

## Carham Parish Walks – **WARK COMMON FARM WALK** on 17<sup>th</sup> October 2021

Our tour of the farm was led by the farmer, Mr Peter Straker-Smith, and gave our small group an insight into the land use, management and conservation methods used on the farm.

Wark Common is a family farm of 474 hectares (over 1,000 acres) with 3 staff covering arable, game and sheep. The main crop is winter wheat, with other crops such as winter barley, oilseed rape, vining peas (grown for freezing, and processed on a factory in Eyemouth) and linseed for vegetable oil. These take up about three-quarters of the farm acreage. Land management on the farm is aimed at more sustainable farming methods, and maintaining a healthy soil is very important. Although a fairly full fungicide programme is deployed, no insecticide is used.

The farm is on a 7-year rotation plan, for example wheat following oilseed rape, and as we walked through the fields amongst the oilseed rape and wheat stubble, we could see the old haulms of the rape from the previous crop. We learned about procedures which aim to reduce disturbance to the soil and damage to the soil structure. Controlled farm traffic means that tractors and machinery always use the same tracks; and with minimum till cultivation the straw is integrated into the soil adding organic matter without inverting the topsoil, as in ploughing. (The downside is, as the surface is disturbed, application of herbicide is necessary). Using the single, or one-pass method, cultivation, seed sowing, and fertilizer application are completed at the same time, which releases less carbon, leaves valuable topsoil in place and saves fuel.

A map of the farm shows the field names, which I always find interesting, such as Rabbit City, Jock's Rig, Wedderlees, Clarilaws and Claribed, or Molly... some are shapes, such as Three-cornered Field, or Points. The map also shows the size of the fields - averaging 6-8 ha, they are relatively small, and bordered by hedges in a semi open-plan – large gaps are left to provide access for machinery, while still leaving 14 miles of hedgerow for shelter and wildlife.

Areas of woodland amounting to 65 ha are dotted throughout the farm with names such as Clay Hills Strip and Howburn Whin, provide shelter, game cover and wildlife habitat. They mostly consist of Scots pine, sessile oak and beech, with scrub edges. There is also a length of layered hedge – an old method of maintaining hedges rarely used now.

The three streams flowing though the farm form undulations in a fairly level landscape, and on the steep slope by How Burn we passed a bank of pollen and nectar plants (I spotted a silver Y moth). These areas, along with game cover and crops of winter bird food, with plants such as quinoa and sunflowers, cover 18 ha. Uncultivated field corners and almost four miles of grass margins, including 6 metre wide strips alongside the watercourses, also encourage birds and beneficial insects. Large square plots had been left for nesting skylarks in the wheat crop – as we passed through, a flock of birds flew up. I was pleased to hear that the farm has approximately 40 breeding pairs of grey partridge, much rarer in the UK than the introduced red-legged variety.



We made our way to Wark Westcommon Farm, past a drainage outflow into Tree Burn. This stream, along with Tongueridge Burn, flows northeast from their source on the farm. Peter informed us that 'Tree' is probably an adaptation of 'threap' or 'threep', a Scots and northern English word meaning 'to argue or protest, haggle or wrangle', and possibly refers to contested boundaries between the Scots and English. This makes sense, as the western edge of the farm follows the Scottish border, and 41 ha of the farm is actually in Scotland!

Near the farm buildings we passed through some of the 16 ha of permanent pasture, containing a flock of Scottish Blackface ewes, and a small flock of Hoggis (young ewes, yet to breed), 2 Blackface rams and a Texel ram complete the flock. An adjacent plantation of mature Scots pine was planted by Peter's father. We made our way through 'Crossroads Field' back to Wark Common Farm, having made a good circuit of about 3 miles. We all agreed that it was a most interesting and informative walk, and thanked Peter for his kind invitation.