Forest Research

Research Note

Paths to embracing trees on farms: The role of social and cultural values

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What leads some farmers to dramatically increase the number of trees on their land? What role do social and cultural values play? And how do values and behaviour interact?

Increasing tree cover across England is a key priority for the UK government, driven by the benefits that trees and woodlands offer, such as climate change mitigation and nature recovery. The England Trees Action Plan 2021-2024 has set ambitious targets to accelerate woodland creation, aiming to increase tree planting to meet the UK target of 30,000 ha per year by 2025. As part of a project funded by Defra under the Nature for Climate Fund, Forest Research has been investigating farmers' values in relation to tree cover expansion. This research note specifically examines the potential for increasing tree cover on farms across England through understanding the social and cultural values of farmers and how these values influence their decisions around tree cover on their land. This research draws on earlier research which identified 30 social and cultural values that have the potential to influence farmers' attitudes and behaviour regarding trees. These values were grouped into seven areas: farm business, social influence, food production, farm health, environmental values, landscape relationship and farming identity. Building on this work, this research note explores how values might change over time; how values might drive behaviour change; and when and how farmers are able to farm in line with their values. We outline four insights that cut across the experiences of the four farmers we spoke to. These were: *core values may change relatively little over time*; *a single incident may shift farmers' understanding of the impact of their work*; *interaction with others supports farmers seeking to farm differently*; and *it is not always easy to farm in ways that align with values*. Rather than conclude with our own interpretations, this Research Note seeks to challenge readers' thinking and provoke discussion.

Methods

We adopted a biographical research approach. Over a few months we spent several hours speaking individually with four farmers, with the first session on the participant's farm and subsequent discussions by phone or video call. In the first two interviews we identified key events or influences which have helped shape their current approach to managing the farm. We explored these in greater depth during interview three. Each of the farmers has been farming for at least ten years and feels they have substantially increased the number of trees on their respective farms.

Over the course of the interviews, we were able to have detailed discussions about the history of the farm, how the farmers' objectives, approach to farming and their perception of what it means to be a good farmer have changed over time, as well as how trees have factored into this journey.

We present here brief accounts of each farmer, drawing on their own words as much as possible. These accounts necessarily lose a lot of the detail from our conversations. The farmers have given permission for use of their real first names and each has reviewed their own story. Following the four stories, we outline some cross-cutting insights.

Tim

'It is a kind of journey because you don't start off thinking this is where you're going to end up. In fact, I never dreamt... yeah, now it seems normal, but it didn't then.'

Tim hadn't planned to farm. Even now, he's not sure he feels like a 'farmer'. After growing up as a third-generation farmer in Cumbria, he moved away to study ecology, and then started a career in conservation. When his father unexpectedly passed away in 2005, Tim took over the 300-acre family farm. He primarily rears livestock, however, in recent decades, the focus was on dairy and then cereals. Over time, he has diversified the business, selling firewood and adding solar panels and a small biomass boiler. He started planting a few trees before his father died, but in the past decade has added small patches of woodland, increased hedges and planted trees into hedges.

Tim describes farming as a 'kind of alchemy' using the sun, rain and soil to 'produce something more than what you've got'. When he initially took on the farm he was 'treading water', saying 'until you actually run a farm you don't really know what it's all about'. Due to his relative inexperience and his mum's reluctance to embrace change, it was easiest to continue farming as his dad had. Looking back, however, he feels he was 'mining' the farm. Now, his primary objective is to run a viable 'land-based business' (not just 'farming') which allows him to remain on the farm and which improves the land, 'putting back more than you take out'. He describes his approach as 'regenerative agriculture' and sees trees as being an important part of holistic land management.

> 'I suppose I adopted an approach really from the way it was being run because it was easiest to do that rather than start to change things.'

Some of the first trees Tim remembers planting were 'standard' trees in the hedges lining the farm lane; he persuaded his dad by suggesting they mark the millennium. Over twenty years later, he is rewarded with seeing these trees every day. He explains that simply planting a few trees leads you to want to do more, and thinks you really notice the change five or six years after planting. He says, 'it just builds from there. You kind of get hooked on it. And suddenly, you start to see how it integrates with everything else'.

> 'The community of this kind of agriculture isn't the people I meet on the doorstep, it's much wider than that, there's a web that's spread across the whole world.'

In 2022, due to his connections with like-minded farmers, Tim's farm played host to Carbon Calling, a regenerative agriculture conference. Following previous experience hosting cattle auctions, Tim was confident the event could be a success. He admits he is not a natural networker, so his involvement with the conference has given him the opportunity to speak to many people. He says, 'this kind of stuff is all about talking about it... The more you liaise with these kinds of people the more it gives you confidence to do it'.

Tim cares deeply about the impact his farming practice has on the wider environment. He is convinced that adopting a regenerative, diversified approach which includes integrating trees can not only provide a viable business but is necessary to the future of agriculture. He said, 'I think those values and opinions on how things should be done have got stronger over time. They've come more to the fore and there's more urgency to make a difference and try and demonstrate that farming can be responsible and productive'.

Tony

'I've always been interested in trees. I've always planted trees. In every corner we've planted them, and hedges and trees, every possible place has got trees in it.'

Tony grew up on a dairy farm, before taking on his father-in-law's fourth-generation family farm in Herefordshire. Previously a mixed farm, Tony has increasingly specialised, introducing 200 dairy cows. Since planting his first native black poplar 50 years ago, when the farm had very few trees, he has planted a huge number and diversity of trees in field corners and along boundaries. Retirement has enabled him to concentrate on this aspect of the farm since his sons took over in 2012.

'I've had so much fun with my retirement. It's enabled me to do all the things I've wanted to do all my life but family and business and everything else has interfered with.'

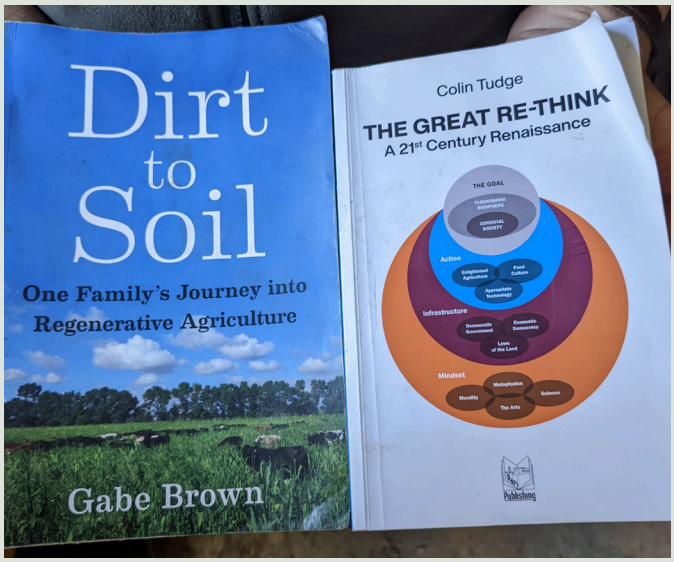
Tony 'was brought up to always farm for tomorrow. And to care for your land'. However, at agricultural university he was trained to remove hedges and pastures, drain land, and use fertiliser: 'We thought we were doing the right thing. Well, we were doing what we were asked to do' – produce food. He now recognises the value of 'ponds and plants... much more than when I was young' and 'hates to think of the hedges I've knocked out and the mess I made following that teaching'. He gradually transitioned towards an organic system, becoming certified in the late 1990s. His approach to tree planting has developed over time and he now sees his initial efforts as 'the wrong sort of trees in the wrong sort of place'.

Tony's parents nurtured his interest in nature. He feels 'deeply embedded in the countryside' and knows when 'there should be daffodils coming out, or to listen for the cuckoo arriving'. However, he feels most farmers 'don't know what a chaffinch looks like' and think 'hedges are just something to be kept down'. Tony noticed birds disappearing as early as the 1960s when the partridges were no longer 'there to shoot'. Initially he 'didn't understand that what I was doing on my land was influencing what was happening to them'. He started to associate his farming with biodiversity loss because over time 'there were no birds following the plough. It's quite eerie. Something had to change'. The Game Conservancy suggested planting woodland as a habitat for birds; he noted that shooting is often a 'driver' for other farmers 'not interested in wildlife' to change their practices.

'I suppose because I'm a businessman I had to convince myself that going organic would still be a business proposition for my farm.'

Although he had already started planting trees, food surpluses in the late 1970s and continuing biodiversity loss led Tony to feel that his farming practices were 'wrong', but he 'couldn't see how to continue a profitable business and put the brakes on'. He read about organic farming but found 'the only way was to go and see how other people are doing'. Of 40 organic farms he visited, 'half a dozen were farming brilliantly and really caught my imagination' because 'the business was working well. The people working there looked happy and understood the wildlife. So, I could see it was possible'. The transition to organic farming required him to 'change my head so you can accept that it looks untidy' because he could no longer habitually spray weeds. The first year was 'frightening' because the grass stopped growing, but over time 'we got some super crops with very little inputs'.

Although he has always been interested in nature and wildlife, Tony's motivations for tree planting have shifted over time. While initially planting trees for shooting and fishing, he recognised the wider benefits for the farm business once the trees had grown, and started planting them for 'shade, they're shelter. They hold moisture in the ground, they provide timber, firewood'. He is still surprised that some farmers 'see a tree as an enemy'; for Tony, 'trees are just part of the countryside, part of the landscape, part of the wildlife that use them'.



Chris

'Farming is terribly two-dimensional, and it needs to be three-dimensional.'

Chris is a fifth-generation farmer, operating a mixed farm over 170 acres in mid-Cornwall. His father purchased the land in 1960 having previously held a farm in Shropshire. Helping his father manage the farm in 1985, Chris suggested planting an unproductive pasture with trees. 'Unbelievably' his father agreed. Today Chris runs the farm alongside his wife and daughter. The family have diversified the business, adopting an ecologically-minded strategy to include organic pasture-fed livestock, a wind turbine, education centre, nut trees and river management with beavers.

Growing up on a farm with woodland cherished by the family, Chris embarked on a forestry degree at Bangor University. While Chris held environmental values early in his farming career, 'that's not to say that those values weren't, in many respects, at quite a low ebb'. These values were enhanced by Chris's growing awareness of climate change and environmental degradation, as well as by involving himself as an 'early adopter' among farmers managing land in line with an ecological 'land ethic'. For Chris, this included an awareness that 'we need billions more trees planted', and since 2010 he has planted 55 acres of wood pasture. Chris 'would like to see food being a by-product of a healthy ecosystem'.

In 1996, Chris leased two-thirds of his farm to daffodil farmers as concerns over BSE had made beef farming financially unviable. The daffodil farmers ploughed and sprayed intensively. They 'left the soil structure broken' and to see 'two-thirds of the farm be essentially killed' was a huge turning point for Chris. This event 'really brought forward' Chris's environmental values and led him to extend his ecological approach beyond woodland management, to his agricultural practice. Chris became certified organic and began looking at other ecological impacts of his farming.

> 'I'm not saying we wouldn't have gone the same way eventually, but it was a very big multiplier in our thinking... It just showed me there's something deeply wrong right at the heart of the way we look at land.'

In 2008, Chris commissioned a carbon audit of the farm. Shocked with the results, he asked himself 'what do we do? How do we stop this?' Around this time, the BBC aired the documentary *A Farm for the Future*. It invigorated Chris: 'It just completely hit the spot for me... we can farm much more in harmony with nature'. He stopped growing cereals in 2009 and 'it was like stopping banging your head on a brick wall!' At the tail end of that year Chris missed the Transition Farming Conference. He asked to be kept updated: 'tell me whatever you do if anything starts up about pasture feeding, grass only cattle'. Chris found that 'three other people were having exactly the same thought' and 'that was the birth of the Pasture-Fed Livestock Association.'

These days Chris tells people, 'I'm not a farmer, I'm in the land business'. Chris values his varied role, organically producing 'good, wholesome food which comes with a carbon credit', improving organic soil matter and water resources, and planting trees 'because land does everything. It is the master resource on this planet'. Chris feels a sense of camaraderie, he's 'not alone, across the country there's quite a good network of us now, we're trying really hard to make our land provide these multiple benefits'. Chris continues to plant trees, curious about what works and what doesn't. He remains upbeat in the face of challenges along the way. From his six-acre nut plantation he got 'good chestnuts this year' and while 'hazels have been a terrible disappointment, what the hell! It's a nice rough bit of grazing to put the cattle onto'.

> 'My view today is land is land and it's all on a spectrum of land use... the more we can edge things towards the green end of that spectrum, the better.'

James

'Our generation is the generation tasked with trying to find the right balance between food production and nature in the landscape. It's a new arena for all of us, and for all the ecologists, so it's quite an exciting time.'

James is a second-generation arable farmer growing oats, peas, oilseed rape and wheat on the Sussex coast. The farm was initially rented by his parents in the 1960s and later purchased by them, with James working under his father's management from age 16 before taking over the farm 15 years ago. He has planted a mixture of tree species and is replanting hedges removed by his father. He has also started importing deadwood to leave on field margins, as well as replanting standing deadwood trees as habitats for wildlife.

James describes his current farming system as 'nature friendly'. He was taught by his father to 'keep the farm tidy' by trimming hedges and removing 'injurious weeds', but over time has come to see 'value in messy edges' as habitats and food sources for wildlife. James has diverged from his father's focus on increasing food production, which he feels 'ruined' the farm. His planting of trees and hedges has at times prompted disagreement with his parents, who 'wanted all those trees gone, they wanted the hedges pulled back out again'.

'Getting the balance right is not easy. I'm not an advocate of a wholesale rewilding. I'm an advocate of maintaining agricultural output, farming in a nature friendly way, restoring habitats on the more marginal land.'

About twenty years ago, James and his father visited a farmer 'pioneering' the use of non-inversion tillage. At the time, James considered his claims that 'worms will do the ploughing for you' to be 'a load of nonsense' which did not align with the production of high-quality crops, so they continued ploughing. More recently, following advice from his farm consultant and having read about regenerative agriculture, James transitioned to minimal tillage, intending to save costs. He has been surprised to notice that with this 'experimentation' the soil drains better, no longer flooding during rainy periods and retaining moisture during dry periods, resulting this year in 'the highest yield we have ever had'.

In 2019, James visited Borneo, having had his interest piqued after seeing early footage of the forests and hearing about deforestation. A turning point came while travelling in a minibus which stopped at the top of a hill: for 50 miles down to the coast he could see 'nothing but oil palm'. His interest in nature had previously translated into small actions he could take at the farm level, but this shifted his perspective to thinking about his role within the wider landscape. On returning to the UK, he visited Knepp Estate, with whom he has co-founded the Weald to Waves project, aiming to create a 100-mile nature corridor connecting Ashdown Forest to the coast.

'We're back in the agricultural experimentation era. And we're all doing it. Everybody I know is trialling new techniques to some degree or other.'

Although James's practices and perspectives around trees have shifted over time, his underlying values and interest in nature have not: his experiences have 'sharpened my values, that we need to be respectful of nature'. He emphasises the difference between his mindset and that of his father, who 'speaks proudly of the works that they did in clearing woodlands and pushing them up with bulldozers'. James's belief in nature restoration outweighs his need for social approval: 'If you feel really strongly about something in life, it's not a popularity contest and you will lose friends'. However, he sees trees as part of a balanced landscape where 'the good land wants farming well' otherwise 'people will cut down forests to clear land for food production'.

Cross-cutting insights

Our intention in selecting farmers who have embraced trees on their farms was to understand how their values and tree expansion activities relate and to consider how this might differ from other farmers. The in-depth research approach we adopted lends itself to uncovering participants' understanding or interpretation of their own experiences. Having focused above on the farming journeys of Tim, Tony, Chris and James, we now suggest some insights that cut across their stories.

Core values may change relatively little over time

The values of each farmer seem to have changed relatively little over their years farming. Instead, what they have always valued has come to the fore and become more prominent as each farmer came to see the impact of their work on the land. For Tim, these values 'have got stronger over time', James's values have 'sharpened' and for Chris, values that once existed at a 'low ebb' have come to guide his farming practice.

A single incident may shift farmers' understanding of the impact of their work

It has taken time for each farmer to better understand the connection between their farming practices and the things that are important to them. While values appeared to get stronger over time, for some of the farmers they were also brought into sharp view by a single incident. James was shocked by his trip to Borneo, which lead him to think more broadly about his role in the landscape, while Tony realised things had to change after understanding the link between his farming and declining birdlife.

Interaction with others supports farmers seeking to farm differently

Building relationships within a similarly minded community has given farmers a firmer belief that they could change their farming practices to better align with their values. Tony was inspired by his visits to other farms and, as Tim said, 'the more you liaise with these kinds of people the more it gives you confidence to do it'. One relationship which is of particular importance in efforts to farm differently is the relationship with the parents, who often retain direct or indirect decision-making power. This comes through with each farmer, as Tony's 'environmentally minded' parents and Chris's Dad supported their tree cover expansion, while Tim's mum and James's father were less supportive.

It is not always easy to farm in ways that align with values

While these four farmers have become better able to farm in ways aligned with their values, they all recognised that this is not always easy. Sometimes realising they weren't acting in line with their values caught them by surprise. Chris had never intended to farm in a way that compromised his values, and only realised he was doing so following his carbon audit. For the decades that James worked under his father, he had to accept trees and hedges being 'ripped out'. He was only able to reinstate them and enjoy the benefits he sees in their 'messiness' upon his father's retirement. Tim felt trapped doing things as his dad had done due to his own inexperience and his mum's ongoing influence on the farm, and Tony has required time to learn about organic farming and move away from the type of farming he was taught at university.

Final remarks

Rather than offering our own interpretations or suggested implications for tree cover on farms, we have intentionally foregrounded the stories of the four farmers. Our intention in doing so is to challenge readers' thinking and to provoke discussion. This work is ongoing. We see strength in this interpretive style of output and wish to build and reflect on its methodological potential, considering further the usefulness of such outputs for policymakers looking to increase tree cover on agricultural land. We now look to continue this research with a wider range of farmers.

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