

Iford Estate News

J & H Robinson Iford Farms Ltd – est. 1895

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Farm Report – some ups and downs in 2019 Ben Taylor

The weather this year, as ever, has played a dominant role. Whatever type we needed at any time, we

got exactly the opposite! The spring and early summer were exceptionally dry, causing spring-sown crops to struggle for moisture. As soon as we started combining, it started to rain. The nice weather at the end of August helped, but by September, when crops were being planted, it was really dry again and we lost a significant area of oilseed rape as a consequence. It rained finally at the end of September and, since then, it hasn't stopped, creating real problems with planting next year's wheat crops.

The growing of crops is now being hampered by the withdrawal of key chemicals, either for killing pests, disease or weeds. The banning of the much talked about neonicotinoid seed dressing has finally caught up with us this year as we have faced a plague of hungry insects intent on eating our seedling rape crop. Of the 600 acres we planted we have already abandoned 150, and some of the rest doesn't look too good.

Don't get me wrong: I am actually quite content for many of these chemicals to be banned, particularly if it is shown that they cause harm to the environment. It does seem extremely

unfair though to allow imports of the same crop grown using techniques banned in the UK. I had hoped that the one silver lining of Brexit would be the ability to restrict imports of substandard foodstuffs, allowing the UK to be a beacon of environmental excellence. The reality is shaping to be the exact opposite: ever tighter restrictions on UK farmers, whilst the country is flooded with cheap food produced to, at best, questionable standards, and certainly standards that would be illegal here.

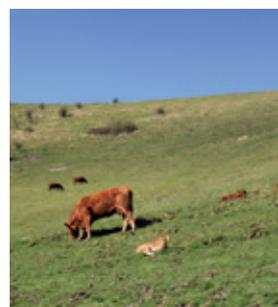
On the positive side, this year we started a new environmental scheme, with the focus on helping farmland birds and pollinators. To that end we have planted about 150 acres of crops designed to benefit them. The winter feed crops contain a mixture of plants like kale, mustard, millet and linseed to which we add *Phacelia* (you might have noticed the purple flowers in the early summer) and sunflowers.

Other areas have a pollen and nectar mix of flowering plants so that in the spring they are full of insects which in turn feed the chicks. You can see some of these strips along the footpaths on the hill. On top of all this we have been feeding over 10 tons of whole cereals through the winter. We broadcast the mix of wheat, linseed, rapeseed and oats directly onto the ground for the birds to eat, and the results are impressive. We've seen exceptionally large flocks of small birds and increasing numbers of rare species (see *inside spread*).

The scheme also covers all the grassland on the farm, protecting the rare Downland turf on the Front Hill and the ditch systems on the Brooks, both of which lie within Sites of Special Scientific Interest. On the Brooks the aim is to encourage overwintering waders, so we are aiming to maintain wet areas where they can wade and feed – not a problem this year!

The grass on the hill is recognised for its rare flora and is one of the largest single areas of Downland turf that survives. Its condition owes much to careful grazing and lack of fertilisation over many decades and the scheme aims to continue that management into the future, as well as extend the coverage of the flora into other areas where it is less well established.

Cattle and sheep play a key role in maintaining the grassland on the Estate, particularly from scrub encroachment and, in the case of the sheep, from ragwort infestation. It is impossible to reach some parts with a tractor so livestock are the only way to keep those areas managed. It's a shame that the important role livestock play in maintaining ecosystems (not to mention the carbon that is locked away in pastureland) is not recognised, while they are demonised for their supposed effect on global warming.



Swanborough Lakes Holiday Lodges

May Robinson and Ben Taylor



Top: view of the lodges from above.

Right: ultra modern living in a rural environment

Having opened Swanborough Lakes Luxury Holiday Lodges at the end of September last year we have been exceptionally busy all year, with guests reporting how much they love the local area, the peaceful surroundings and the beautiful views from the site. It has been interesting to see where guests have travelled from, with quite a few living locally and coming to get away from it all for a few days.

There seems to be a big unfulfilled demand for holiday accommodation in the area, which we imagine is due to the growing reputation of the South Downs National Park, as well as the growing 'staycation' market. We hope that, with the effect of Brexit on agriculture, the lodges will provide a buffer to see us through turbulent times.

We have set up several collaborations with local businesses, with some good examples being spa



treatments from the *Reading Room Day Spa* in Iford, celebration cakes from *Guns and Posies* bakery in Swanborough, fresh produce from *Holmansbridge Farm Shop* as well as *Riverside Flowers* in Lewes. Our guests have really enjoyed exploring the area, including walks, beaches, local pubs such as *The Juggs* and also wandering into Lewes.

We therefore took the decision to build the remaining lodges earlier than planned, and so over the summer we took delivery of five new units, built by *Boutique Modern* in their factory in Newhaven. Although the style of the new lodges is the same as the first ones, we have redesigned them to be luxury one bedroom units as the majority of our guests are couples. We have also made them even more luxurious than before with a superking bedroom and large bathroom with roll top bath. The new lodges should be open by the time you read this, and we will spend the winter months planting more trees and shrubs to complete the landscaping.

We have also been very pleased to employ local residents Henry Gerrard and Elysia Elliott to help us in the reception. We are often on the look out for staff so please contact us if you would be interested in some part time work with us.

From the archives...



This photo was taken in 1912 of a wedding party in Iford, two years before the outbreak of the First World War. We think the wedding was Emily Pettit's.

That smell!

Villagers will be aware of a strong smell that occasionally pervades the village. This is caused by spreading treated sewage sludge, which is a valuable organic fertiliser; that we apply because it both improves the soil structure and reduces the amount of inorganic fertiliser that is required. All sewage sludge has to be applied to the soil somewhere in the country because it is no longer permissible to pump it out to sea.

It is delivered during the winter when the sewage works are being cleaned out and we clamp it in the field. There is a smell while this happens but, once it is clamped and sheeted up, there is no smell. In the winter when most people are indoors the smell is hardly noticeable. After harvest in July and August, contractors spread the sludge on the land and we cultivate it into the soil on the same day. It is during the spreading process that it smells; once it is cultivated into the soil, it doesn't.

If the wind is in the wrong direction, the smell can be particularly strong, even though short-lived. In consideration of people wanting to spend time in their gardens at weekends we no longer spread sludge at weekends. If you are planning a social event outdoors during the week in July or August please let us know as far in advance as possible and we will do our best to avoid spreading on that day.

Iford Downs – a migration oasis

Jamie Horner, RSPB Project Officer, Peak District Bird of Prey Initiative

Left: wryneck, a rare member of the woodpecker family

Below left: a female Montagu's harrier in flight

With all the southerly winds we experienced in early autumn, we've had a build up of migrants making full use of the cover crops and strips that we've planted for the partridge. Highlights for me have been the wryneck, nightjar, female Montague's harrier and quail.

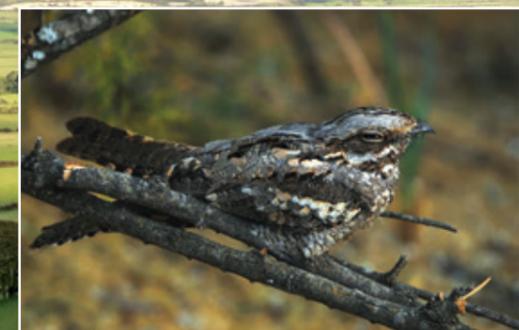
The crops are also hosting vast flocks of finches which include goldfinches, linnets, greenfinches and, at times, a few siskin. The latter appeared with the northerly winds so I assume they had migrated down from the north.

Presumably following them down from the moors to the south coast, one of the loveliest (and smallest) of our birds of prey, the Merlin, turned up in mid October to take advantage of its favourite food source. They chase small birds from a vantage point like a rock or post and have even used grazing sheep to give them extra cover.

This year we've seen noticeably more of what we'd class as moorland migrants. These included four ring ouzels in the gorse on Pickers Hill on the 17th of October, along

with numerous whinchats and stonechats all over the estate. Meadow pipits and skylarks seem to have had a good breeding season in the north due to the numbers we have seen here.

With the return of the north wind we saw a dramatic decline in the last of the hirundines (the swallows and martins) as they migrated to warmer climes – so too the hundreds of wheatears we've seen here, along with a handful of the Greenland wheatear variety.



Nightjar



May Berryman (l) and
Nora Greenfield (r)

The story behind 'Nora's Garden'

John Robinson

In the 1920s Edward Hay Greenfield, a London solicitor with his own business in Lincolns Inn, was living in Camden Hill with his wife Ella and two young daughters, Frances and Nora. When she was six months old, Frances, the elder daughter, caught whooping cough and their doctor suggested that sea air would be beneficial – and so the family started spending every summer in Seaford.

In 1930 they saw in the paper that my Grandfather was selling Sutton House and they bought it – and Nora's long association with Iford began. The sisters went to Wistons School (1921-1969) in Dyke Road, Brighton and Edward took the steam train to London every day. In 1933 there was an epidemic of flu which Frances caught. The doctor sent for oxygen but when it arrived the tap of the cylinder was seized. By the time a replacement arrived Frances had died. She was 13. Although Nora said very little about it, the effect on her must have been profound. Early photos clearly show Frances as the elder responsible sister and Nora as the mischievous younger sibling. She was now forced to take on the role of the responsible sister and her life of looking after other people began.

Nora was called up during the war and worked initially in West Croydon and then at an electronics factory in Brighton making radar equipment. Her father Edward died at Christmas 1947 and shortly after, her mother Ella bought 'Soanberge' on the Kingston Road and sold Sutton House to Lord Rothermere. Nora would have been about 30 at this time. Although she now lived nearer Lewes, Nora's heart was always in Iford where she had spent most of her lifetime, and she remained completely immersed in village life.

When I was born in 1946, and my brother and sister later on, she used to babysit us and became a very close member of the family. It is hard to imagine today but there was so little traffic in those days that she used to walk us in our prams along the C7 to Soanberge.

When her mother Ella moved into Soanberge she employed a young woman called May Berryman as a servant. May had had a very hard life. One leg was in irons as a result of polio as a child. Orphaned in her late twenties, homeless and with no means of supporting herself, she was sent to a convent run by a particularly cruel set of nuns. She eventually plucked up the courage

to run away and fortuitously answered Ella Greenfield's advert. In spite of the age difference (May was 16 years older than Nora), she and Nora were to become inseparable companions. After Ella's death in 1955, May's duties gradually changed from servant into more of a helper/companion to Nora. Eventually there was complete reversal of roles, with Nora looking after May until her death in 1997.

Nora was once described to me as being the most tactless person that they had ever known! Certainly you always knew where you were with her because she always said exactly what she thought, regardless of who she was talking to or what other people might think. Essentially though, she had a heart of gold. She 'adopted' various women who had fallen on hard times and, if you visited Soanberge, there was always one or two of these ladies staying with her. She had a remarkable affinity with children too, considering that she had none of her own, and when our own were young she always managed to produce the ideal present – always inexpensive but always exactly what was required.

For over 60 years Nora was at the heart of every social activity that took place in Iford – the W.I., whist drives, the church, flower shows and fetes. She even paid for the heating in the hall. When she died in 1999 she had no known living relatives and, although I was no such thing, she had appointed me as her 'next of kin'. As such I had the privilege of organising her funeral and winding up her affairs. 'Nora's Garden', which is in the early stages of construction next to the hall, is one small way that I can repay my enormous debt to her and I hope that it will bring enjoyment to future generations of villagers.

Opposite: The gravestone in Iford churchyard commemorating Edward and Ella Greenfield and their two daughters, Frances and Nora

