

Farming & Sustainability



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Northsidehead farmland near Middlesmoor.

The farming industry in Nidderdale AONB has created the beautiful landscape we see today. As the primary industry of our island, farming comes in many different forms, many of which are dictated by land type, climate and tradition. The greener and wetter hills provide favourable conditions for grazing livestock, whereas the flatter areas of the country in the east are mainly arable. Historically, Britain has always been a predominantly agricultural nation. Today, farmers and growers manage 75% of our nation's total land area.

As the ice retreated at the end of the last ice age 15,000 years ago the landscape would have looked very different from the one we see today, covered in rocks and quite barren. As time passed the area was colonised by trees coming from (what is now) mainland Europe before Britain became an island. Trees dominated the landscape for a time until the influence of man started to shape the landscape of Nidderdale AONB.

Humans began as hunter, gatherers but as they began to settle in areas at the start of the Neolithic period they started to manipulate the landscape. A great deal of woodland was removed to create open land for growing crops and keeping livestock. By the 18th century the enclosed field system was established, through the planting of many hedges and building of drystone walls. Nidderdale is a patchwork of fields with most of its remaining woodland on the steep valley sides. The higher land is managed for sheep grazing and game birds.

The Nidderdale AONB's landscape has changed since the 18th century but not through differences in farming. The changes have been the creation of more roads and railways and the opening up of the countryside for recreation. By the 1950s much more housing had been built in rural areas and more families owned cars and could visit areas so tourism increased.

The landscape, shaped by farming, has resulted in scenery which has inspired music, books and paintings, as well as creating a tourism industry in the UK. The protection of these landscapes is now seen as an important part of our heritage. As well as preservation and support of our rural economy as the population increases and towns and cities expand. Modern farming has been given environmental responsibilities to protect the vast array of wildlife on the land.

But what of the farmers and farmworkers themselves?

From neolithic to medieval times a large proportion of the population was involved in agriculture in one form or another. However, by the mid 18th century mechanisation was beginning to have a significant impact on the industry. The Agricultural Revolution began and farming expanded through mechanical means. Much of the population still worked in agriculture but people were starting to move into the towns to work in other industries such as textiles. By the mid 19th century only 22% of the then 21



Farmland in the Washburn valley near Norwood.

million population worked in farming. The farming industry became more productive and food prices reduced significantly over the 20th century and the population increased as life expectancy increased. By the year 2000 less than 1% of the 57 million population works in agriculture.

The modern farming industry does not just create produce for the British consumer, much of our wheat

and other arable produce is exported. However, Britain also imports huge amounts of food from other countries even though we can produce it ourselves. Why, do you suppose, might this be the case? Imported produce may be cheaper and lets us eat kinds of food when they are “out of season” in this country. Seasonality of fresh fruit and vegetables is an interesting topic to look at!

What purchases does an average household make?

Calculate the air miles involved in bringing the produce to this country and relate it to climate change and fuel usage. Compare with buying food of British origin locally sourced. If you’re eating strawberries in winter, they probably came all the way from Israel and your winter salad may be lettuce from California!

Quality British produce, both vegetables and meat is easy to identify in the supermarket or local shop, just look for the Little Red Tractor logo on the packaging.

When do the food items actually grow in this country? Seasonality

SPRING	SUMMER	AUTUMN/WINTER
Cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, leeks, mushrooms, potatoes, spinach, swede, turnips and (indoor) tomatoes.	Carrots, courgette, marrow, mushrooms, onions, peas, potatoes, runner and broad beans, spinach, tomatoes, lettuce, sweetcorn and peppers. Blackcurrants, cherries, gooseberries, plums, raspberries, rhubarb, strawberries and some varieties of apple.	Brussel sprouts, cabbage, carrots, cauliflower, leeks, marrows, mushrooms, onions, parsnips, potatoes, swede, turnip, sweetcorn and nuts (such as chestnuts). Blackberries, pears, pumpkins and some apple varieties.

Other aspects of farming and sustainability to investigate

Biofuels

The UK needs to reduce its reliance on fossil fuels: wheat, sugar beet and rapeseed can all, potentially, be converted into bioethanol and biodiesel. These crops grow well in our climate and could fuel our transport in a more sustainable way.

Green waste compost

As a nation we produce a huge amount of waste. Glass, plastics and metal cans can be recycled as can cardboard and paper. We need to make more of an effort to do this as most rubbish is unsorted and goes directly into landfill. If we recycle these items we can really do our bit to help our sustainability. Our green waste can also be recycled. If we take our garden waste to the local tip to a designated skip it can be recycled into compost which farmers can use on the land as an alternative to chemical fertilisers.