



# Cow Hall Farm Maintaining the heritage of a traditional organic farm



## INTRODUCTION

Mark and Joy Measures have lived and farmed at Cowhall since 2000, when it was inherited from Joy's Aunt and Uncle.

***"It is such an exceptional farm in that Dan and Dorothy, Joy's uncle and aunt, just loved the wildlife and didn't think that they should be using chemicals or fertilisers or anything else on the farm. And so we were able to take it on, get it certified as organic in 2001 and maintain the farming system rather similarly to how he had run it since the 1930s. That underlies quite a lot of what we're doing here - maintaining a traditional farming system and conserving all the wildlife that goes with that."***

Mark has worked in organic farming for nearly 40 years, with many years as an independent organic consultant. Joy leads 'Land, Life and Livelihoods', which works with local people and agencies (Environment Agency, Natural England, Defra, Shropshire Hills AONB, Shropshire Council) to achieve conservation of soil, water, plant and animal life and the very special landscape and rural community. There has been recent emphasis on care of the Clun/Teme river catchment for the benefit of all.

They have blended professional careers in organic food systems and ecology with farming.

## WORKING IN PARTNERSHIP

Historically, Mark and Joy farmed cattle and sheep and cultivated small areas of arable crops for the farm and seed potatoes for market. Recently Chris and Lynn Parker have joined them as share farmers. This has meant working together to adapt the management of the farm.

***"Most of the sheep have in fact, gone to a new farm and we're focusing on pedigree rare-breed traditional Herefords as breeding stock for other farms to buy in-calf heifers. We've got about 25 cows and all their progeny."***

Recognising that the upland environment is challenging from a profitability perspective, the change to cattle was both a business decision and something that aligned with Chris and Lynn's interests.

The traditional Hereford breed was farmed by Uncle Dan and maintained because of its popularity for farms grazing permanent pastures, and those with retail outlets, because they prefer to work with a smaller carcass. Additionally, wildlife sites need cattle that will thrive under upland or more difficult grazing conditions, and will finish off grass without the need for concentrates.

## LAY OF THE LAND

With elevation ranging from 800 to 1400 feet (245 – 425 metres), the farm is mostly grassland, with much permanent pasture. Some is ancient hay meadow with extremely high botanical diversity. Hill-top fields at Cow Hall have been kept in a historic arable rotation, which provides feed for the farm in a circular system. While the crops vary from year to year, any cereal crops are usually under-sown with a mixed herbal ley to fix nitrogen and support soil health.



## COWHALL FARM

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## WILDLIFE

Some Iron age farmstead remains exist on the lower valley portion of the property, which means that it has likely been farmed for over two thousand years, and the botanical diversity reflects this. The various ecosystem zones are managed for wildlife and species diversity. The landscape includes meadows, with notable species including orchids, and helleborines. The wetter land hosts a range of wetland species. The farm includes about 12 acres of original Clun Forest rough pasture with scrub and rushy land:

*“That’s interesting because there are only a few undrained and unimproved sites in the Clun Forest that are like that.”*

The farm provides lots of habitat types, which is credited for the curlew, which get ringed as they hatch, as well as Nightjar, Woodcock, Dippers, Flycatchers, Snipe and Kingfishers. Despite maintaining the traditional model of the farm, Mark worries about bird and insect numbers, since there are so many external factors which are impacting them.



## FARMING IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES

Mark and Joy are big advocates of the Farming in Protected Landscapes (FiPL) programme.

***“It’s been great. It really has. It’s one of the few schemes that gives you flexibility and common sense and somebody local to talk to.”***

***“We’ve done a range of things... We’ve been hedge planting, mainly reinstating some rather dilapidated hedges. We’ve got three new ponds, four leaky dams, quite a bit of tree planting.”***

In addition to the landscape features, FiPL has supported with capital for infrastructure like water troughs to give water access to some of the areas of permanent pasture, a cow brush and some cattle handling equipment.

***“The farm itself is so exceptional from a wildlife point of view. FiPL gives us the opportunity to do more in terms of managing it in a more focused way, to deliver on the wildlife side.”***

Mark and Joy intend to apply once again, which will be their fourth round with the grant scheme. The farm has plans for further hedging, and subdivisions of its fields which will help target the grazing to suit the botanical priorities. Also for clay lining of an existing pool and action to protect curlew.

## CHALLENGES & OPPORTUNITIES

For a relatively small hill farm, Mark explains that the ‘economies of scale’ presents a big challenge. At Cow Hall, this was the case for their small flock of 80 Clun ewes. The limitation within the arable system was that with only 30 acres the area for seed potatoes in any one year was limited to 6 acres; insufficient to compete with much larger organic farms in Scotland.

Over the years, Mark and Joy have sold their meat through direct sales and local markets, and created a new opportunity when they invested in a shop, and involved a partner to set up Myriad Organics. Myriad was an outlet for Cow Hall for many years, and remains a well-known independent shop, sourcing from a number of quality local producers.

The time and skills required for direct sales and marketing are also challenging for farmers. Mark believes that as growers are facing severe economic pressures, independent organic shops have a vital role to play in supporting local producers and are invaluable to the local food economy.

