

# GRASSLAND & MUCK PREVIEW

Managing grassland under environmental stewardship agreements can be a challenge. **Joanne Pugh** finds out how working with Natural England and using the right machinery has turned things around.

## All pulling together for a common cause

**W**hen grazing rights on an estate near St Albans, Hertfordshire, went out to competitive tender just under two years ago, it was for a block of land in need of attention.

Aside from a small area of permanent pasture, the 345-hectare (850-acre) estate was entered into arable reversion in 2005, as the resident family had wanted to restore the land to its previous parkland glory, replacing crops with grassland over three years and even using GPS and old maps to replant trees exactly where they stood decades ago.

The land was entered into the Countryside Stewardship Scheme (CSS) – under one of the last agreements before the advent of ELS/HLS – but the grassland mixes planted as part of the scheme failed to thrive.

The agreement required traditional seed mixes of meadow grasses, fescues, dogtail and cocksfoot, with no modern rye-grass varieties allowed. However, a combination of what was in the seed mix and a reservoir already in the soil, meant cocksfoot quickly dominated.

Although good in drought situations, the cocksfoot made the sward very spiky, discouraging sheep from putting their heads down and grazing.

Without the pressure from



Team approach (left to right), David Canty, David Day, Rob Pratt and Jamie Burrows.

heavy grazing, spurs from the cocksfoot died down, creating a thatch in the bottom of the sward which, combined with a lot of moss, made it impossible for more palatable grass varieties to come through.

Yet this did not put off Rob Pratt, who farms at Dunstable and takes on many blocks of grassland in the area to support his 2,500 breeding ewes.

The prospect of 187ha (462 acres) in one block, recently fenced under the CSS agreement, and laid out to facilitate

rotational grazing, was a huge draw, even given the quality of the grazing and the fact it would have to be managed with strict guidelines from both Natural England and the landlord.

“You can’t beat a big block of land, all fenced, but what was underfoot was in potential need of improvement,” says Mr Pratt, explaining that he runs 810ha (2,000 acres) of winter grazing but loses quite a bit in the summer to ‘the haymaking barons’.

### Potential

The estate is managed by Strutt and Parker, and farm consultant David Canty discussed potential improvements with all would-be applicants.

He was concerned about the grass and willing to negotiate with Natural England about obtaining derogations for cultivation

work and stocking rates/times. But he also knew he needed the right stock and person to get involved in this process.

Much of the ground is stone over gravel on very thin soil and, with arable crops taking a lot of nutrients out of the land for several years, there was little in the soil to support grass growth.

Allied with the cocksfoot and moss problem, and the fact traditional parkland grasses are ‘not overly palatable’ for modern breeds, Mr Canty wanted a grazier willing to overlook the immediate grazing availability and look to the future.

He also wanted someone with a lot of sheep, as a low stocking rate was partly responsible for letting the cocksfoot get out of hand in the first place.

In September 2009, Mr Pratt was successful in the tendering



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The He-Va 6m roll with harrow and seeder played a crucial role in improving the grassland.



Sheep are a vital grassland management tool, grazing fields down hard. PICTURES: Tim Scrivener

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ROB PRATT

process, being awarded a 'herbage agreement' for the 187ha (462 acres).

The remainder of the 345ha (850-acre) estate (excluding game cover areas) is managed by Jamie Burrows, and a close relationship between him, Mr Pratt and Mr Canty, has evolved.

In addition to managing the estate's 35-cow herd of Longhorn cattle, Mr Burrows checks Mr Pratt's sheep for him, even undertaking routine work, such as drenching, when required.

This relationship has evolved more recently, to the extent Mr Burrows also runs some of Mr Pratt's sheep on other blocks of land he rents.

Mr Burrows also does contracting work and, when a derogation was granted by Natural England to do some cultivation on the grassland, he was asked to bring in his conventional spring tines to try and drag some of the thatch and moss out of the bottom of the sward.

But three-quarters of the way up the first field, the tines were so full of trash they were unable to drag anything else up. At this point David Day of Opico was asked to bring in a HE-VA combined 6m grass roll, harrow and seeder.

Mr Canty had his reservations, as he was worried travelling at a speed fast enough for

the harrow would move the roll too quickly, flicking up stones instead of pushing them in.

### Ripping

But, compared to the spring tines, the combi made a better job of ripping out the thatch and moss, partly because ballasts were used on the roll, to alter the weight and vary the 'aggressiveness' of the harrow.

Mr Day explains: "The tines were pulling up a lot of trash but

couldn't cope with it. They were doing too much work, pulling out more moss but not that much thatch, and it wouldn't flow through the machine."

Mr Burrows agrees, saying of the combined roll and harrow: "This machine pulls out less, but if you go back year after year it's improving it."

Mr Canty was won over, seeing the additional benefit of being able to do everything in one pass, saving on time, fuel

and labour. And Mr Pratt was so convinced he actually bought the machine, for use on several blocks of the grassland he rents.

"I was worried about a multi-functional machine because often something that does more than one job doesn't do any of those jobs particularly well," says Mr Pratt.

"But this is as good a harrow, as it is a seeder, as it is a roll. It made a big difference and things soon started to green up." ▶

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◀ Under the derogation, the machine was used on every field on the estate – both those in arable reversion and the permanent pasture.

This was mostly without anything in the seeder, although an additional derogation was given to over-sow a few fields, mostly with grass seed but also a couple with clover.

The roll and harrow was used again at the beginning of this year, dragging out more trash and aerating the soil. Everything was gone over by March 1, baring a field that lapwings had made home.

### Compaction

Another permanent pasture field, with historical ruins, had also had slightly different treatment. Here compaction issues could not be solved with a plough, due to a ban on deep cultivation, and so an Opico sward slitter was used to 10cm (4ins).

Mr Pratt uses this machine on other areas of his grassland, with the intention of slitting every two years and then using an Opico sward lifter in the third, tending to slit in spring and lift in autumn.

### Jamie Burrows

- Farms and does contracting work with his dad
- Family farm at St Albans, Hertfordshire, is 65ha (160 acres) owned plus 125ha (310 acres) rented and includes livery for 84 horses
- Numerous grazing agreements, which increasingly involve sheep provided by Mr Pratt



The family that owns the estate made moves in 2005 to restore the parkland to its original state, replacing arable crops with traditional grassland mixes.

Such an approach is not suitable on the estate, given the restrictions in place with the CSS – but Mr Pratt, Mr Burrows and Mr Canty have been impressed with how Natural England has developed a working relationship with them on the approach they have taken.

"Natural England has been really, really good – they appreciated that if the grass was a failure, the scheme would have been a failure, and that's not good for anyone," says Mr Canty, referring to the waste of taxpayers money if the estate had pulled out of CSS.

Mr Pratt adds: "Natural England appreciates it has to work for everyone. And if it works for us they'll get more acres in the future, as it overcomes the perception that Natural England stops people farming."

The future is based very much on communication between everyone involved. For example, Mr Pratt and Mr Burrows have taken to rotating the sheep and Longhorn cattle across the fields, rather than the sheep sticking to Mr Pratt's land and the cattle to the in-hand land.

### Grazed hard

They both ensure the sheep graze fields hard, to keep on top of the cocksfoot and encouraging other grass varieties, and steps are taken so sheep are both taken out and returned to fields at the right time.

Mr Pratt appreciates he has to sometimes take a knock on body condition to achieve this, but the grass is already so much better than it was, he knows it is worth it.

Mr Canty says they will have to stop grazing fields quite as

hard in the future, in line with Natural England guidelines, but they will stick to having the maximum numbers allowed.

"Stock numbers are the key," says Mr Burrows. "You have to hit it hard, then move them away when the grass needs it, and come back when the grass is young, palatable and needs grazing. If not, it's not long before you get the thatch again."

Like all the team, he has an eye on the future, knowing improvement will be over many years. He says flexibility between them is critical for this, as there is not much flexibility 'from the top', and so constant communication is maintained.

Mr Pratt agrees: "That's what makes it work – communication – from me to Jamie to David."

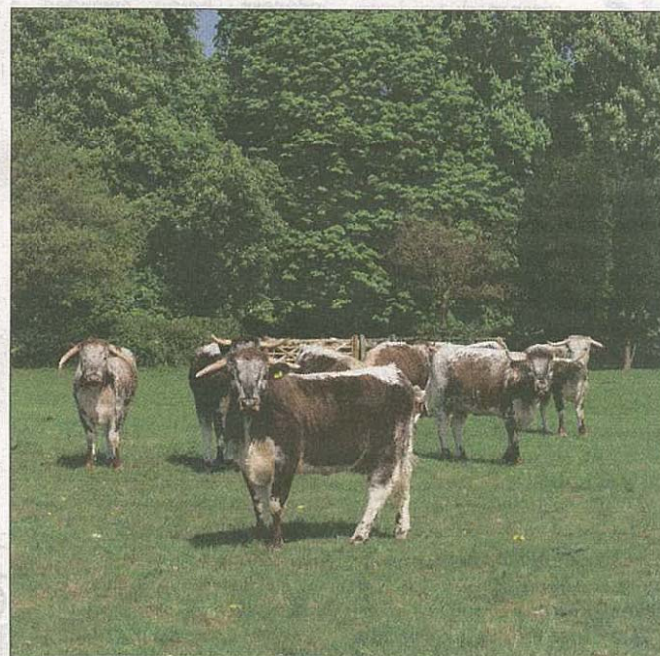
"This was a huge, huge thing to take on initially, but look how far we've already come."

### Rob Pratt

- Main farm at Dunstable, Bedfordshire, plus numerous grazing agreements
- Some cattle and arable land on the home farm, but mainly a sheep enterprise
- Lambled 2,500 breeding ewes this year, half inside and half out
- Also runs 1,200 ewe lambs and 300 ram lambs, selected for sale as breeding stock
- Ewes include 300 Highlander and 300 Primera (in conjunction with Rissington Breedline), 1,200 Hartline, 100 Charollais and 50 Suffolk
- Plans to streamline breeds in the future, with the focus on two maternal lines (Hartline and Highlander) and one terminal (Primera)



- Currently selling 500-1,000 breeding females and 300 males each year, and would like to increase this
- All lambs not retained for breeding are sold finished



The 35-cow Longhorn herd is managed by Jamie Burrows. Progeny are sold as stores.