



## DDSBA OPEN DAY EVENT

Sunday 9 June 2024

By kind invitation of Rachel Hall

Gutchpool Farm, Gillingham, Dorset SP8 5QP

This Open day was intended to be a day of looking at grazing rather than just sheep and did not disappoint. We started the day by walking up to Rachel's flock of Dorset Downs, which she mob grazes. When Rachel moved to Gutchpool in 2005 it had been farmed intensively as a dairy farm and then let for many years when it was ploughed up to grow arable crops. Consequently, after years of monoculture and heavy grazing, the soil had become exhausted with no life in it. The land is heavy clay and tends to be very wet, so had suffered from waterlogging, run off and erosion.

Since Rachel has taken over management, she has tried to restore the balance, structure and biology in the soil that was sadly missing, being an early adopter of Regenerative Farming. The sheep are part of this process. Rachel explained that with the aid and guidance of the Environment Agency they recently established a wetland corridor on the farm, with tree planting and physical barriers of timber, not unlike a beaver would achieve in the natural world. The trees are part of this process but also will provide shade for the sheep, and more are planned under an agroforestry management. Whilst the sheep are treated to fresh pasture on a daily basis, leaving different heights of sward and some areas deliberately trampled, an arc and water must follow. Along with the electric fencing required, this makes for quite a labour-intensive process.



As we looked over acres of lush grass, Rachel freely admitted that she could do with 1000 sheep to make the system work better. Thankfully she has expert help from shepherdess Alex James who has a larger flock of Poll Dorsets, who helps and shares the grazing some of the year. We could see the wetland corridor and how it would provide just what it says on the tin, a corridor for wildlife to thrive and move, and a break for the gushing water in the winter. Fascinatingly this involves breaking the old land drains, which produced a few furrowed brows, as it seems very counterintuitive, but forcing the water over the land and encouraging natural drainage helps to prevent flooding downstream.



We were very lucky to have Pam Lewis with us, the queen of Wildflower meadows. Pam mostly listened sensitively and only interjected when we were straying far from the truth or had some nuggets of information to add. I certainly learnt to recognise Hemlock water dropwort, which to the casual eye looks just like cow parsley. She also pointed out the Yorkshire Fog grass, which is not particularly palatable to ruminants. Rachel had tried herbal leys but had not been impressed, being more suitable in an arable rotation as they are not long lived and are hard to manage for more than a couple of years, with many of the species dying out within three years. However, her wildflower meadow was going well, and the sheep had grazed it hard at lambing time. There was some talk of various plants which might help the sheep as an anthelmintic (wormer), and a wide diversity in the pasture helps Rachel take her lambs through to Hoggets with no inputs. She is a certified member of the organisation Pasture for Life, producing 100% pasture fed meat using no grain, chemicals or herbicides.



We moved back to the buildings where Rachel and Alex James had prepared some shearling Ewes and Rams for us to cast an eye and choose our favourites. Alex Gibbs was asked to point out what he thought a judge might be looking for, which was good preparation for judging later in the summer. He was quick to rope in some experienced opinions from the two Roberts - Hyde and Burrough. There ensued a good discussion about varying types of Dorset Downs, but as you would expect, all decided they tick a lot of boxes in the Sheep world and were very suited to most systems.

The morning finished with what for many was probably the highlight, the most delicious lunch. We were given a feast of everything from the farm. Succulent slow roast hogget, with homemade apple juice to wash it down, and homemade redcurrant jelly to accompany. What could be better.



Many thanks from the Society and all that attended to Rachel and her helpers, an informative, relaxed and very enjoyable day.