says, "it's just set aside – it's not farmland. If we can demonstrate success, then I hope that adjacent landowners – who already take an interest – will join in too."

For more information about the project, see the website www.caytonflixtoncarrs.org.uk or contact Tim, Tel 01723 374079

Scarborough Conservation Volunteers work on projects throughout the borough. Contact Chairman Alastair Simpson on 01723 366833, or Tom Normandale on 01723 232323

A public footpath runs across Flixton Carr, accessed from Flixton Bridge, OS map ref TA 039 812

Below, Scarborough conservation volunteers; right, the canalised River Hertford

