

Farming Connect Management Exchange

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Topics: Low Input Farming, Organic Farming, Herbal Leys, Holistic Management and Regenerative Farming.

Countries and places I visited:

Brittany October 2018

England: Cotswolds September, December 2018, Worcester February 2019

Background

I farm in partnership with my parents in Myddfai in the Brecon Beacons. Esgairllaethdy is a hill beef and sheep farm of 160 acres and grazing rights on the adjoining common. We currently run 500 ewes and 150 ewe lamb replacements and around 80 head of cattle. A mix of Angus x & Hereford x stores and a growing herd of Highland sucklers. Traditionally we would be using a fair bit of fertilizer every year and spray off fields pre reseeding. Going forward I would like to cut out bagged fertilizers and chemicals. My exchange visits were targeted at farms that did not use any of these. By visiting these farms, I was hoping to learn more about how to grow grass and manage the farm in a more environmentally friendly way. This is what customers are asking when I sell lamb at the Farmer's Market.

Itinerary

Like a lot of journeys, I found myself changing my destination along the way. Much of this was down to farmers I met on my exchange visits. Especially Nuffield Scholars, Geraint Powell in particular.



HONEYDALE FARM

My first visit in September took me to Honeydale Farm in the Cotswolds. Honeydale is owned by Ian Wilkinson of Cotswold Seeds. Here I met up with Sam Lane the farm manager. Sam explained how Ian Wilkinson bought a struggling arable farm with the intention to transform it into grassland farm and a research and Education Centre with the environment at the heart of every

decision. Here they are big believers in herbal leys. By growing herbal leys, they are transforming the soils back into productive land. Nitrogen fixing, deep rooting, diverse plant species and with the reintroduction of livestock are improving fertility and water retention of the soils. Bee hives, orchards and ponds are attracting wildlife and insects in turn helping the biodiversity. With a deep rooting, diverse mix of seeds Sam explained how these herbal leys also play a big part in carbon sequestration. While I was at Honeydale a number of other people turned up from different environmental bodies to learn more of what was going on there. This will educate others about the benefits of herbal leys.



GERAINT POWELL



Geraint Powell a Nuffield Scholar met me at Honeydale. Geraint's topic for his Nuffield Scholarship was 'Sustainable grazing strategies that meet ecological demands'. Geraint highlighted the benefit of herbal leys in livestock production. From Honeydale we travelled to where Geraint farms nearby to see how he has implemented herbal leys in a Stewardship Scheme and how it's benefitting his flock of 4000 ewes and 50 head of cattle. Finishing lambs on herbal leys with good daily liveweight gains (DLWG) was impressive on the Cotswold's brash. Geraint and his business partner are tenant farmers, they manage the land for wealthy land lords that take all the BPS and Agri environment payments. Making a profit from grass is their only source of income and Geraint says herbal leys plays a big part in his business. He also says that if we keep farming as most farmers are doing now it's basically a race to the bottom. With changing perception from the public and climate issues, we as farmers have to adapt and change to survive. Having wealthy landowners that take huge payments and don't re invest in the soils or the communities will benefit no one eventually.



3LM HOLISTIC MANAGEMENT



My next part of my Management Exchange was a 3 day Holistic Management course at Esgairllaethdy, where I hosted Christopher Cooke from 3LM, part of the Allan Savory Institute UK. Holistic Management, to put it in simple terms, is to look at the bigger picture of everything you do within your business. Making a profit, working with the environment, animal welfare, human health and wellbeing, communities' wellbeing and social aspects and quality of life must be considered with everything we as farmers do. Holistic planned grazing is a key tool in livestock management and soil and grassland management. Christopher explained the need to study the 4 ecosystem processes:

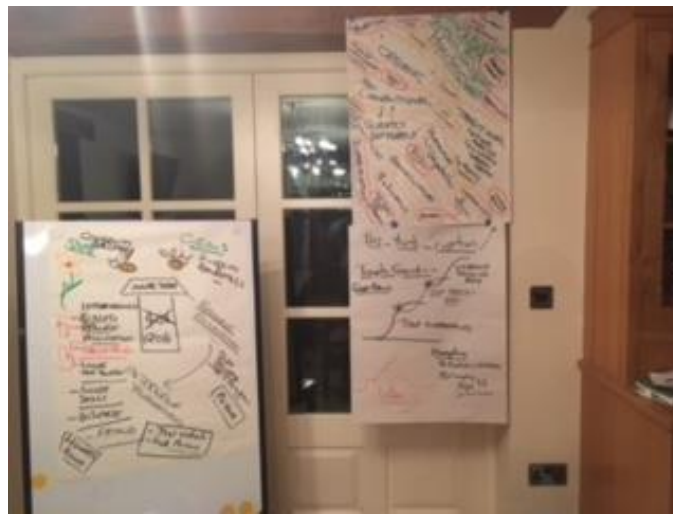


Water Cycle: Water is a finite resource and needs to be cycled effectively. Every drop of rain that falls on the land must go into the land and not run off taking soil and nutrients with it or be evaporated. Water should enter the atmosphere via plant growth or move through the soil into natural underground storage.

Mineral Cycle: The movement of mineral nutrients from soil to plant to animals and back to the soil. Plants take up nutrients from the soil and animals and re-cycle nutrients back to the soil either by eating or trampling the plants.

Energy Flow: The flow of energy from the sun to green growing plants, which convert the energy through photosynthesis-the food that fuels all life.

Community Dynamics: The more complex and diverse communities become, the more stable populations tend to be. Biodiversity is really important.



GUEZENOC FAMILY KERLOUAN BRITTANY



In October I travelled to Brittany, France to visit George Guezenoc and his family. George Guezenoc is an organic vegetable and arable farmer. He is president of the organic society in

Brittany. The family market their vegetables through the Prince de Bretagne Cooperative. George and his son Leo and his daughter Aurore explained how they manage to grow a very successful crop of vegetables and cereals without artificial fertiliser and chemicals. Crop rotations is the key for pest control and growing legumes is how they put nitrogen into their soils. They have an agreement with an organic dairy farmer for farmyard manure (FYM) in exchange for cereals. FYM, legumes and seaweed are important to soil fertility and the crop rotation is important for pest control and also soil fertility and health. George explained that for every pest there are around 1700 predators, if chemical sprays are used, they destroy predators and soil health and human health!!!





Aurore took me to visit an organic dairy farm that they exchange FYM for cereals. The Morvan family use clovers and herbal leys in their pastures to grow more grass and better, quality forage. They grow quality maize without artificial inputs too. They, like others I've visited, are convinced that artificial fertilisers and chemicals destroy soil health and crop production. The Morvan Family increased their farm size from 30 Ha to 150 Ha through their savings on fertiliser and chemical costs and an organic bonus on the milk price. Three people provide the labour and they are installing three robotic milking machines, the idea being that the robot would free up time that they could spend with the family and enjoy their free time, which the French think is their number one priority. Organic farmers and under 40 year olds get 50% grant for certain investments and machinery.





ROB RICHMOND



In December, I travelled to Cirencester to visit Rob Richmond a previous Nuffield Scholar. Manor Farm is an organic dairy farm of 850 acres tenanted land (500 pasture 350 woodland). Rob is milking 300 Friesians/Shorthorns and there are 200 young stock for replacements all wintered outside. Rob has an organic and antibiotic free contract with OMSCO. Rob employs one fulltime person. If any animal needs antibiotics it will automatically leave his herd. Only three cows have left his herd since he been on an antibiotic free contract. Rob manages to keep his cows out all year round on conserved grazing and brassicas. No other supplement feeding would be used apart from some

wholecrop bales in extreme weather (drought). Machinery and housing costs are minimal, slurry isn't an issue.



By conserving grass rather than harvesting Rob says he saves on contracting costs and the feed is always in front of the animals by moving an electric fence daily. Allowing grass to grow for a longer period allows deeper root depth which means that in dryer summers the grass can source water from deep in the ground. This in turn means he can grow more grass year on year. The conserved grass is of a higher value than hay. Herbal leys have been introduced recently and they seem to help with growing more grass as they have deeper

roots and in the wet weather help with drainage. Bale pods of straw are used for bedding areas for cattle over winter and by calving time there is a good clean area for calving on. These bale pods also satisfy the public as they can see the cattle are comfortable in the wet winters. Rob pointed out that we must work with nature not against it.



ROB HAVARD



February 2019 I travelled to Droitwich, Worcestershire To visit Rob Havard at Phepson Farm. Rob's system would be described as regenerative farming. He is farming 170 Ha of grassland with 90 pedigree Angus cows. The bulls and heifers are sold finished to ABP. Pedigree bulls are also sold for breeding.





He is also a fulltime ecologist with Natural England. Rob does deferred grazing and mob grazing this enables him to build up organic matter and soil health. He splits large fields into smaller paddocks with electric fences. The paddocks are grazed for 2-4 days then rested for around 60 days and while some would be ready to graze after 20 days some would be left for up to 100 days.



After a few years of his system Rob now manages to outwinter all his cattle on his heavy clay ground, he says that by growing the grass for longer before grazing the plants have deeper roots to help with drainage which also enables the plants to find more minerals for the animals. In the winter hay bales are rolled out into the newly grazed paddock At a ratio of 20 cows per bale. This hay not only feeds the cattle but also acts as nitrogen for the soil. Rob will buy hay in but only from known sources as he particular what seeds he wants to introduce to his land. Bale pods of hay are used in extreme weather and weaning time. Cattle will have access to around 8 bales just placed in a small area then once they have been eaten cattle are moved to the next section of field always behind an electric fence. This is where the calf weaning process starts. It also gives him some free time if he needs go away.



The herbal leys play a big part of Rob Havard's system as they help with keeping his animals healthy and a diverse plant system is important in livestock production. Rob explained that rest is important to grow more grass, his theory is graze a third, trample a third and leave a third and then rest it. Rest is the important part.

AUORE GUEZENOC



April, I welcomed Aurore Guezenoc to Esgairllaethdy. Aurore is the daughter of George Guezenoc that I visited in Brittany in October. Due to work commitments and difficult weather in Brittany with it being a busy time of year for them on their farm George was unable to come as well. As Aurore helps run and works on the family farm and was also the interpreter when I visited Brittany, she was more than a valuable source of knowledge and information. Aurore explained to me how they control weeds in organic vegetable and cereal production which was relevant to me at the time as I was about to start preparing my previous winter brassicas fields for this coming year's Glastir unsprayed cereal and pulses option, my fodder beet field and my herbal ley reseedling. Aurore suggested I would cultivate the fields (rotavate) at least 3 times before planting seeds, leaving a gap of 7-10 days between passes. They called this false seeding as you prepare the field for sowing but then they would cultivate once again, weather dependent. The idea is that you have a clean weed free seed bed without the need to use herbicides. Aurore explained that using herbicides and pesticides destroys the insect life in the soil that is so important to the biodiversity and reminded me what her father told me in Brittany, for every 1 pest there are around 1700 predators. She advised me to source FYM from other low input farmers if I didn't have enough FYM myself rather than purchase artificial bagged fertiliser as that would be acidic and reduce my pH whereas FYM is neutral. Liming is important to get the soils to the correct pH for vegetable production and she said that in Brittany they are lucky as they have soils with pH of 7 naturally there.



While Aurore was here, we were busy lambing and I took advantage of her help, in turn educating her on the production of sheep farming. We also took the time out to show bit more of the local area and the terrain, a visit to Llynfan Fach was one of the destinations.



WHAT DID I LEARN FROM THE MANAGEMENT EXCHANGE?

The main thing I've learned is that doesn't matter where I went farmers were happy to share their knowledge and passion of what they believed in and what they are achieving.

The soil is the most important thing on any farm, a healthy soil can be the difference between profit and loss. We shouldn't get so hung up about just N P and K as the pH, trace element and mineral content is also important. Soil organic matter must be looked after. Artificial bagged fertiliser is acidic and drops the pH of soils rapidly. This is something that worries me, are we being influenced by large chemical and fertiliser companies and reps to spend more and get less in return?

Working with nature not against it is the only we can achieve long term success.

MY NEXT STEPS

I've already reseeded some of my brassica fields with herbal leys. To date I haven't used any chemicals or fertiliser in my reseeds. Rather than making second crop big bale haylage last September I conserved the grass and grazed with cattle in the winter reducing winter housing costs. Also, one field was used as a flushing paddock for 500 ewes for ten days pre tupping and those fields have recovered very well in the spring in terms of grass growth and how quickly they dried up.

KEY MESSAGE TO THE INDUSTRY

If you get the opportunity apply for the Management Exchange and go explore. Challenge yourself to learn something different and get out of your comfort zone. Look after your soils they are the most important tool on your farm. Work with nature not against it. Look at the bigger picture not just whatever you are doing. Everyday is a school day and never assume you know everything as we farmers tend to think. Finding the sweet spot between biodiversity and productivity is key.

I would like to thank everyone that made my Management Exchange possible, my hosts, my family, Farming Connect and especially the Nuffield Scholars (Geraint Powell and Richard Tudor) that pointed me in the right direction and gave me contacts.

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