

Natural England Guest Blog – featuring Emma Holman-West

How are land managers embracing biodiversity net gain?

Biodiversity net gain (BNG) will soon become mandatory. This means new developments must have a net positive impact on nature.

Biodiversity is the essence of life on our planet, and its conservation is a responsibility that rests on the shoulders of each generation, this is something that has always been obvious and important to me in my adult life. I believe that stems from being lucky enough to have been brought up in wonderful countryside surroundings, living with nature and from the responsibility of being a custodian of a country Estate. Let's face it, who wants to hand over the baton to the next generation not having made positive improvements for the future? Currently there is a biodiversity crisis in this country and globally, this is intrinsic with climate change, something we hear an awful lot about now and we cannot separate the two, therefore, environmental conservation and enhancement are the future.

Today, Alscot is a diverse country Estate covering over 4,000 acres, combining residential and commercial development, tourism & leisure opportunities, farming, forestry, and Biodiversity Net Gain (BNG), with environmental aspirations to become carbon neutral before 2050. Balancing this little lot is no mean feat, each industry is an important cog in the wheel to keep this Estate, and the locally economy, a success. Biodiversity and agriculture are intrinsically linked, we need both and we need to find ways in which we integrate them, especially as food production is a necessity and makes up so much of our country. Likewise, offering a BNG site does not mean that we are anti-development, to the contrary, we understand that commercial activities must continue, people will continue to drive, fly, and watch TV and there will always be a growing need for new homes. Therefore, it's important to embrace all our multiplicity's and ensure that clean and green technologies and principles are introduced as part of a bigger picture. This is what we have been trying to do for several years now at Alscot, work towards a greener strategy. Furthermore, as wider development continues, a system is in place for mitigation, and this is where BNG comes in. In my view, biodiversity should be firmly embedded within development and farming.

When I took over the family Estate over twenty years ago, my long-term ambition was to restore the historic parkland at Alscot, lost in part over the years to war time efforts, age, and disease. The focus of the restoration for me had always been about planting trees, for both landscape and environmental benefits. In 2014, Prof. Tom Williamson, University of East Anglia, was instructed to carry out a survey of the historic parkland and when Tom presented his findings, he told me to consider it carefully and when the time was right to implement the restoration in my own way, it need not follow suit.

It was 2017 and my attention was brought to a new project, Biodiversity Net Gain, and Warwickshire had been selected by Government to introduce BNG policy into their planning system. This felt like the right way to go. It aligned with Alscot's over-all long-term strategy and to introduce conservation and habitat enhancement and creation was the perfect alternative to parkland restoration. Tom was right, times had changed, I needed to make changes to benefit the future generations and the planet. It wasn't just about planting trees, although I felt an urgency to plant several trees to offset the number of "green" books I bought and read, re-wilding, carbon sequestration, native trees, regenerative farming, you name it I read it, watched it, and listened to it, during my BNG journey.

It's fair to say that I was hesitant, very hesitant, when asked to contribute to a Natural England blog - what could I contribute to assist others? As an early pioneer of BNG I have learnt a great deal and I

am still very much learning four years on, especially as we are about to introduce a bigger second phase to our BNG project and under a new metric but the most important thing for me and what is key to the overall success of BNG, is that it fits into Alscot's operations, aims and future ambitions perfectly. We chose our land carefully which was crucial, for the first phase we chose 47.86 acres of land along the river corridor that runs through the Estate, and the river Stour now plays a significant role in the Estate's land use and how it functions. Within that corridor we have given over the parkland and some farmland, and as much as it wasn't a deciding factor, I wasn't sad to say goodbye to the strong smell of onions emanating from the crops or the effects that hay making had on my asthma. In return we are improving grasslands and creating habitats with the all-important connectivity!

I am approached a lot by other landowners considering BNG. There are so many considerations, and every situation is different. For me, the environment is important, and I want to conserve and enhance nature for us, our future generations, and the planet, however, I wasn't prepared to put all my eggs in one basket, and I wanted to implement a project that would work. In the early days I literally held the Biodiversity Management Plan (BOMP) in the same regard as the Bible. It was created and monitored by ecologists, I am not an ecologist, I did not think that I could change it – I was wrong. Nature is not the same world over, nor is it the same from county to county. Geography plays a massive part, land is different, soil varies, wildlife and plant life species differ from region to region. You know your land, like I know my land, so we must challenge, and offer valid input into a BOMP. A BOMP is not meant to be easy, it's a means of change through a long-term process, but it does need to be do-able.

I suppose the first phase of the Alscot Biodiversity Net Gain Project, was a trial and has been successful, so much so that we are about to embark on a second phase that connects more land along the river corridor. This will observe The Lawton Principle to create an ecological network that operates more naturally and effectively. To date we have concluded over fourteen transactions with developers over Warwickshire to provide their off-site mitigation. This has enabled the development of over 500 residential dwellings as well as the delivery of commercial enterprises, including a leading supermarket.

Managing a BNG site is not just about conservation; it's also about engaging the community. Hosting educational programs, guided tours, and volunteer opportunities can, as we have found, foster a sense of stewardship among local residents. Rather than padlocked farm gates and strictly no entry signs, we have most definitely found that when people feel connected to the site, they are more likely to support our conservation efforts. We now regularly welcome local schools and groups to assist their ecological and environmental studies and interests.

Owning and managing a BNG site feels like a labour of love. It requires dedication, resources, and a long-term commitment to conservation. However, after three and a half years I am already seeing the rewards, and this fills me with a great sense of pride. Through BNG not only are we contributing to the well-being of our planet and creating a legacy of biodiversity for future generations to cherish but it forms part of the Estate's income, enabling development and keeps the economy moving. I am very much enjoying my role as a Steward of Nature.

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