

Thorne & Hatfield Moors Oral History Project

Interview with: James Hinchliffe

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Interviewer: Lynne Fox

This is Lynne Fox for the Thorne and Hatfield Moors Oral History Project. It's the 23rd November 2006 and I'm talking this morning to, this afternoon, to Mr James Hinchcliffe.

Hinchliffe.

Hinchliffe, I'm sorry.

It's all right.

Mr Hinchliffe, can you just describe where we are?

We're at Top House Farm, Rawcliffe Bridge, which is the farm on the north side of the main east coast railway line that, and there's another farm over the railway line, before you get to Thorne Moors. We also farm that farm, which is called Priory Farm. That's the farm that has quite a big border with Thorne Moors and we farm right up to the edge of Thorne Moors.

So the road that I took to get down here turned off at Rawcliffe Bridge.

It's called Moor Road.

Right, and that goes down to Creyke's Sidings.

That goes to Creyke's Sidings and then, carries on then to enter the moors, at what they call Creyke's Gate. Creyke's Sidings were where the peat works were originally.

Have you always lived here?

No, came in nineteen sixty-six.

Where were you before that?

Newland. Which is near Drax, and we came here in sixty-six. I were six years old and the moors was sort of a big mystery and Brian Hibbard took me first time. I think you've already spoke to Brian haven't you, and we went to the gull colony. I can't remember much about it but it seemed a long way away and it was fantastic, and then probably went two or three times a year till I was eleven and then I didn't go on the moors till I was in me forties again. So I had a big break.

Why was that?

I was too busy. First with school and then when I left school I was busy working on the farm and that was more important than going on the moors and then, about three years ago, I was introduced to John Hitchcock, who you've also spoken to, and he was a volunteer and he sort of got me interested and became a volunteer then and it's a marvellous place.

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Volunteer for English Nature?

English Nature, that's right yeah.

If I can take you right back to being six or whatever...

Yeah.

What, you, your family are, are they all farmers?

Yes, yep and I've got an elder brother who was nine when we came and Brian Hibbard was a little bit older than us, he'd be about eleven and because we were isolated we'd no other playmates, sort of thing, and he was the only, well he had a brother as well, they were the only children at Creyke's Sidings, so you know, that was our first introduction to, sort of other children in this area that we could play with and his father I think worked on the moors and that's how we got onto the moors as well.

Tell me about this gull colony, what was this?

Well I can't really remember much about it but, if you go on the moors now it's big vast open spaces, because it's been, the peat's been taken off industrially with big machines, whereas in the mid sixties, I can't remember, they had some sort of machines, but it was basically a lot less intensive and there was huge areas, as I remember it, with sort of like wooded, and like a wilderness. Whereas now it's started to grow back but it's like vast open areas. I think there's still a gull colony there but it's not as I imagined it when I was six. But then when you're six you're only about three foot off the ground and anything six foot looks tall, whereas when you get old and you're six foot tall, things at six foot tall, you're eye level so they don't look as big. So it could be a bit deceptive.

You've done it a little bit just there, but can you describe to me what the moors looked like when you were that age?

Well it seemed a lot wilder, a lot more vegetation, tall vegetation, whereas now it seems quite bleak really, you know. Well as I say, we didn't go on, maybe only two or three times a year and it would only be till I was eleven and then I went to, this is me father, [someone enters] went to, went to secondary school and then I was busy playing rugby and things like that and never had time to do, anything like go on t'moors, so. It was only till about three years ago that I ever went on t'moors again, so it's quite a gap really.

Did you, I know you lived just near to Creyke's Sidings, but did you ever see the peat diggers themselves?

No, they used to go very early in the morning. I've heard them go on their motorbikes and they used to come back about two o' clock in an afternoon when they'd, got tired I suppose, cause it's hard work. Cause they didn't tend to dig so much in the winter because it was wet, you know they used to, and then we used to have a bus load of the stackers that used to turn it for drying out. They used to come this way sometimes, but not a lot, no, no we didn't have a lot of, what's the word...

Contact.

Contact with 'em no, no, no.

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Can you describe your, what the farms like...

It's all arable, we've no stock and it's all combined with crops, we've no potatoes or sugar beat, just wheat, oil seed rape, linseed, beans, that's all we've got.

And has it always been like that?

No, no it used to grow potatoes and sugar beat but we stopped in about nineteen eighties. In fact some of the same people that used to stack the peat used to come and pick the potatoes, you know in autumn, not many but some did, yeah.

Were they local people?

From Thorne, Moorends.

How was that organised, how did that happen?

It's was sort of like from mother to daughter, you know, word of mouth really and then we used to go pick them up and you know, one year to the next. You know, they would tend to have what, a main lady that looked, sort of organised the work and then spread it about to who they wanted to come with them really.

Now, I think you've said that you don't actually, there's none of the actual moorland is incorporated into the farm?

No.

But you go, do you go right up to the edge?

We go up to the edge, yes.

How does, does that affect you at all, how does the farm work with the, being so close to the moor?

[someone enters]

This is me nephew, well I've got him to be a volunteer.

* Afternoon.

Oh, hello.

So, no, only, only affect we really have is the rabbits come off the moors and nibble our crops and the deer, but we don't get any, we feared when they stopped digging the peat and, cause to dig the peat they liked it as dry as possible, and now Natural England, we better call them, are trying to grow the moss again so they want it wetter, we feared that that would have some affect by making all the surrounding land wet and making it more difficult to farm but we haven't found that as yet. So, it hasn't had a lot, no it doesn't have a lot of affect on the farm apart from we do get rabbits and deers that live on the moors come and nibble the crops, which, it's not too bad, but it's worse some years than others.

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Do you do anything special on the farm because of being so close?

No, nothing at all, we don't do anything more special on that farm than we do on any of our others.

* Just follow good agricultural practice

That's right, yeah.

And what's good agricultural practice?

What we do! Obey all the, the rules and regulations what the government say, which all farmers do!

[Laughter]

I notice that you, I now this wood down there...

That's my wood yes.

Has got a notice on it about birds.

It has yes.

Can you tell me a bit about that?

Well that has benefited from being near the moors cause we get certain birds that we would, if you was on a farm that wasn't too near a moorland you wouldn't get the harriers which we get, the marsh harrier and the hen harrier, hunting over that wood, cause we've got rabbits and pheasants and things in there. Kevin the manager on Thorne Moors says it's because of the moors that I've got quite a lot of birds on this farm and I say it's because of my farm with all these birds that he's got them on the moors, so, because some birds are farmland birds and some birds are moorland birds you see. So, it, I think they help each other, you know, cause all the farms in the area used to have a wood and ours was the only one that was left standing, they was all cut down between the war and nineteen seventy, was the last one that was cut down, cause they asked if they wanted to cut ours down and we said no and we enlarged it in nineteen ninety three, we added another seven acres. The original woodland's four acres, old, oak woodland and we added another seven acres in nineteen ninety-three.

Why did you do that?

It's one of the poorer fields on the farm and there was good government grants that assisted that and, sort of just an interest in trees really.

So it wasn't because of the birds and the wildlife?

No, no, in mi' original forestry, cause when you apply for the forestry commission grant you have to state your aims in planting a woodland, and wildlife and birds was right at the bottom of the list, timber production was the original main aim, and now...

[Voice in background]

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I think it's probably the least of me aims.

Why do you say?

Well A, it's not very good land and if it's not very good land for growing crops it's generally not real good land for growing anything and that includes trees, and I've got more into wildlife, you know, enjoy wildlife and that's sort of taken precedence over trying to make money of it. Well no doubt it will make money, but it's a long, you know, and oak takes hundred and fifty years to get, to be any decent timber out of it.

Is there any other part, I'm gonna come back to that in a second, you said that the farms all had their trees, or the area had the trees cut down.

They each had a wood, because it was part of a big estate you see Creyke's was a, they had the hall at Rawcliffe and he got killed, the heir got killed in the first world war and some sort of arrangement with the West Riding County Council took over a lot of the land, and another estate took over some of the land and of course the second world war came and we were short of food and government encouraged people to chop woodland down and turn grassland into arable land to grow crops and between then and nineteen seventy when that was still going on, all the farms that was part of the estate had the woodlands taken down and there's very little grassland as well in this area. You know, it's all been drained, under drained, tile drained, into the ditches and you know, it's good agricultural arable land now, rather than grassland and woodland. And ours, our wood is on a particularly poor bit of soil and it made no sense to pay somebody to chop it down when we probably wouldn't have grown good crops on it anyway. So that's the reason ours is still stood.

Does it have actual protection that piece of woodland?

No I don't think so.

Okay. You said that you think that the farm and the moor work together.

Yes.

Can you just tell me a bit, in what way you're thinking?

The moors is very good habitat but there's not a lot of food on it and things like yellow hammers and corn buntings and that need the bushes and that when they're on the edge of the moors, but they needs cereal seeds and grass seeds which grow more on the farms to feed on, so it's alright having nice bushes, but they also need food as well. So that's how I think it helps and quite a lot of the government thinking is towards putting strips round fields to provide both habitat and food for birds and small mammals I think they recognise that as well.

And do they not interfere with your business?

Well at the moment we're getting, we get payments for having these strips if we want, I mean, we aren't in any schemes, so we're doing just because we like birds, but a lot of farmers have got this environmental stewardship scheme where they can take so much money to put these strips to help wildlife around their fields.

But the birds and the rabbits and the things don't really..

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The birds have no effect, the rabbits can have an effect but English Nature do do some controlling from time to time and then myxomatosis comes along, that wipes a few out, so I w'unt say they've caused us any real damage but there's always the chance that they could.

Now I know that you've got a good relationship with English Nature and in fact you do..

Natural England now we're to call 'em now.

Yes, we are now, Natural England, and I know that you do some voluntary work for them.

That's right yes.

Can you tell me a bit about that?

Oh, that's excellent, but it's mainly doing menial tasks as we think, you know, labouring tasks, but they do get us doing some survey work. We've been surveying the Large Heath butterfly which is specific to Thorne Moors and that's quite interesting and I think that's what I enjoy the most because I can do labouring tasks at home! But, and the other thing is you get a good group of people all working together and enjoying it, you know, being out in the countryside, so, yeah, I'd recommend it to anybody.

Now you said there was this big period where you didn't go on the moors cause you were...

Busy.

Very busy, yeah.

Yeah.

And did you always have an interest in wildlife?

Not really, no, no, no, no, I was just interested in mi' sport and farming and that.

So how did that develop, how did that interest start?

I suppose it started when we planted the trees in ninety three, I got into thinking more about nature then, and as I say, it's about three years ago that John Hitchcock, I was introduced to him on another matter and he said that he did this butterfly work and he was a volunteer on the moors, I says 'oh I'll join up for that', cause I'd be able to go with him you see and that's how I got started on the moors, again.

Just, I'm sorry I appear to be hopping about a bit, I just was interested in, you going back to when you were a youngster and you went to look at the gulls and what have you, what kind of things did you go onto the, you went to look at the gulls but what did you get up to as a youngster?

Well we was, birds nesting, we were after eggs. That was the original plan, not that we ever got any, cause I was a bit timid and when it's wet, you, and I can't swim, so I never actually got any eggs, but it was just the excitement of going onto a wilderness and like young lads are, I mean, they maybe don't do so much these days, but you know, from, what will it be from this farm to where t'gull colony, you know it'd be like a mile, which you know, six year old, takes a long time to get

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there and then you've got to get back and your mother will have been worrying where you are and it was just a big excitement.

And was it easier to get about?

No it wasn't, because you didn't want to be spotted by the Fisons workers, cause you shouldn't really have been on, and, you were sort of fighting through undergrowth. But when you're six, and I wasn't very big, it would seem quite big, even if it wasn't really big, if you understand, so. I can't remember much about it, that's, it's all a bit vague really. But it was, it did seem a real wilderness, like a jungle and then when I went on just three years ago, started again, it was like all, like a moon landscape. It has grown up a bit now in vegetation but it was all bare land.

What did you think to that?

I thought it was a shame really, but it's too late once it's done, you know, you've got to carry on from where you were, rather than thinking how it would have been, cause John brought me a book about when it was in it's pristine condition, how it swelled up with the winter rains and it obscured t'church spire it grew that much. You know, it must have been a fantastic thing if you could go back now that we've learnt to appreciate these things and that they are rare. I suppose people in this area wouldn't think that it was a rare thing, you know, because they'd been grown and, you know, they made a living from digging peat or working round and you know, just part of the local countryside. Whereas, you know, it is quite, a raised peat bog, there wasn't very many in the country to start with.

And can you see the changes that there have been since the peat digging has stopped?

Definitely, yes there's definitely more vegetation coming in, whether it's all the right vegetation that they, Natural England think should be there, you know they're doing work to take out the silver birch and that, but yeah, I've been going on three years and there's huge difference, a lot more cotton grass growing, which is marvellous in May and that. Yes I can, definitely.

And the increase in deer's not gonna cause you too much trouble then?

Well I suppose it will get to a, a limit of natural, cause they're very territorial, so once they get to the amount that they can have for the territory, you know, the deer will move onto somewhere else. Rabbits that would be more of a problem, you know, if they got out of hand, but it's fairly wet you see in the middle, so they'll never, sort of, rabbits be all over the moors, it's just on the edges where it's a bit drier, cause it's slightly raised because they didn't dig the peat right up to the edge, that's mainly where the rabbits are. So, no I can't visualise that that will be a big problem, and English Nature when we've mentioned it before, well they have taken steps to try and reduce the numbers, so, we have a fairly good relationship with them. They understand and they don't want too many rabbits either, because they eat their things what they're trying to introduce.

Well this, I mean the peat digging was a very big, or reasonably sized industry.

It was yes.

Employed a few people, and now obviously that's gone or on the process of disappearing and I wondered if it did have any impact or what people thought about the impact that was going to have. Now having a nature reserve as opposed to a peat moor.

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It's funny I've just introduced a lad who's lived in Rawcliffe Bridge, I don't know how many years, and he had no idea the moors was there. Most of the peat chaps who I can remember coming on their motorbikes early in the morning, they were all nearly about retiring age anyway when sort of peat was being, well it became less labour intensive anyway towards the end. So there was less people involved at the end that got made redundant anyway and they were probably all nearly retiring age anyway, so I, I don't think it had so much impact on that. But it's really amazing how few people who live in Rawcliffe Bridge know about the moors. I'm quite pleased because I don't want a lot of people traipsing about over it anyway, cause I have my view that it should be left as a nature reserve, rather than trying to have open access and people out to walk all over it with the dogs. Cause I mean, you get responsible people and you get irresponsible people. Whereas if it's left for nature and the few people there on the better, you know, it's better for the nature side.

That's a bit selfish, cause I mean I can go on and enjoy the peace and tranquillity, whereas if it was opened up more, you know, there'd be more people on, more noise, you know, more chance of things going wrong and especially in summer it's very risky because of the fire risk. You know, I can remember some fires and I mean it took months to get it out. They had to have a pipe from the canal all the way to the moors, to pump, keep pumping water on to put it out. You know, it's quite a dangerous area in summer. You know, in winter it's a different thing because it's wetted up, but in summer with all the bracken and that, I mean, and that causes a lot of damage and I know Natural England are weighing up what they're going to do and some are really for a lot of access and people like me are very much against opening it up, but it sort of a bit of a selfish view, from my point of view, cause I can go on and enjoy it and, I can see where they're coming from but I mean, you've got to decide. You can't, it's very difficult to have a thing that's good for nature and allow lots of people to look at it.

What do you enjoy about the moors?

I like the bleakness, and the sound of the wind in open, yeah, you know, the tranquil, that, the openness and peace, yeah.

I think I can relate to that, and you say that this area doesn't have any government schemes to help support you?

No it does.

For working with wildlife.

It does, yes, but we've chose not to go in them. Basically because we think they're a bit restrictive and, sort of we've had experience with these sort of things and they're maybe better not bothering with, and doing your own thing if you can, rather than a lot of government interference. But there are farms that are around the edge of the moors that are going into government schemes and, I'm sure it'll benefit the birds, yeah, and small mammals, which, you know, the raptors feed on, so, yeah, it's good thinking. But how long the money 'ull last I don't know, we've heard something this morning that, with the Olympic Games' costs going up that rural development spending's being dragged back to the treasury to help fund the Olympic Games, so, you know. They'll have to wait while the Olympic Games are over and then it'll become a priority maybe again.

So, you got the wood.

I've got the wood yeah.

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And you say that you leave areas around the fields.

A few, round the edges.

Yeah, tell me, tell me a bit about the, tell me a bit more about what you actually, say you'd rather do it yourselves.

We've put grass, we've put six metre grass strips, some with wild flowers, sown in them, not all of them, round all the fields that have a ditch and that's basically to encourage birds. It's not on a government scheme, but they could be if you wanted to be. Things like planting clover, oxeye daisy, bernet, teasels, and they're mainly to benefit birds and small mammals which, you know, we're trying to encourage barn owls. We've also put nest boxes up for the tree sparrows, cause that's one of the declining farmland birds and that's worked really well, cause they're idle birds and need somebody to put a nest box, they need somebody to put food out, and then they'll do all right. But they're not very hard working and don't like searching out very far for a nest. But if you put lots of boxes up you can get lots of tree sparrows. So that's been a big success.

We've had a good year with partridges breeding because of the dry June, when it's a wet June and the chicks have just hatched it's a bit of a struggle to rear them, but this year it was dry in June. So, and they, they like the grass strips cause you know, they're like, permanent whereas the arable crops we're always tilling and drilling and tilling and you know, every year you have to work the land and drill, so it gets disturbed and there's not maybe as many insects and things. Whereas in these grass strips there's more, well it's different wildlife, that's the thing, biodiversity's the word. So.

You say small mammals, what are you thinking about?

Well shrews and voles and things what owls will eat. We haven't had any, I mean we have a assessment seven times a year on the farm, what birds are here, but we haven't done a small mammal assessment at the farm yet to see what the baseline is and if it's encouraging them, these grass strips. But I suspect it is.

And who does all the assessments?

Well they do it to RSPB standards, but it's not through the RSPB, because they sort of fell out, as people do, but it is.

* It's pretty thorough.

Well it is proper thorough, they're busy writing up there reports for the last [goes to fetch report] but that's the two thousand and three report.

Gosh that's a sizeable tome isn't it.

It is, I've got to shoot you now I've shown you that!

[Laughter]

Crikey, is this one of your boxes on the front cover?

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That's the box, yeah they're made in Germany out of straw and concrete they're indestructible, last forever.

So have you had this done, I mean have you paid to have this done?

No I haven't paid it, we have trials on the farm, BASF, big German chemical company, who make agrochemicals among lots of other things. They have trials on this farm and I know, well, and open three days in June and part of the agricultural, to try and stop Gordon Brown, the Chancellor, putting a tax on agrochemicals the agriculture industry started what was called the voluntary initiative, which is like a partnership between all the stakeholders in agriculture to try and prove that agrochemicals aren't harming the environment to the detriment of birds and other wildlife. And one of the aspects of many is that all these big chemical companies have to sort of adopt a farm and do various projects to enhance wildlife and BASF adopted this farm as their biodiversity project. [Inaudible] that, biodiversity action plan.

They have to do, each of the big chemical companies I think they maybe have to do more than one, cause they have another one up in Northumberland on a coast where there's some seals on a farm that runs down to the beach. So they maybe have to do two in the country and this is one and so they pay for some of the work. They've paid for the survey, I've paid for some of the boxes, they've paid for some of the boxes but they've paid for that bird survey and it's been done two thousand four, two thousand five and they've just finished two thousand six but they've only got that report and you know, it's fully comprehensive, it's been, they've been down to RSPB. RSPB have bought a farm in Cambridgeshire, very similar to this, so, cause they quite anti-farmer are the RSPB, I don't know if you know that, but they are. They say we're real baddies, killing everything and part of this is to try and prove that we don't. So we have to do them at least to RSPB, preferably better than their standards.

But you know, it's fully scientific the search, you know, they're both doctors and they're doing their surveying and sort of independent so that the RSPB can't pick holes in. Cause we, of some species, we've got way above national averages, particularly skylarks and corn buntings and the ongoing work is to see why and if we can keep them. The skylarks have gone up but the corn buntings have declined while we've been doing it since two thousand and three, and the meadow pipits have declined. But the tree sparrows we've put in boxes and you know, we've five hundred percent more tree sparrows. So some things are working, but we haven't actually done anything, as we know of, to affect the corn buntings, it's very difficult to study. Cause, you know, you've only maybe got three or four pairs and you know, we haven't worked out whether it's to do with the cropping or weather or, whether these grass strips are gonna be better or worse, are they making predator corridors, so it's easier for foxes and that to get to 'em.

You know, there's a lot of things in it, you know, it's not all straight forward, so, it's been quite eye opening, I mean having that report. We've got over ninety birds, different types of birds being recorded on the farm over the four years, so that's quite good and we regularly have about fifty to sixty different birds, year on year. Some of those ninety are only occasional sightings, not seen every year, so, quite pleasing really. Cause we haven't got a pond, cause apparently if you have a pond on the farm that increases your species no end. So that might be a future project.

He's looking at you!

He doesn't, he d'unt want me to have a pond.

Why don't you want a pond, cause you'll have to dig it?!

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* Yeah!

Yeah, that's why.

[Laughter]

Though he's like what I was between the ages of eleven and forty-three, there's other priorities you see.

Yeah. Does this measure what you actually do anyway on the farm, or is this something that you do with BASF that introduces different things onto the farm to see how they work, do you know what I'm saying? Is this just a measure of what..

That is a measure, that is the base, that's the year measure before we did anything.

Two thousand and three.

Three, we put the boxes up after that report, because I didn't get that report while two thousand and four, they used a picture from the two thousand four summer for the front cover, so, what we've done, basically since then is we've put some food crops in, that's part of a trial.

Food crops for the?

Birds, that's like quinoa and sunflowers, kale.

* Just after the wood on the right hand side, have you notice them strips there?

Yes I have noticed them yeah.

Well that's a trial on different...

* Bird food crops.

To see which birds like which crop best.

Oh right.

And as far as we know there isn't anybody else in the country doing that work. But I mean, that's as far as we know, that doesn't mean to say somebody isn't. But as far as we know that's what's happening.

And if you found that say certain birds like a certain crop...

Yes we have yeah, I can't tell you what they are because I haven't got the report yet, but the people say that they have. I have briefly glimpsed at some grass that show, like, is it...

* Finches on teasels.

Yeah, but what, what do they call them graphs where you have columns?

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* Bar graphs.

Bar graphs, I've seen some bar graphs flipped in front of me that looked quite promising, but I haven't actually had time to study what's feeding on what.

And when you find out, what, how will that...

Well I'm hoping to get English Nature involved, cause, are you aware they've bought some land, moor land at bottom of Sam's farm.

No but I wouldn't be necessarily.

No. Well, cause they've had some of their funding stopped haven't they, for, for anything over about five thousand pound, they can't do anything, it's, cause of this change over from Natural, English Nature, to Natural England and government wanting their money back. They've sort of money, they've bought this land, our neighbouring farm, I think it's seventeen acres and they were going to dig it out and bund it and make it wetland. Well if they've run out of money I'm going to suggest to Kevin that we planted some of these bird crops on, and although it may be won't be habitat for nesting it'd be feed area. So, that's one thing in my mind that might be of some assistance, but it depends if they're in favour of it doesn't it. Cause it's all right having places to live, they've got to have something to eat as well.

And do you think your fellow neighbouring farmers might have a different opinion about that?

Well some will and some won't.

I was thinking if it, you know, is it going to...

Well if it's on, if it's on English Nature's land English Nature can nearly do what they like.

It won't affect other people?

* No.

Well I don't, I can't see how putting food crop on, I mean it's only like another normal crop. Cause if, if you left an area of wheat, say, I mean we grow our, fifty percent of our land maybe a bit more is in with wheat. If we left an area at the side of the moor unharvested the birds 'ud come and feed in that anyway wouldn't they. It's just a matter of getting the best crop for the bird that you're trying to encourage, you know. If you're trying to encourage lots of different birds you need maybe different sorts of crops. I mean the finches love sunflowers, but not much else eats the sunflowers, well it's mainly greenfinches. The reed buntings seem to go on the quinoa a bit and that, and they don't bother with the sunflowers, so you know, you've got to decide what you're trying to help and then plant accordingly.

Now as you said BASF are a chemical, agrochemical...

They are yes.

So do you change the way you use your chemicals because of...

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No, no that's part of the, my, why I said I would do it is I wanted it to be done on a proper commercial arable farm that wasn't one of these farmers that sort of farmed, just with nature in mind, we're trying to make as much money as we can by growing crops as intensively as the rules and regulations allow, to try and prove that the vast majority of farmers in this country that are not organic, you know, that are farming conventionally with chemicals and that aren't killing everything. Cause we know we aren't, because walk into our fields and they're full of life. Rather than, you know, RSPB can buy a farm and not spray it with, you know, go organic so there's no chemicals, no fertilizers and you know, that proves, you know, maybe bird life does increase, but I'm trying to prove that you can increase it on a normal farm by just doing little things and it's not the agrochemicals fault why birds have declined and I think, well certainly on some birds, but I wouldn't say on all birds, because it's very difficult. You need to do it over, maybe twenty years, to find out cause, you know one year to next things go up and down don't they.

But the big success is bringing tree sparrows back, providing them with nest boxes and food all year round. We've had some huge increases in numbers of those.

And you said you were trying to encourage barn owls.

Yes.

Have you had a success with that?

We haven't had any breeding but we've seen some flying over these grass strips so that's a start. We've put owl boxes up but the tawny owls have gone in those, so we're going to put some more out, cause a tawny owl is dominant over a barn owl, so a barn owl wouldn't go in a box that a tawny owl in, whereas a tawny owl would kick a barn owl out if it wanted it's box. It would boss the barn owl out. We've had two years breeding tawny owls, so I class that as a success and kestrels and little owls. So it's just a matter of patience really.

I don't know whether you mentioned this right at the beginning, you may have done and I've forgotten, can you tell me how, how big...

No I didn't.

How big your farm, the two farms are?

The two farms together are about five hundred and eighty acres.

And do they join together?

They do, but there's a railway line in between, that railway line there.

Well I'm just very amazed about, what, what you're able to do within, you know, the confines if you like of trying to run a business as well, so.

Yeah.

And still find to time to work...

Well it's only one day a month in't it, volunteer.

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What that you work for Natural England?

Yeah. It's only one Sunday a month and then they have, they have January at home, cause it's too near new years day so that's only eleven and then they have...

* They one off in summer cause...

[Both talking]

They have the, yeah, they had the April one off cause it rained, so. It's not that onerous!

[Laughter]

So what exactly have you been, what kind, I know you said...

The best one's the February one, you ought to come on the February one.

* Cause that is excellent.

It's excellent, it's on Thorne Moors and we're doing nightingale management, that's cutting old willow to make new willow grow up.

* Coppicing it.

Coppicing it.

* Making...

[Both talking]

You come on that one don't you. It is fantastic, there's about nearly twenty of us and, have you been to see Kath, maybe cause, is it just Thorne Moors that you're doing rather than Hatfield.

Thorne and Hatfield.

Have you been to see Kath Smith?

No, who's she?

She's a volunteer. Her and her Ernie worked about two or three days a week as a volunteer for English Nature.

I've heard, I've heard about Ernie, yeah.

Yeah, well Kath's his wife she, if anybody has an injured bird they take it to her and she nurses it, and she found a big deer antler in these, things.

* Was it a seven pointer?

Seven point deer antler.

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Wow.

Cause you get into t'wilds, and I mean you don't have, I've only been the February one the March one and then I went on the November one, because we're busy in summer, I would have done the June one but the, when I was saying English Nature's rubbish, they cocked up the butterfly survey, so we've missed a whole year, so I'm really upset with 'em about that.

The butterfly survey.

The butterfly survey.

I have to say that you did say English Nature are rubbish with a sort of smile on your face!

[Laughter]

I wouldn't want them, somebody to pick that sentence out and get your, wrong reputation!

[Laughter]

I know you don't mean it.

I don't mean it at all, but you know, if you, see they don't run a business they're a government organisation and they look at things from a different angle.

And there is only four of 'em in't there?

Five of 'em.

Five of 'em, or don't you count Kevin!

[Laughter]

* We'll tell him that!

So they've not got masses of staff, but...

Yeah, but volunteers were going to do it, they only had to organise it. That's what's upsetting, we'd done it the previous two years, I was the only one that had, it's over four weekends, June, end of June, beginning of July, I was the only one that had done the whole, both four times each year.

What does it, what do you do?

You just walk round a set route and record how many of these butterflies you see and then from that they will tabulate whether it's a good year or bad year, if populations are declining, or increasing and if the area is spreading, because part of your route is done where they've never seen the butterflies before and if you see them then they'll know that they've increased their area. That's part of what the cotton grass is to do, cause the caterpillars eat the cotton grass, some part of the cotton grass I don't know fully.

So I was quite upset with 'em for missing a year, because having had this sort of report done on my farm, I know the importance of having year on year on year else you can't see trends and, and

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things like that, so, anyway we've had a meeting and they've got it in their calendar already for next year.

Good.

So, and everybody likes doing the butterfly survey, cause I mean most of the volunteer work's sort of like hard grafting, as hard grafting you can for Natural England, but whereas this is sort of just walking round and observing and doing like study work which is slightly different, and you know, you get to see the moors and nice and sunny, cause they only come out in summer, so it's generally good weather. As long as you've got your insect repellent on you're all right.

This hard graft, this is building some of the paths and things is it?

Pathway maintenance and cutting down, if paths get overgrown, cutting down, you know branches that are over, so people can walk down the pathways and things like that.

Cause, have they built some new paths and things, some new access ways?

I think they have yes, I haven't had much, as I say, I did the February volunteer which is always the nightingale management on Thorne Moors and I can't remember what we did.

* April we went down towards, past Bailey bridge towards...

Oh yeah we, the March one was, pathway maintenance, it's an established path but it got overgrown with branches and that we were chopping them down and then I didn't go while November and November I was tractor driving taking stone. They were making a roadway, so, that's the only, and then I think this December one we're at Hatfield Moor we're doing some more pathway, scrub, you know, making a pathway, you know it's got overgrown, chopping that down. So yeah, it's real good fun. The April one two years ago, when we was on Hatfield, Kath, myself and Jean, I don't know, Goodthorne is it?

Yeah, yeah.

We was doing pathway maintenance and we saw eight adders and we kept, we had to keep going back and forwards and about half an hour in between and the adder kept coming, we disturbed it when we walked by, but by time we come back it'd come back to same place to sun again, in the sun. So that was the first adders that I'd seen on Hatfield, I've seen odd one on but not as good views as I saw not this April, the April before.

And you've seen 'em on Thorne have you?

I have seen them on Thorne yeah, but not many.

So you're getting involved as well in all this?

* Yeah, I've been, is it two years I've been going a'nt I.

Yeah, but he's only been on the February one, cause he's even busier than me.

* And March I've been.

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Aye, you did two last years d'int you. I'm trying to get him to go this December but he ant said yes or no yet. He a'nt been to Hatfield you see.

Oh right.

Different in't it Hatfield.

Very different, very.

* Last time I've been on Hatfield was about ten years back

Oh it'll be interesting to see what you think about how different it might be, I didn't know it ten years ago but I've been recently, you know obviously, in the last few months and it's very different to Thorne.

Oh aye it is yeah, well I say they want to keep all people going round Hatfield, put big iron fence round Thorne so nobody can get on it.

Do you have any rights of way then at, around here, I'm not going to...

No I don't think there is really. It's a private road this, but public have right of way up to the crossing, because, from when it was the sidings, and then after the crossing that's way it's only invitees, it's not a right of way, it's allowed to be walked I think, but not vehicle.

You mean round the houses at...

Round the houses at Creyke's Sidings and up there. But it's all from the cottages, it's a private road, it's not a council road or adopted road or anything, we have to maintain it, the farmers and the people that live at the crossing, Creyke's Sidings. So, see it's all, it's not old land you see, we get more rights of way and that in areas that are old land, this was all marsh and bog you see until Vermuyden draining it. So, you know, no, no pathways across, cause you know it didn't go anywhere as such and you know, it wasn't easy to cross, so they sort of went round.

* Then it was estate land and that was all closed...

Yeah, you see, big private landowner owned it he wouldn't want, he wouldn't make any rights of way would he.

Is it, is it warped land here?

Yeah, yeah we're warped land, yeah.

Do you ever, I mean is it, how, do you know how thick a layer of warp land?

It varies, I've some that's only ten inches of warp, have you ever seen warp?

Well only the top of it obviously, I've never dug down..

You haven't seen the warp.

No.

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* Have you got some laid up?

[goes off to fetch box of warp soil]

* [inaudible] you can see all the layers of when they laid it, if you dig deep enough to soil that hasn't been disturbed from when it was warped and you can see where they laid it out [inaudible] and for different thickness of layers. You see after they warped it they had to grass it down for so many years to get some organic matter it or otherwise it was just like river mud and what happened in this area was, it used to be, before t'first world war it was cavalry horses were run on it, all this land to help build up the organic matter and then [inaudible] during wars and potatoes in to feed Manchester across t'Pennines.

[opens box of warp]

That was very interesting thank you. It's like slate in't it.

Yeah, that's it dried, but each tide puts down one layer of silt you see.

Wow, I never imagined that you'd be able to see it, with it being silt, you'd think it'd all mash together wouldn't you.

But it does when you work it, that's, that's virgin warp that's under the cultivation layer.

* That hadn't been disturbed until it was dug up.

From when it was laid, from the day it was laid to the day dug up, that had never seen light of day or anything.

So you've got peat underneath?

There's very little peat under this land, it's only about that much.

So what's underneath?

Sand.

Sand, sand and then this on top, in fact it's sandy isn't it, you can feel, this on top and then when you say cultivation layer what do you mean.

Well it's about, what you plough and that brings organic matter in you see as soon as you start cultivating, but the residue from grass and things and that's why soil's black, sort of brownie and this is sort of, when you dig it up it's really light brown, it's no organic matter in there or anything you see.

* It's mud.

It's mud.

And so, the, the cultivation layer is actually this that's been worked.

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Worked.

* Worked.

Yeah.

* Mixed around with...

Mixed around with, you know, crop residues and, well, manure, you know, when they used to spread manure on land, when everybody had stock and, crop residues, grass, roots from growing crops and things like that.

And you were saying that they ran the cavalry horses on here?

Yes, yes, the first world war this farm on the estate bred cavalry horses for t'first world war, cause it was nearly all, well it would be nearly all grass, cause all though Vermuyden had drained it, it wasn't drained to the same extent as it is now.

* He'd just dried up t' marsh and then laid a bit of warp on hadn't he?

That's right.

And so that would just make it, would it make it good for grass or would it be very wet?

Yeah, it'd be a bit too wet, but I mean, it'd be, you know, it's quite good land is warp land you know.

* It was stage one of improving the land...

That's right, yeah. Yeah, I doubt whether you'd be able to grow arable crops on virgin warp anyway, you'd have to have it grassed to stabilise it.

* Well I think it was in t'contract of when it was warped it had to be grassed for so many years.

Yeah.

* It was part of the contract, you know, to grass it down.

Why was that?

* Well to get the organic matter in.

Matter in, so that it wouldn't be wasted.

* And if you notice as you drive down t'road, you can see one side of the road higher than the other and it's depending on the landowner at the time how much they could afford to what depth of water they could afford, how long they could keep it out of production.

You mean how many years they had it?

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Yeah, yeah.

[Both talking]

* How many years they had for warp on it because this road back towards the village was a warping bank we believe.

Yeah that makes sense.

* To separate it.

Yeah, and presumably if you worked this and then didn't put, if you sort of ploughed it and didn't put any, didn't allow that organic matter to build up, it would blow away would it?

No it be, it'd be mud, you wouldn't be able to work it. You need some structure in to, hold it together. As soon as that gets wet it'll just go to mud and it's real silky, you know you said it's sandy, but if you, if you...

[All talking]

* If you wet your finger and rub it on top it'll feel real smooth.

Real silky.

* And buttery.

Rather than, sandy, cause sand's a bit coarser.

That's what you're saying then. So really would grassland have been worth any money, I mean would it have been worth, would they have made money out of it?

Yeah, because they would have these horses and then they would sell them on, you know, you've got to think that in pre, do you want me to take that off you, in pre first world war, you know, everything cost less but if they were producing cavalry horses for the government the government would be a good payer they would assured of getting the money wun't they if they bred good horses.

Quality horses aren't they it's not like, you know, local dobbin is it?

No, no, but if they were they wouldn't have local dobbins would they, you know, if they were producing local dobbins they'd get local dobbin price.

I were just thinking, I wondered if that, if that was, not much of an incentive for having land warped if they had to lay it down to grass for so many years.

Well that's why some people have only, some of our farms only ten inches, and then where Richard lives and some of my better land, you know we've got two feet of warp, so they were able to keep it out of production longer. But you wouldn't do all your farm all at once you see, it'd be so much and so much, do it in stages.

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But presumably they'd lay some warp down first before they'd put the...

Well it probably would be laid down before it became sort of farm land, you know, when the estate before, although it was a big estate he didn't farm it see, he built farm houses and had his tenants farming, so, that's how it worked. So, I mean the original man might have bought it off the government I don't know what it would be in eighteen hundreds, why, how they would acquire it, you know. Somebody would own it originally wun't they, although I don't know who owned, is it common land now the moors, you know, what Mr Bunting did and all that, have you got to bottom of all that?

Oh, no, and I won't, cause that's a university thesis in itself I think but..

[Laughter]

Well he's arguing it was, that it was common land, it wasn't owned by anybody but Fisons had the digging rights di'nt they to dig peat off it. Well I assume then it's still common land although English Nature paid Scotts all that money to get it, I assumed it was just to stop them digging and it's still owned by everybody.

You've only got common rights on it, is my understanding. I looked at this area in the Middle Ages in the twelve hundreds and thirteen hundreds and it was definitely owned by the lord of the manor, you know.

Yeah.

That, what they called the waste, and he leased that, he sold off or leased out little parcels of moorland for people to dig peat on, but there was also a common turbarry, there was also a common...

Yeah.

Area where anybody who had a certain land holding had a common right in it, but it dint mean that, well I suppose in that terms that they did, the village owned it, but of course that all, a lot of that changed when Vermuyden came in and all that arrangement which was one of the reasons why people were up in arms. But, you know, I mean I've seen in some of the records where the people from Hatfield Chase, because the area around Goole, the north of Thorne Moors, was owned by a different person and there was much more improvement in the north because the big churches and things owned land and they would be in to improving, to make more money. Whereas in Hatfield Chase they wanted to keep it as a holiday park, basically, so they weren't really very interested in improving the land at that time and I know a lot of, there's one particular case in something, early thirteen hundred, I can't rememeber the exact date, early thirteen hundreds where the, the men from Hatfield Chase went and broke the sluices at Marshland, at...

Swinefleet Way.

Swinefleet Way, yes, to stop them, you know, being able to control the water and draining it off because they wanted their, their wetland, to keep it wet. So you know, there's always been issues about drainage and always issues about who owns what and what have you, but some of it was only, only rights in, more than actually owning the land itself, you know.

Oh yeah.

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But it all changed, changed in sixteen hundreds with Vermuyden and it also changed in eighteen hundreds with the enclosures and all that really. So quite where that leaves us I don't know.

But that's what Bunting, though, went to court, high court about warn't it.

It was.

I thought he won.

Well he won the right, as my understanding is, he won the right for himself, but not for everybody else necessarily.

Oh right.

But I might be wrong there, so, I've not looked at that in detail.

Not that anybody wants it like, but...

* you do don't you

Yeah, I do, I loved to have it yeah.

What the whole Thorne...

Yeah, yeah.

Gosh, that'd be a drain on your resources wu'nt it?

Well I'd have to win lottery wunt I.

What would you do with it?

I'd leave it as it was.

Just put a big fence round it?

Yeah.

[Laughter]

Well I wouldn't mind people that go bird watching and, you know, that go on now, but I can't see benefit of...

* He wouldn't advertise the fact...

I can't see benefit of trying to get all people out of Moorends and Thorne and Goole and that traipsing across it cause, they wouldn't appreciate it in the same way.

* People that...

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I think they ought to do more to get school people to go to one of the moors to try and encourage it that way, but that's not easy these days wi' school trips and that is it. But I think that's way to go about it.

One of the purposes for doing this project is to make people more aware of it, because I think the idea behind it is that if they know that it's, if they know why it's important and they know what it is and that it is this great treasure on the doorstep and so on, if they value it and appreciate it more then they'll take more, they'll take care of it and they'd be a bit less inclined to, a bit more inclined to support.

Yeah.

The sort of preservation..

It's very difficult though isn't it, you know, to get the balance right between getting people onto it to appreciate it and also keeping it so it is something special.

Yeah, it is, yeah, cause I live in Sheffield, south side of Sheffield and I'm, ten minutes and I'm in middle of t'Peak Park..

Yeah.

Well not middle but, I'm in t'Peak Park and I can see the change their in my lifetime. When I was little, I mean a lot of people from Sheffield have always gone into the Peak Park and I spent my life virtually there, but now you can't move for cars and part of you thinks, oh it's marvellous people are coming out to appreciate it, but the other part thinks all I can see is shiny roofs in the sunshine, you know, and all these people around. I belong to walking clubs, so we get away from this, we go out further, but the roads are all clogged and so on and you start to think, well yeah, you know, and it's developing as a tourist place, which they need the money.

Yeah, yeah.

You know, they need the industry, they need the jobs and all that, but, and it is this balance as you say, so I think it's almost, it's okay, a few more and it'll not be...

Well that's why I think they're lucky and they've got two and my argument is why mess them both up making 'em public when you can show all the peat and that at Hatfield and you've got the lakes and things and leave Thorne to, you know, your marsh harriers nesting and your nightingales and your nightjars and whatever else so they're a bit more undisturbed. Cause I'm sure disturbance doesn't help any wildlife.

But, don't you think that Thorne and Hatfield are so different, Thorne is so different to Hatfield?

Yeah, it's so much better!

[Laughter]

In your unbiased view!

Well it is though in't it. For, as a moor, I'm not, Hatfield's better because it's got more varied, you know, it's got all that sand and gravel pits and, you know, I'm not saying it's not fantastic, but, my,

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I'm coming from the moorland point of view cause there's plenty of sand and gravel pits all over t'country that you can make into, you know, moorland there's very few, well I know it's not a raised peat bog now, but you know, it was a raised peat bog and there's very few about and if they're trying to make it back how it was, which is the stated aim isn't it, trying to get sphagnum moss and it grows a millimetre a year, in a thousand years it'll be back to where it was, or whatever.

You know, you can't have your cake and eat it, you can't then have, cause I mean one o' ideas they were gonna set up a train ride round weren't they to get people to go round, you know, well disturbance of trains and all the work that's gonna involve getting materials in. You know, whereas Hatfield it's got more hard roads cause it's sand and gravel, it's got the area of peat that we've worked to show people that are interested in peat workings, it's got some mature-ish woodland a'nt it down at, sort of, far end, badger corner, round there. So you know, it's got nearly everything that Thorne's got, maybe on a smaller scale and other things that it hasn't and it's better access, why mess both of them up. That's my view.

I'm just collecting what people say.

That's right.

* That's it.

Right well thank you very much.

[Recording Ends]