

Sustainable Farming Incentive Pilot Journal

Pitchcott Hill Farm

SBI: 200526485

Date 3/9/22

I have been busy preparing for PitchShift and then welcoming all the participants and facilitators to the farm.

This is the third PitchShift, the first two having taken place in 2021, when the farm offered a safe space in nature for people to come together to connect following the lockdowns during the pandemic.

This year we have the opportunity to try out different sessions to shift perspectives and help people connect more deeply to themselves and to nature.

The exterior of the Hedgerow Hut is now finished and we gathered on the decking as part of a nature exploration across the farm.



5/9/22

Today I attended a CLA webinar on 'The role of landowners in delivering nature recovery'.

I was particularly struck by Marian Spain's contribution (CEO of Natural England). She noted how nature is increasingly seen as a solution to biodiversity loss, climate change, as well as the decline in health and wellbeing.

The latter is not often mentioned within the context of the former two challenges, but we can't address one without the other.

There were several other useful insights from the webinar, including on how to set up / designate a national nature reserve.

6/9/22

This morning I attended an online event about the Innovate UK Farming Innovation Programme, with info on how to apply for R&D Partnership and Feasibility projects.

It was useful for making contacts with several innovative companies interested to collaborate with farmers and landowners.

7/9/22

I have noticed how one of the few things to grow during the hot summer has been the thistles.

This is the view on to the paddocks where some of the grass is starting to recover but there are large clusters of thistles. Next year I will cut or top the thistles before they start to flower and disperse seeds.



8/9/22

This is the kitchen garden at Oakley Court / River House near Windsor

Some ideas and inspiration for the paddock area at the farm.

First though I will do a soil sample as required by the grassland soils standard of the SFI.



12/9/22

This morning I had two calls with contacts from the FIP consortium-building event.

Farmer Charlie is a company with tech solutions for small farms and are interested in some of my ideas on nature connection and I have sent them a concept document for a Climate Camp aimed at (young) people working on nature-based solutions for climate change.

I also spoke with Jamie Bartley from Unyte, a company promoting the growing and use of hemp in a variety of products and services. I have learnt how hemp is used as a (cover) crop that increases soil fertility.

I am interested to learn more about growing other medicinal plants and herbs with therapeutic uses.

I have contacted the Sustainable Soils Alliance to find out more about their Soil Carbon Code and receive their response -

The project consists of separate elements designed to address different marketplace requirements including ['Minimum Requirements'](#) that all programmes and projects should look to reach, and a community code that aims to open up the market to new and smaller players. Our work is based on new and existing research into the technical, legal, practical and behavioural aspects of soil carbon buying and selling, as well as feedback and advice from a variety of stakeholders via our workshops and online consultations.

This could be useful when considering the grassland soils standard of the SFI.

In the meantime I am supporting an SSA fundraising dinner with a voucher of the nature bathing experience that I am developing at the farm.

14/9/22



These are the sunflowers which have now come into bloom in the centre of the courtyard. I grew them from sunflower seeds that I bought from my friend Judith to support the people of Ukraine (where the sunflower has national significance). Judith was also part of the team coming together to build the Hedgerow Hut earlier in the year.

I grew the flowers from seeds in small pots and then planned to move them to different areas of the farm, but the ground was so dry and hard that the best place for them is the planter in the centre of the courtyard which is fertile and well watered.

15/9/22

Today I met with Dudley Peverill who are farm diversification consultants and based locally in Aylesbury. We walked across the farm during a full morning of discussion on the options and possibilities for land management as well as the diversification and development of the farm buildings. They will be producing a strategy report in due course.

24/9/22

I have been doing some more research into local cluster groups and have contacted the River Thame Conservation Trust who lead a project called Engaging with Farmers and also facilitate the Thame Valley Cluster group.

Meanwhile I have been considering the collaboration with the nearest farm which is Quanton Dairy, my uncle's farm to the south of Pitchcott. The grazing licence that we have arranged has been working well except that there has been much less grass than anticipated available because of the hot dry summer. The sheep have been on Big Hill for a long period and we are now discussing moving them to Little Hill. The Hedgerow Hut is in a corner of this field so I have arranged with Nigel (my uncle's farm manager) to erect a fence around it so that the sheep can be moved into this field.



I have contacted the SFI team to ask about the Working Group for Low to No input Grassland and received the following reply -

Unfortunately on this occasion we are only recruiting farmers/land managers who are in the low & no input grassland standard and have Priority Habitat Grassland and Grassland in SDA areas. The reason we are doing this is because we are potentially developing a new standard around these areas of interest.

I can see from the email chain below that you have signed up for the working group, if you are to get in and you explain your situation, as you are interested in the Priority Habitats and looking to implement them on your farm they will likely let you stay in the group and work with you to develop the standard.

I do not have any registered Priority Habitat Grassland but am working to create more biodiversity and habitat and would be keen to join this group particularly as I will be applying to extend the area of Low to No Input Grassland within the SFI Pilot to take account of the whole area with rotational grazing as well as pond restoration and wetland creation.

29/9/22

Two meetings at the farm today, the first with Rachel Gladstone-Brown, a Catchment Sensitive Farming Advisor.

We discussed some of the options available through Countryside Stewardship. She thought that some areas of the farm would be very suitable for Stewardship, whether Mid Tier or Higher Level. I told her about my plan to extend the SFI pilot across a larger area of the farm.

She was very impressed with the condition of the hedgerows and their diversity of tree and shrub species.



This is a crab apple tree which has produced a bumper crop of fruit. Last year I did not notice any apples from this tree at all. This year there are thousands. I am wondering what has changed. Has it somehow benefited from the shower that I set up inside this tree?



The shower has been hugely popular with the people staying at the farm for a wild camping experience. This is what nature connection is all about. And the tree seems to love it too.

Rachel was very interested in the balance between people and nature at the farm

She has given me details of one-to-one advice from Catchment Sensitive Farming on soil sampling / planning and water resource management.

I have been looking into options for soil testing and will initially get some samples tested with NRM for the paddocks in the grassland soils standard.



The second meeting today was with Dan Lazarou-West, the local Woodland Creation Officer from the Forestry Commission.

Dan wanted to see the farm prior to approval of Stage 1 of the Woodland Creation Planning Grant. I explained my plans to develop wood pasture alongside the wetland areas in the northern section of the farm, with initial woodland planting in southern areas.

He advised planting in small clusters as this will increase the areas of overlap between woodland and grazing which is likely to result in increased biodiversity. We also discussed areas of coppice and woodland designed in such a way so that different clusters would feature more prominently in different seasons.

The woodland will create multiple benefits including shade / shelter, effective soil and flood management, crops including timber, fruit / nuts, and social benefits including health and wellbeing.

Dan was also interested / impressed by the farm's possibilities for nature connection and wellbeing.