

## **A walk on the wild side**

Cholderton Estate

### Thoughts on the Future of Farming

Dame Helen Gosh, head of the national Trust has made a welcome opening gambit in the forthcoming debate on the future of agriculture in the UK. Perhaps Brexit will give opportunities for a greener future, but we all need to try and promote our sustainable methods so that instead of being regarded by the industry as a small group of eccentrics, we are recognised as exemplars and leaders in a new green future for Britain.

For too long the farming industry has been represented by organisations which are undemocratic and which have failed to safe guard the interests of much of their membership. The consequent cataclysmic decline in the numbers of farmers and farm workers in the last 50 years is evidence enough. The catch words of efficiency, rationalisation and productivity are the mantra espoused to excuse this, but no thought has been given to those displaced country people whose skills have been lost on a tide of mechanisation.

However, despite the huge increases in productivity achieved, farmers' incomes have declined year on year for decades. Many farmers believed that amalgamation of holdings and investing heavily in modern equipment would improve their incomes. Instead, they find that with increasing cost and declining prices they are trapped in a cycle, which akin to Tantalus, reaching for fruit that he is unable to pluck, they cannot escape.

The advocates of industrialised farming are always keen to promote the attractions of high yields but never the hidden costs of bio diversity decline, soil depletion and pollution of both air and water. The adverse effects on global warming are brushed aside yet the worldwide use of nitrogenous fertiliser, upon which the entire edifice relies, adds some 8000 million tonnes of Carbon Dioxide to the atmosphere every year.

Dame Helen's intervention is well timed. Brexit will by necessity open Britain's doors to agricultural commodities and it could be that much can be produced more efficiently and with less chemical intervention than that which is normal here.

Now indeed is the time to return to sustainable integrated systems in agriculture where nutrients are provided by leguminous crops and by livestock. Rotations where different crops are grown sequentially with some exploited by farm animals and others being cereals for human consumption, have to be the future. Not only is bio diversity fostered but also soil quality embellished and CO2 emissions minimised.

Farmers and agricultural students need to be encouraged to take this path to step back from this industrial monoculture where the only beneficiaries are the multi-national companies who manufacture the fertilisers and pesticides upon which the entire un-sustainable system depends. Dame Helen is right; the subsidy system must be reset to encourage wildlife to redress the evils of industrial agriculture and offer a future for country people in what was once, but hopefully will be again, our green and pleasant land.

Henry Edmunds FRES

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