

Address to the
OXFORD FARMING CONFERENCE 2014
by Chris Musgrave

“Making The Most Of Our Resources”

Mr. Chairman, Ladies and Gentlemen,

In order to understand how it is that we have arrived at where we are today I would like to take you on a journey back in time, to the year 2001.

2001, as we all know, was the year that this country was ravaged by Foot and Mouth disease. There were only ever seven cases in Wiltshire, and sadly, Temple Farm, based up on the Marlborough downs, was one of them.

As one looks back, this was certainly the catalyst that was to bring about an inevitable change. Until then, we had been a 4,500 acre estate based very much on traditional lines of commercial arable and sheep production. I was the farm manager, having originally been the assistant shepherd and then assistant manager, and I was working for Count Konrad Goess. One of the changes, as a result of Foot and Mouth, was that we downsized from 4,500 acres to 2,000 acres.

What I learnt from this experience was that we needed to spread our risk, and that we could no longer rely solely on farming as we had known it – now was the time to move the business forward and embrace diversification and change. As if any further proof were needed, the near collapse in the cereal prices of 2003 - when wheat was sold for as little as £80/ ton, as many of you will remember - showed just how fickle the fortunes of farming can be – one day good, the next disastrous.

It was also a time of opportunity. Whilst continuing to manage the Temple estate I was encouraged by Count Goess to start my own estate management company, Musgrave Management Systems. One could even say that he took me to the end of the springboard - and pushed!

Initially, I was able to secure the farming contract for part of the land that had been sold off; as well as, combining with our other neighbours to create a 7,500 acre farming unit. At the same time, Temple established a contract for service arrangements with these neighbours, using our machinery and grain storage facilities; which allowed the other estates to fully embrace the opportunities offered through diversification, too.

Whilst food production was to remain as the core activity of each of the estates, the ‘mind-shift’ was to acknowledge that the single greatest asset was the land itself, and this in turn demanded that we explore and maximise all the uses of our natural resources and, thereby, enhance bottom-line profitability.

The land sold off post-FMD became the Barbury Castle Estate. Over the next ten years, I was able to work with Nigel Bunter, the new owner, to help turn Barbury into a racehorse training facility; with eleven miles of grass gallops as well as two all-weather gallops, with Alan King as the trainer.

On the other side we have Manton Estate, a wonderful flat-race horse training establishment owned by the Sangster family. Collectively, we now have around nineteen miles of racehorse gallops with about 350 horses in training every day.

The story of horse racing on the Marlborough downs goes back to the 1700s; where the natural downland turf makes them the ideal setting for this sport of kings. Manton was an historic stables and already well-established as a premier horse training premises. Nigel Bunter’s

concept of creating a new National Hunt training facility *par excellence* at Barbury Castle, would give the spur to the direction in which we were bound to go.

Old farm buildings, which were initially used to house 3,500 ewes and subsequently various cattle herds, have now been converted into stabling. This was something that we were able to do ‘in-house’ which meant that we continued to employ people in the countryside – albeit with changed responsibilities.

With the enthusiastic support of Nigel Bunter, a purpose-designed venue has been established for the annual Barbury Castle Horse Trials, which are held every July. It was a considerable challenge to create this large open-air forum, but the small, dedicated team has achieved first class results and more than 15,000 people now flock to this countryside spectacle each year. This has become a highly prestigious and important event in the equine calendar and attracts significant corporate funding. For the last seven years St James’s Place Wealth Management have been the principal sponsors; and they bring 400 guests each summer to this now world-renowned Horse Trials.

This event is a natural ‘fit’ with the development of other horse riding interests, and the synergies go further with the holding of the ‘Great British Endurance Riding Championships’ and a point-to-point course, which holds three meets a year.

On the farming side we continued with the traditional lines of winter wheat, spring barley and oil seed rape. However, we were also employing a full-time gamekeeper who was very persistent in his demands for ‘weedy stubble’. So, having considered this and the options open to us, and ever more wanting to embrace different enterprises, we decided to put a small percentage of the estates into Organic, most particularly around the gallops where the trainers were not overly enthusiastic about our use of large machinery and sprays.

Our experience of Organic has been mixed and in the early years, based on net margin, it compared well against mainstream farming. However, over the years we have found it difficult to maintain this level of profitability, particularly as the country was entering into recession, and we have now brought our acreage down to a base level with the retained area being mainly around the gallops.

Determined to maximise all of our assets, we have taken a serious look at each of our buildings. A traditional stone barn, originally used for shoot lunches, was an obvious target for change and it is now let out as an ideal venue for weddings and parties. We have no website for the barn and yet it is fully booked for 2014 from the beginning of May through to the end of September. For every wedding that takes place, there are 150 people who see the venue, and it advertises itself. We also let people camp down there and clients have access to the venue from Wednesday to Monday.

Recognising these and other elements of the estate as ‘assets’ has enabled us to realise previously untapped income potential – it’s all about making the most of what you’ve got.

So, that very much sets the scene as regards the farming set up and the add-on ventures that we have embraced. But there is another, absolutely crucial, element involved in this journey that we have undertaken – the Environment. Much time has been devoted to working with the environmental schemes on the Downs.

Like most of you here who are farming today, we entered into all of the Stewardship schemes that were available to us as well as doing a few other things ourselves, but with little regard to what others around us were up to. This all changed in 2010 when a new way of thinking came to my attention. Sir John Lawton published his Defra-commissioned report ‘Making Space for Nature’ and in it he introduced, for the first time, the concept of ‘landscape-scale conservation’. Research suggested that, despite decades of delivering environmental management via established schemes, species and habitats are continuing to decline. The report identified one of

the reasons behind this failure was that current efforts were too piecemeal and not sufficiently ‘joined up’. Simply put, an individual can carry out all the environmental measures possible, but unless one’s neighbours are also so inclined positive impact upon wildlife, water quality and so on will be limited. However, if those same environmental measures are taken up on a wider scale across a significant area, then the impact can be profound and the benefits far greater than the sum of the component parts.

The majestic county of Wiltshire, second largest in England, has a proud history of pastoral life dating back thousands of years and is simply littered with the evidence of early man’s existence. It can best be described as an outdoor museum with, perhaps, the greatest concentration of Neolithic sites in Europe, including Stonehenge to the south and Avebury, West Kennett Long Barrow and the Ridgeway around the Marlborough downs. This ancient landscape supported life long before the creation of the modern boundaries with which we are all familiar. It is a proud legacy that we respect and cherish, and it is the historic foundation upon which we farm today.

I had always regarded what we were doing on the Downs as ‘landscape management’. Combining with our neighbours allowed for one management system over the whole area and the results were there to witness. The biodiversity was truly wonderful. The buntings, the linnets, the skylarks and all the other farmland birds were doing well on our land ... though not necessarily further afield. And our success was recognised by others. For example, we were chosen by Natural England to host the launch of the South West Farmland Bird Initiative in 2009 because we had all the target species up on the Downs.

So, while we – Temple, Barbury and Manton– were, as I saw it, practising landscape management, Government was also talking about it. And the breakthrough came when Defra, on the back of Sir John Lawton’s report, launched a new type of environmental initiative: Nature Improvement Areas or NIAs. This was one of the main proposals in the Natural Environment White paper presented by Caroline Spellman and Richard Benyon in June 2011.

Partnerships were invited to submit proposals for new ways of delivering nature conservation on a landscape scale and the NIA competition was launched.

What originally excited me about this was the apparent opportunity to try something very new – a bottom-up approach. Rather than following detailed prescriptions imposed on us by, for example, Natural England, it allowed us, for the first time, to say ‘what do *we* want to do on *our* farms to support the wildlife we know is there?’ Initially, when the criteria for the scheme were published, I thought they were looking for a minimum area of 10,000 acres. Being already at 7,500 this didn’t seem too great a challenge as I was confident I could fairly easily persuade a couple of my neighbours to join in with me and to give it a go. Then I read the small print again.....10,000 *hectares*.....25,000 acres!

It was at this point - and this was to prove to be a turning point in the evolution of this scheme for us - that I joined forces with my environmental advisor, Dr Jemma Batten, and we decided to map out and see what 25,000 acres up on the Downs would really look like.

We used main roads as our boundaries and we quickly worked out a map that we thought was potentially feasible. We undertook to map the land ownership within our 10,000 ha and managed to identify around 42 known holdings.

Nothing for it, we called a meeting one evening and we got around 25 farmers to turn up. Those that couldn’t make the meeting had been approached by telephone and we attempted to explain what it was that we were trying to do, and not one of them was against the idea. Remember, this was one of only two candidate NIA partnerships in the country that were trying this approach – going directly to the farmers and saying ‘how about it – would you like to be part of a farmer-led, landscape-scale conservation project on your farm?’

Our first meeting, and I can remember it well, was held in a barn up on the Downs in September 2011. This meeting was a pivotal moment in our journey: We were trying to explain to our

neighbours about a new environmental scheme whose rules were at that time unwritten, and yet there was the potential to make something really special happen. We all acknowledged that no-one was keen to lose large areas of productive land as we are, and always will be, farmers first and foremost. However, we could see that by working together we could, potentially, have a widespread and significant impact. Going back to the idea that something can be more than the sum of its parts, we realised that if we could roll out some of the things that we were all doing in isolation, and instead work collectively beyond farm boundaries, we could achieve, together, far more than we could as individuals.

At the end of round One, 76 applications had been submitted nationally. All the other partnerships, the other 74 trying to get shortlisted, were what I would call ‘top-down’ and led by wildlife charities, National Parks, AONBs, and so on. The applications were judged by a panel led by Sir John Lawton and slimmed down to 20 to go on to the next stage, which involved writing a detailed business plan. Not an easy task when there were so many unknowns and, for any of you who are used to writing these plans, you will know that, in reality, everyone has their own ideas about what should be included but, at the end of the day, only one person can actually write it.

We also had to set up a formal partnership and chose GWCT (what used to be the Game Conservancy) and Wiltshire Council. Although both organisations were consulted during the preparation of the business plan, the ultimate decisions about what was included – the objectives and targets for achievement – were made by the farmers.

When the 20 applications were reduced to 15 we were thrilled to discover that we were one of the groups invited up to Defra Head Office to present our detailed proposals to the judging panel. What transpired was that twelve new Nature Improvement Areas were created, with ours being unique in that we became the only farmer-led NIA in the country.

As farmers, we view this as a ringing endorsement for allowing those who manage the land to take responsibility for our own environmental management. It is a totally new approach, and I must commend Natural England for giving us the chance to prove what can be brought about if you allow farmers to take control. It is also an opportunity to see just what can be achieved through farmer to farmer influence and collaboration.

But before we could begin to deliver anything on the ground we had to set up a legal entity for the NIA. We decided to register as a Charity, with the farmer board as the trustees. The set-up was a huge amount of work and took most of the first three months. Unlike other NIAs we had no existing infrastructure, none of the required policies (H&S, data protection, etc.), no bank account, insurance Nothing! Worse, we had no working capital and had to negotiate 'up front' payments whereas other NIAs had charity or organisational funds they could use and then claim back through the Defra grant. Furthermore, what was 'normal working practice' for the other NIAs, familiar with an organisational structure, was completely new to us as largely self-employed farmers. However, with a lot of help, we made it and were fully up and running by June 2012.

Our aims are ambitious, and we set our targets by each agreeing what we would be prepared to do on our own farms. Everyone is keen to look after our Downland species and the habitats that support them, and we're all doing lots of work to try and achieve this. Rather than re-inventing the wheel, we're basing our efforts on tried and tested methods such as using wild bird mixes instead of maize in some of our game cover. One of the things that has been enormously successful on the Temple Estate has been bringing water back to the Downs in the form of dewponds. Over the years we've created nine dewponds and have seen how they've become oases for wildlife in what would otherwise be a very dry landscape. The whole NIA was once littered with dewponds, most of which fell into disuse with the decline of widespread sheep farming, but no-one else - Natural England and other conservation organisations included - seemed to realise what effect their loss had on the local wildlife. Through the NIA we're now

able to roll out a programme to restore and create dewponds, all linked by wildlife corridors of rough grassland, scrub and wildlife crops.

We think it's really important that we share what we're doing, between ourselves and with everyone else. We're learning from one another's experience (both successful and less so!), and have lots of events on farms where anyone, farmer or not, can come along and learn about the countryside, the animals and plants that live on the Downs, and how farming and conservation can go hand-in-hand.

We're also working to promote circular walks and rides that showcase the Downs and our work. One of our most successful partnerships is with the local Driving for the Disabled group which is based on one of the farms on the Downs. Affiliated to Riding for the Disabled, the group offers people who might otherwise never get out into the wider countryside the chance to do so under their own steam – you can drive a carriage just as well from a wheelchair as you can from a normal seat. More recently, we have seen the group catering for injured serviceman and women who have been caught up in the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. It's a wonderful organisation and something that I am sure we would all choose to support – but we, as the Marlborough Downs NIA, are in the enviable position of actually being able to do something to improve their quality of life.

Before the advent of the NIA the group only had access to designated byways and bridleways and had to use main roads to get to these. If any of you have ever been in a horse-drawn carriage you will know that it's not much fun being on a main road with cars whizzing by at 70mph – it's unsettling for the horses and not particularly pleasurable for the people in the carriage.

So, they were looking for new and different rides to use over the Downs and got in touch with the NIA farmers who have been happy to help, opening up a whole new series of drives that, hitherto, they would not have had access to.

This is not the council creating ‘rights of way’, just local farmers agreeing to put in a gate in a hedgeline or fenceline which would enable the carriages, and only the carriages, to be able to drive on prescribed routes including private roads and tracks over the Downs. One only has to see the look on their faces to realise the pleasure that these people derive from having this safe access. It’s farmers working together to improve the lives of others. It hasn’t cost them anything, and the amount of land taken out to create the odd grass verge for the carriages to drive upon is negligible. But in terms of giving something back to society –this is a real result.

Looking back to when we first started with this whole concept of an NIA, it was always one of our key objectives to be able to foster better links with our local communities. This is based upon the ever-increasing evidence which illustrates that people who spend time outdoors are generally healthier and happier than those who don’t. Last year, in this very room, Dr. Peter Carruthers and Prof Michael Winter presented their report on Farming’s Value to Society in which they said, and I quote, “Exposure to nature, especially if it is combined with exercise, can significantly improve physical and mental health and well being, and address some of the most pressing health problems in western society”. Furthermore, this view is supported in a recent report by the Faculty of Public Health which calls for collaborative effort to provide green space for community and group activities, and prescribes their use to promote health and wellbeing. This is exactly what we’re doing in the Marlborough Downs.

So often, transformation comes out of adversity. Foot and Mouth was the catalyst that transformed our vision and the way in which we manage the land. We learned to spread our risk, to combine resources with our neighbours, to take on new ventures and to realise previously untapped income potential. Finally, we integrated an environmental scheme into our landscape management, which has improved the lives of others. We can’t fix all of the world’s problems. However, we can deliver a combination of commercial food production alongside an environment with an ever-increasing biodiversity, and this in turn can feed into real and tangible social benefits to society.

It's not that long ago that farmers were vilified for tearing up hedgerows and being responsible for the loss of habitat and species from farmland, and that to go to a dinner party and declare oneself as a farmer was to put one's head in the lion's mouth. But all that has changed – we are no longer seen as Public Enemy Number One.

At the end of the day the poet Virgil wasn't too far wrong, in my mind, when he wrote:

“ O fortunatos nimium, sua si bona norint Agricolas!”

“ Oh farmers excessively fortunate if only they recognised their blessings”

We have a wonderful opportunity to deliver much from the land that we all care so much about – it's just a matter of seizing this opportunity and recognising the many benefits that it can deliver – not only now but also into the future.

As I said earlier, we are and always will be farmers first and foremost; but I challenge you to hold a wider vision.

Thank you.

CBM
December 2013