



# Farming Connect Management Exchange

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England

Large Scale Rewilding

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This report has been written by Mathew Plumb, who was awarded funding in 2020 to undertake a Management Exchange to look at 'Sustainable Forestry and Solutions for Carbon Sequestration'. Due to the Covid-19 pandemic, overseas elements of the exchange were unable to proceed.

The views, opinions and statements published in this report are those of the author, and they do not necessarily reflect the views of Farming Connect.

## 1 Background

Invigorating ecosystem vitality, along with timber production, agroforestry, and eco-tourism in my 5 hectare (ha) mixed woodland unit in Monmouthshire necessitated a trip to Knepp Wildland, East Sussex.

Knepp abandoned CAP twenty years ago, and began a minimal intervention farming system based on ranching cattle, ponies, deer, and a small number of pigs. Priority was given to ecosystem services, with ecosystem recovery being the main. Latent in every action were the very clear empirical observations made on-farm, and those observations emanating from the scientific community regarding biodiversity loss and climate change.

Arable crops of winter wheat and maize, a dairy herd, the application of fertilisers, herbicides, pesticides and ploughing have all been abandoned.

## 2 Itinerary

Knepp is divided into three different farming systems, amounting to the northern, middle, and southern blocks. The southern block was the most relevant to the system of farming I am currently installing, and we conducted what, given the vegetation pulse of the last twenty years, I would ostensibly call 'a perambulation'. The age and composition of the woody plants now flourishing in this block being scrubland advanced enough to impress on the imagination a burgeoning, predominantly wild sown woodland system.



England will curtail the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) in 2028. Wales will see the removal of the Single Farm Payment (SFP) in 2021. Knepp receives 14% of their gross annual income from BPS and have future proofed the farm to transition to Environmental Land Management (ELM) without any anticipated difficulty.

Coincidence of positive outcome from a low intervention, ranch style system has facilitated Knepp's lowered reliance on BPS, and arises, in part, from a requirement of BPS to declare Permanent Ineligible Features (PIF) and Temporary Ineligible Features (TIF).

Permanent features specific to Knepp are early mature, with mature Oak trees being keystone species that support masses of life.

Temporary features pertain to brakes of bramble and more advanced scrub that are the prelude and consistent features of a healthy woodland frequented by large herbivores. It's a habitat that echoes back along to a shadowy, indefinite vista of our imagination.

Coincidence of positive outcomes manifests in the introduction of white stork, now nesting in mature Oak, that has already attracted 30,000 visitors to Knepp this year; a footfall that make use of paid car parking, a pop-up cafe, and the farm shop.

TIF at Knepp, specifically those brakes of bramble that now support swallow, have driven a population increase in Purple Emperor Butterfly, which, when combined with the anticipation of seeing other endangered and recovering organisms, gives rise to a truly enthralling safari experience.

Most experienced land managers are well used to the site of fallow deer, but for the reason of expectation, suddenly seeing a flash of antlers hurtling through brakes of scrub, a glint of eye, the rest of the herd consigned to invisibility, is a tantalising thrill.

Evidence of rootling by Tamworth sows, for someone who has never seen a full-grown Tamworth, and they have also introduced Kunekune onto their land unit, increased anticipation and excitement, which, when passing through an old hedge line, entirely disappeared when confronted by the sight of a Longhorn cow suckling her calf, the rest of the family unit only metres away behind another hedge line. Such a restful, natural meeting, I felt quite bad later that evening to have forgotten all about the Tamworths!

Stopping in blazing sun on hard packed clay, the grass turning to lint, Charlie Burrell drew the attention of the group to minute holes in the ground. Barely a millimetre wide, the burrows of sweat bees were all around us. These fascinating insects play a role in nourishing the health of the ecosystem that ploughing, pest and weed control destroy - the small stuff that scales the whole system up.

### 3 Next Steps

Unequivocally, the most important lesson I have taken away from Knepp is how much we need to drive and derive public goods under Sustainable Land Management. To best do this, accessibility needs to increase. Bringing the public onto my unit, providing accommodation, refreshments, experiences and education that are derived from an improvement of ecological services is good for ecology and good for people.

In April 2021, I intend to open a four-pitch camp site in one coupe of my woodland. Each pitch will have a serviced compost toilet with rainwater shower and will cost £40 per pitch per night

(maximum four people per pitch). This is the most value for money investment I can currently make, and it works really well at Knepp. Offering a charcoal and coppicing course, nets of logs, bags of charcoal, breakfast ingredients, and takeaway stew in the evening will all add value.

Installing green corridors between the farm and woodland units through farm clusters is essential to attempt to mitigate climate change and ecosystem collapse. Without employing this system of land management, the future of life on this planet is distressingly bleak.

In terms of public goods and economic resilience, I am concerned that farm units in Wales are not ready to comfortably transition to SLM and take the hit of SFP being repealed so suddenly in 2021.

## 4 Key Messages to the industry

1. Drive the change - low intervention systems are the future.
2. Landscape welfare - only harmonious practices are sustainable.
3. Connectivity - connecting the landscape through connecting farm and woodland units.
4. Accessibility is crucial – people are taking a keener, more involved interest in how food is being produced and the impact food production has on the landscape and ecosystems - involve the community.
5. Productivity and quality – productivity should lower as quality and price rises.