

## **Malvern Hills National Landscape Landowners and Managers Group Event**

### **Re-generative Agriculture – 6<sup>th</sup> November 2023 at Baston Hall, Alfrick**

This was another well attended event, with 17 landowners, graziers and farmers taking advantage of an opportunity to see how Ian Horsley has been farming re-generatively at Baston Hall, Alfrick. Despite some problems with road closures and the weather we all enjoyed the chance to listen to Ian, enjoy a sandwich lunch and to see some of his work on the ground.

#### **Notes:**

Ian farms 140 acres, at the heart of which sits Baston Hall, a beautiful Elizabethan mansion. Ian and his wife, a professional nutritionist, moved here eight years ago from a farm in Devon, with a view to using their land to provide a 'setting' for the house, which operates as a holiday rental, and to provide healthy food.

Ian was a latecomer to farming, having been an investment banker before quitting to follow his dream of farming holistically, combining traditional and modern methods to farm in an environmentally friendly way whilst making a profit. You can find out more in this podcast: <https://www.misterkindness.com/1807812/9201918>, he cites the book 'Restoration Agriculture' by Mark Shepard as his inspiration for making the change.

Since 2015 he has worked to transition from 'modern/best practice' conventional 100% sheep farming, with a pedigree performance recorded flock, to a regenerative approach with 80% cattle, 20% sheep; focussing on improving soil health, biodiversity, and 100% pasture fed meat.

#### **In summary:**

1. Ian reminded us of the 5 principles of Regenerating Farming:
  - Don't disturb the soil
  - Keep the soil surface covered. ...
  - Keep living roots in the soil. ...
  - Grow a diverse range of crops. ...
  - Bring grazing animals back to the land.
  
2. Ian brought 650 pedigree sheep up from Devon when he moved and began using the New Zealand grazing system on the farm. This rotational system is designed to provide sheep with a daily intake of high-quality grass whilst also letting the grass recover. It also avoids 'patchy' grazing which can be a feature of open stocking, where animals stay in one field for the whole grazing period. If sheep take a 'second bite' of grass they are effectively preventing re-growth and reducing root growth.

3. In 2018 the severe drought triggered a re-think as the grass was still not resilient enough to provide grass year-round. Ian began moving the sheep on a daily basis (or as often as appeared to be needed) and put more emphasis on measuring the grass growth and animal weights in order to maximise grass production and grazing benefits. The sheep learnt the routine of moving very quickly and Ian worked out the most efficient way to do this using his working dogs and 3 strand fencing on a hand reel. Sheep and cattle are regularly monitored and Ian adjusts the feeding opportunities accordingly, being careful not to allow over-feeding.
4. Water proved key to efficiency. Ian used a quad towed 500ml water bowser which he towed to the locations needed and emptied into a wide trough, with unrestricted access. He has now used grant funding to get water into each field via a standpipe.
5. Ian had bred resilient sheep, making sure that the sheep suited the land and not vice versa. Continued measuring and analysis allowed him to take a fairly ruthless approach of moving animals on if they didn't do well on the land. This is epigenetics – the idea animals respond to their environment, which might cause differences in product yields, wool quality, disease resistance etc. It is possible to carefully breed to promote good traits.
6. An inherited worm burden in the fields proved problematic, especially as he wanted to avoid chemical wormers. In 2021 Ian moved from sheep to cattle, keeping just a small rare breed flock of sheep and buying a small herd of Aberdeen Angus from a local, regeneratively grazed herd. These cows were bred for easy calving, rumen capacity and the ability to carry a calf over winter on pasture/hay alone.
7. Ian has been mob grazing sheep and/or cattle for over five years, and has out-wintered cattle for two years using bale pods, with only 30-60 days inside to coincide with an annual family holiday.. The group of visiting owners and managers then moved outside to look at the bale-pod system in practice. Ian lays out the bales in advance on a grid system which reflects how he will fence and move the animals. He currently uses 2 bales a day of his own hay for 40 cattle in low grass growth periods.

#### Questions and answers:

1.Q – Are there 'general' practices which anyone can follow?

A – There are the 5 key principles of regen farming – as above - but every farm is different and regenerative farming needs careful analysis of the farm and good planning. The choice of systems and stock which are well suited to the farm is key to success – this matching of environment and crops/stock is something many farmers don't think about enough.

2. Q – Topping – Do you top the fields?

A- Ian does topping only as needed. Topping for neatness is what he considers 'recreational tractor driving'. Thistles can be eaten by stock, are good for nature and have long roots which hold and aerate the soil. If the thistles look as though they are getting out of hand he will top before seed is set, taking care to avoid compaction by tractors. The topped material is left to feed the soil.

3. Q- Sheep foot problems – how do you avoid this in a long grass situation, where grass may be wet?

A – Ian removes sheep from the flock which seem to have hereditary foot problems, making sure that he only keeps animals which have thrived in long grass pastures. His frequent monitoring also helps him to pick up problems quickly and to move or treat sheep promptly. The use of long rooting leys helps to make sure soils drain well and animals are less likely to be in wet fields. Multi-species swards also contain plants which may act as both tonics and medicines, helping animals both to resist and recover from ailments.

4. Q – Why did you use Aberdeen Angus?

A – Ian wanted a small animal with the ability to perform well outside year round. He also took advantage of the availability of a local regenerative herd, so he knew they had been bred for environments like Alfrick. He felt strongly that cows have been good for the farm in terms of the environment and profit. By reducing time spent indoors, keeping calves at heel for longer than average and grazing almost year round he had driven costs very low and produced happy, healthy animals and good meat. He now has 48 cattle.

5. Q – There are spectacular wildflower meadows on the farm. Did you ‘add’ seed?

A – Most of the wildflower meadows are produced through grazing management but they were overseeded when he first came, using local varieties. The wildflower areas are now managed by grazing and by the use of species rich hay bale feeding, which scatters and tramples seed into the ground.

Ian is not a ‘purist,’ alongside the native wildflowers he has fields where he has sown herbal leys and bird mixes, encouraging a really wide range of birds and animals. He has also used grants to plant connecting field hedges and shade trees.

Ian is passionate about passing on his own experiences and encouraging others to farm regeneratively. He is also a regular speaker at many regenerative farming events. Find out more at <https://gartonhardy.com/about/>