

The Limestone Country Project

The Limestone Country Project is a five year project based in the limestone areas of the Yorkshire Dales. The Project has a £1.27 million budget, of which £550K is from the European Union LIFE (Nature) fund; money specifically allocated by the EU to support the management of internationally important wildlife sites. It is a partnership project, jointly project managed by English Nature and the Yorkshire Dales National Park Authority, with a number of other partners including the National Trust, the Grazing Animals Project, National Beef Association and the Rare Breeds Survival Trust. The Project has now been running for just over two years.

The limestone areas of the Yorkshire Dales are of national and international importance for biodiversity. These areas are associated with the distribution of Carboniferous limestone and the majority of the area is concentrated in the uplands around Ingleborough and Malham. The soils overlying this rock are usually very thin and of low fertility and, in combination with consistent grazing, result in a rich diversity of lime-loving grasses and wildflowers for which the "limestone country" of the Dales is famous. The limestone grasslands are dominated by blue moor grass with colourful species such as bloody crane's-bill, rockrose, small scabious and wild thyme.



**Blue Grey Cattle on Ingleborough National Nature Reserve
(Yorkshire Dales)**

This is also an important area for limestone pavements with 50% of the UK's pavements within the Yorkshire Dales. Limestone Pavement is a unique and declining resource of international conservation importance.

The Yorkshire Dales landscape and habitats have been influenced to a large degree through a long history of pastoral farming. However agricultural census returns over last 40 years show a general decline in mixed farming – for a variety of reasons, both economic and cultural. Research carried out during the development of the Limestone Country Project showed clearly that much of the higher limestone land was now being grazed exclusively by sheep. Despite having had a long history of summer cattle grazing the land is now seen as not being of good enough forage quality, and cattle grazing viewed as too labour intensive or uneconomic. Where cattle are still present these tend to be the larger commercial continental breeds and these are rarely left on the land for any significant time period.

There is now a wide amount of experience regarding the role that traditional cattle breeds may have in helping maintain important wildlife sites and a large number of wildlife sites are being managed by traditional breeds to enhance their biodiversity. Native upland cattle breeds have been recognised for their ability to graze unimproved upland grasslands and convert low quality forage much more effectively. They are also less selective graziers and thus encourage greater diversity within grassland swards.



Ingleborough National Nature Reserve

The Limestone Country Project aims to restore habitats within the Ingleborough Complex and Craven Limestone Complex Special Areas for Conservation (SACs) by encouraging a return to mixed farming using hardy upland cattle breed. We are aiming to introduce native upland cattle onto a minimum of 1,500 ha of limestone habitats in the project area, working with 15-20 farming enterprises.

Farmers joining the Project are able to select from a range of native cattle breeds, including Galloway, Shorthorn, Blue Grey, Luing, Highland and Welsh Black. Blue Greys would have been a very common sight amongst suckler herds in the Dales only 40 years ago and we envisage that they will play a

very important role in the future of the Project. Several farmers have already chosen Blue Greys with which to stock their land.

Recently in the summer of 2003, as part of the Project, English Nature purchased a herd of Blue Grey cattle. The 19 yearling heifers and 7 two-year old heifers have grazed across 180 hectares of upland rough grazing from June right through to January 2004 when they were removed and outwintered on more lowland pastures in Cumbria.

These Blue Grey cattle were brought onto the Ingleborough National Nature Reserve to tackle the blue moorgrass which was the dominant grass on the higher land, in order to increase species diversity amongst the grassland swards. Blue moorgrass is typically avoided by sheep and continental cattle which preferentially graze the fescue swards. Since May 2004 these cattle have been back grazing on the slopes of Ingleborough and although as yet we have no hard scientific evidence for wildlife habitat improvements, the initial visible results are promising. We are, however monitoring both the performance, economic viability and grazing impact of the cattle, including using radio collars which will locate the herd and allow us to gain information on their grazing and behavioural patterns. The results from this research will start to become available from late 2005.



Grazing one of the Three Peaks in the Yorkshire Dales National Park

Local farmers seem very enthusiastic about the Project and we currently have 12 agreements with farmers in addition to the English Nature herd. There are a further ten farms on the short list for entry over the next 1 - 2 years.

We have also been working with local marketing consultants to help create a market within which to sell their beef direct to the consumer and are currently looking into viability of any local project branding. We have also been fortunate to grab the attention and support of the celebrity TV cook, writer, and broadcaster Sophie Grigson, who has already attended and cooked for an evening meal attended by all participating farmers and other key individuals.

Mr Hough.



Bryan Hough at the Cheshire Show demonstration of traditional breeds with Burnedge Goldie and her calf at foot Burnedge Lorraine 2nd.

Cows due to calve are moved into pasture close to the steading and have access to a building at night. All calves are injected against braxy at birth, but apart from that receive no other treatment. Other cows remain on the hill and are fed in ring feeders alongside stone tracks constructed across the hill grazings.

Surplus bulls and heifers are finished off the hill at about 22 months old. Only occasionally are any brought inside for a few weeks of feeding on a coarse ration.

"We're selling to a local abattoir at up to 330kg

deadweight. Local butchers and restaurants clamour for the beef which has a wonderful flavour," says Mr Hough.

The herd's Galloway stock bull, Glenkiln Arthur, is now 12 years old. This 50% Canadian-bred bull, a past Royal Show breed champion, has passed on his scale and stretch to his pure-bred progeny.

"Traditional breeds have to combine hardiness with shape and size. We don't want them too big, but this bull has given us just the right lift in conformation. That's being passed on to the Blue-grey cows and its making them a good commercial suckler."

"But keeping a suckler herd used to be a low-cost business, now it has almost become as intensive as keeping dairy cows. That's where the money is being lost."

The Blue-grey cow will comfortably suckle a big Continental-sired calf, says Mr Hough. "She has bags of milk and, if anything, carries too much condition. And unlike Continental crosses which might produce five calves in a lifetime, they will produce up to twice that.

"They go into winter carrying plenty of flesh and will withstand the worst weather." Burn Edge Bent Farm has more than 1500mm of rainfall a year. "There's no spring here until May and winters come early, but cows stay out."

The farm doesn't use any artificial fertiliser and makes all its own forage. The only costs are two loads of straw and magnesium syrup which is offered year-round.