

Back to nature

Access and the environment don't have to be a problem for farmers and landowners, argues CLA member **Gordon Hawcroft**

I am a farming CLA member in the East Riding of Yorkshire. Following the disastrous foot and mouth disease outbreak in 2001,

I took a new look at how I ran my farm and decided, among other things, that our traditional brick buildings could be renovated, greatly increasing the value of the farm.

We'd only just got on with this when Defra announced Higher Level Stewardship (HLS). This fitted our circumstances well, as our farms had been brutalised by hedgerow removal. We managed to have our bid accepted and got on with putting our scheme in place.

It has always surprised me that some farmers are dissatisfied with their role as countryside stewards, oblivious to beauty and wildlife. They seem to be forever trying to expand while being reluctant to plant even a single tree, denying the undeniable peril our wildlife faces.

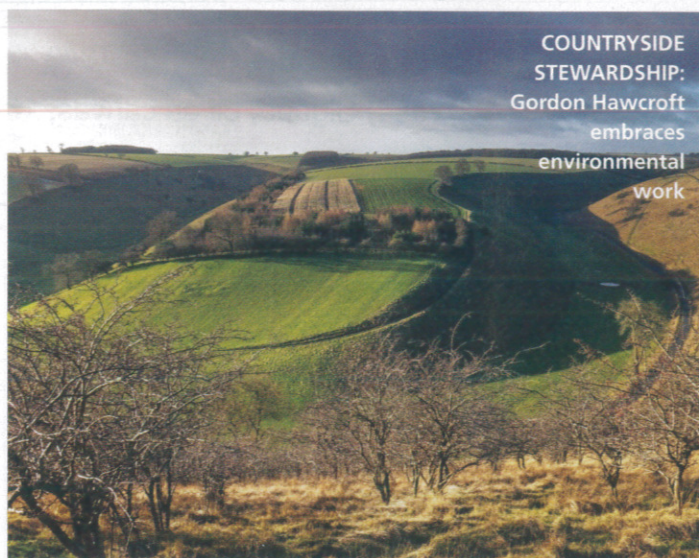
Many other farmers have embraced HLS and found an unexpected pleasure in what they had previously ignored. I am one of these. I approached HLS as a new enterprise.

I met many forward-thinking farmers on the HLS journey and, surprisingly, many were hoping to diversify with HLS as a starting point. Shooting, fishing, tourism, property, food, drink and many more natural extensions to our trade, all having the common theme of recognising the treasure of the East Riding itself.

As a result of my work with rural tourism I was asked to sit on the steering committee of the Yorkshire Wildlife Trust (YWT) Nature Triangle to offer a farmer's perspective. This body has made enough noise and rattled enough cages for there to be some spin-offs: tourists like to walk and ride and the connection with the East Riding Countryside Access team was made. It soon became obvious that they have a massive job to do with 1,592

kilometres of public rights of way (PROW) to look after. It was evident to me that this work could be greatly hampered by the obstructive attitude of a few landowners.

I was asked if I would represent farming interests on the Joint Local Access Forum for the East Riding of Yorkshire and Kingston upon Hull (JLAF), and I was appointed in 2012.



There are roughly 80 Local Access Forums in the country and they were created under the Countryside and Rights of Way Act 2000. Their statutory role is to provide independent advice to a range of public bodies, including local authorities, on issues affecting countryside access and public rights of way. Forums have an influential role to play, and the public bodies we advise must have due regard to the advice we give them.

It wasn't until I joined JLAF that I realised how little I knew about local access, an issue that seems to worry us landowners. Since I joined JLAF, I have found that working with walkers, riders, cyclists and other members with varied rural interests has been a fascinating experience. The Forum is full of wisdom and knowledge and love of the East Riding

countryside and I have learned much. JLAF has given me an ideal platform to put the views of landowners across, helping to strengthen mutual understanding and respect.

In the 1930s popular interest grew in the countryside and it was felt the public should have greater access, but this was seldom accepted by private landowners who were slow to recognise that the vast and ancient network of paths were here long before the enclosures.

In 1949 the National Parks and Access to the Countryside Act set up the National Parks and local authorities were given the task of surveying, recording and mapping rights of public access. In recent times Parliament has extended public access and transformed how it is cared for, and the Government's recent White Paper on the Natural Environment has set out plans to help reconnect more people with nature.

In the Parish of Holme on Spalding Moor there are around 3,000 people. It's the biggest parish in the East Riding. In the years after World War Two, more than 100 farms employed countless men, women and children. Today there are fewer than 25 farms and much agriculture is controlled from outside the village. These numbers follow the national pattern where farmers make up a fraction of one percent of the population yet occupy 90 percent of the countryside. Our role is crucial.

It is natural that people will want to venture along the footpaths and bridleways; we need to accept that this is unstoppable. If we become proactive we will be able to help and guide this access; if we are Canute-like we will have changes forced on us.

As landowners we must step up and match these new expectations. They should be our expectations too. We can be a major force in a fruitful process.