



MEET THE HIGH WEALD FARMERS: HELEN & NEIL RIDGE

We recently caught up with first generation farmers Helen and Neil Ridge at Fresh Meadow Farms in Dallington, East Sussex. Having got to know them over the last few years at our local farmers market we jumped at the chance to visit their farm to shoot a short film to help promote the **Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme**, which is delivered locally by the **High Weald National Landscape team**.

More than £1.3million has been awarded so far, and with funding still available for farmers and land managers in the High Weald, I was keen to learn more about how the grants have benefited Helen and Neil's small family farm.

Farm Visit

Arriving at Fresh Meadow Farms in Dallington, East Sussex, we parked up in the farmyard and Helen and Neil invited us in for a coffee and chat.

Initially starting out with a few sheep, Helen and Neil have gradually moved to more regenerative farming practices, with the aim of improving "their bit" of East Sussex, they explained. In 2020, after trialing rotationally grazing their sheep with electric fencing, they decided to build up their holistic knowledge of regenerative farming practices.

Keen to tap into available grant schemes, they approached the High Weald National Landscape team for support and a member of the Land Management team came out to visit their farm. He advised them on a number of grants schemes available, including the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme, which funds projects that benefit climate, nature, people and place.



Kerry hill sheep



Mob grazing Hereford cattle

Applying for their first Farming in Protected Landscapes grant

After the visit, they successfully applied for a FiPL grant to attend a 12-day Holistic Management course run by 3LM, accredited by the Savory Institute.

The course was run at FarmED, an Agro-ecological learning centre based on a 107 acre mixed farm in the Cotswolds. The funding covered 100% of the course fees, said Helen - who was able to stay locally at a holiday let they own nearby. There is an option to do the course online she added but opted to do it in person, preferring the format.

"I wanted to do it at FarmED and to have the interaction with other farmers," she added.

Identifying key challenges and opportunities

The course helped Helen and Neil think more holistically about their farm and what they can do to overcome some of the key challenges they face.

"Every time I presented about our farm, one of the recurring themes was deer pressure. We've got no wildlife corridors, we've got grazing pressure, we've got fences down. We can't rotationally graze properly," explained Helen.

She described how often they would find 70 deer grazing on a 60-acre block of land surrounded by woodland. The course helped them see how they could turn a problem into an opportunity.

Neil has since trained as a Deer stalker and they now run a Venison enterprise on their farm.

"It's very satisfying turning a problem into a product and making a bit of extra income," he added.

Another hurdle Helen identified during the course was the increasing number of weeds, with thistles becoming increasingly common in all of their fields.



Deer pressure - knocking fences down



“Typically thistles are an indicator of poor drainage and everyone said we should try rotationally grazing cattle,” explained Helen.

Having added a herd of 23 Hereford cows, they have spent the last two years rotationally grazing their fields and are beginning to see the benefit, with less purple flowers. They have also noticed a greater diversity of grasses attracting more insects and pollinators.

As well as seeing positive changes to their sward and insect life, they find rotationally grazing their cattle very rewarding and have seen a marked improvement in the amount of grass they are able to grow, too.

Deer damage and applying for FiPL funding for deer management equipment

Walking around the farm Neil and Helen showed me some of the damage the deer are doing to their land. First they showed me damaged perimeter stock fences, which often result in escapee livestock.

In areas where they have coppiced Neil pointed out where the deer have nibbled the new shoots, preventing the regeneration of the woodland. He also showed me where they are rubbing on the trees and debarking – which is starting to affect the growth of the chestnut.

To help manage the growing number of deer and get their Venison enterprise up and running, Helen and Neil applied for further FiPL funding for some essential bits of equipment.

This included three high seats to go on their land, a deer extraction sled, a chiller for hanging the deer, a deer skinner and a freezer for storing the meat to allow them to sell at local farmers markets.



Neil sat in one of his deer high seats

Key Learnings and advice to other High Weald Farmers

Both Helen and Neil said they wished they'd thought more about the infrastructure before buying stock and starting to rotationally graze.

"We underestimated the impact the deer would have on electric fencing." This was a problem when rotationally grazing the sheep as three to four strands of wire are needed and the deer often tangle this. They've had a lot more success rotationally grazing cattle, mainly due to the fact you can get away with a single strand of electric wire, which the deer either go under or over.

Despite the occasional disaster with electric fencing, they both find a real pleasure in rotationally grazing their animals and recommend farmers attend the Holistic Management course.

"The course really gave us the confidence to continue what we were doing and try some other stuff too, because we knew we were moving in the right direction. It doesn't always work but that's the learning," said Helen.

Next steps

Interested in doing a project like this on your land? Funding from Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme is still available until 2025 - visit highweald.org/fip/ to learn more and fill out the short online enquiry form. A member of the High Weald National Landscapes team will then get in touch for an informal chat, and can even come out for a visit if required. You will be supported through developing your project and submitting your application.

More information

Looking for more inspiration for your project? Checkout some of the other farmers we visited in our Meet the High Weald Farmer series. All of them have benefited from the Farming in Protected Landscapes programme.



Venison carcass hanging in their new chiller