



FARMING IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS: CASE STUDY SERIES



Shropshire Hills
National Landscape

Neil Brown & Family New House Farm, Hayton's Bent, Ludlow



INTRODUCTION

Neil and his family farm their 300 acres in the Shropshire Hills. He is the third generation farming his land and is a member of the Clee View Farmers group.

He credits his father for being supportive of his management approach on the farm:

"Dad's very open really. He's just keen for me to try anything. He's never held me back at all."

Neil is moving into his second year of developing a rotational grazing system. Although he explains that the journey began in 2019 when New House became a strategic farm with AHDB (Agriculture and Horticulture Development Board) on a four year plan. This included working with a mentor on grazing management and using EID (electronic identification) with the livestock. This sparked Neil's interest in taking a different approach to grazing and splitting up field to build rest into the system within his largest block.

He's noticed that the amount and quality of the grass has improved and that he's seeing fewer weeds as the landscape has recovered. Weed pressure is often a worry when starting this transition, but as soil health improves the number of weeds decrease. By finishing the cattle primarily on grass, Neil has noticed how healthy and well they look.

THE SHIFT TO ROTATIONAL GRAZING

Neil knows that the regenerative farming movement is taking off, and he's well aware of the arguments against it:

"To be fair, a lot of people wouldn't probably even consider splitting fields up with electric fences. They don't want the work and the hassle of that. But for me, trying to manage the grass better and giving that a go is definitely a win."

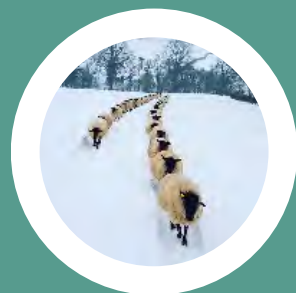
He's had a positive experience with his rotational grazing efforts, seeing an improvement in soil health, wildlife and biodiversity and his animals. As Neil puts it, ***"it's about more than just grass."*** By taking a more regenerative approach, he's reducing synthetic fertilizer inputs and relying more farmyard manure, and has seen improvement in soil organic matter.

Neil has felt this approach has been working well at New House Farm, and he's an advocate for people to give it a try.

AT A GLANCE

"We lamb 800 ewes. We have 35 suckler cows."

We finish all our stock through to fattening. We're predominantly grass here. We're in the SFI scheme, so we've just put in about three quarters of the farm into herbal leys."



NEW HOUSE FARM

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SALES AND DIVERSIFICATION

The beef is currently all sold into market as deadweight through ABP Food Group, with the sheep sold half at market and half from the abattoir.

This method of selling is straightforward for a farm like Neil's, whereas direct selling does present challenges, such as logistics, finding the markets, where and how to sell, as well as butchery.

While Neil has never sold directly to consumers, New House Farm also operates a holiday let, for which Neil sees an opportunity to link into the farm business by offering home-grown lamb as a part of the rental offer.



FARMING IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES (FIPL)

Neil has been working with the FiPL programme to split a 40 acre field into eight paddocks with the option of splitting them again in half with moveable electric fencing. This was designed as a rotational grazing system to manage the grass more effectively. This has also included planting 20 in-pasture trees to secure the future shelter and shade for the livestock in the paddocks.

This project was ambitious because it was located on the furthest point away from the farm, which meant that it had no mains water. While there are two dingles running along each side of the main field block, these were fenced off to improve water quality and protect the banks from being poached by the cattle.

The FiPL funding enabled the installation of a 5,000 litre underground tank to extract water from under a layer of rock. This was equipped with a solar pump to pump water up into a second larger 10,000 litre tank at the highest point of the field with gravity feeding the water down into temporary water troughs in the paddocks.

The programme has also funded the installation of 'leaky dams' as a natural flood management technique. These use woody materials to slow down and temporarily store water in streams and rivers, reducing downstream flood peaks and mimicking natural processes.

CONSERVATION

In addition to running the business and managing the livestock, environmental systems are an essential part of operations.

The role of water management on the farm has become an important consideration as the climate has brought changes to the weather.

Neil has been working with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust to install ponds for habitat creation.

As he's made changes to infrastructure, he's observed changes in biodiversity. As an example, fending off water courses has helped to create wildlife corridors, with habitats just growing up naturally now in the dingles.

"It's quite amazing to see really, compared to what it was before, where the cattle were going in and poaching it."

