

Chapter 1 The Significance of *Land Healer*

(Part 1 of an essay on nature and farming inspired by *Land Healer*, introduced in the blog *Revolution in Taliban Alley*; Chris Rose. chris@campaignstrategy.co.uk September 2022)

Introduction



It's not often that a book comes along which actually changes very much but Jake Fiennes' 2022 book [*Land Healer: How Farming Can Save Britain's Countryside*](#), could be one of those books. It's received positive, sometimes rapturous reviews because it offers hope that the arc of intensive industrial agriculture really can be bent to restore nature. In this four-part essay I try to look at it from a change-making perspective – how that hope could be realised.

For the benefit of readers outside the UK, I think Fiennes' book has relevance beyond the shores of this little island because he is not promoting a theoretical alternative to mainstream farming but demonstrating that what already exists can be radically improved for biodiversity, by farmers, and within a few years.

Every farm is different and every country's farming is different but the maximum-production industrial chemical farming model has eliminated nature in countries all over the world. Ecological Intensification is necessary to reverse the damage, and in the UK at least, Fiennes and the "3Rs" of Restoration of nature, Rewilding and Regenerative farming offer the prospect of a new pro-nature agricultural revolution.

The UK, and England especially, prides itself on being a 'green and pleasant land' with a world famous Alice-in-Wonderland landscape, of small woods and fields divided by hedgerows. Visitors from larger countries are often reminded of a garden.

Yet although it has remained green, it has become one of the most nature-depleted landscapes in the world, the scene of crashing populations of birds and other wildlife, and lost flowers and plants, even within its (mainly farmed) National Parks.

This has happened despite the existence of a large number of NGO environment and conservation groups boasting a combined membership of around 8 million (over 10% of the

population), a huge amount of ecological study, thousands of nature reserves and fifty years of AES or Agri-Environment Schemes paying farmers to be more nature-friendly.



Otmoor, Oxfordshire, whose 'chessboard-like' field pattern inspired Lewis Carroll's 'Through the Looking Glass'. It's wetlands were saved in 1829 when 1,000 local people resisted drainage plans of the landowner, and saved again in the 1980s and 2016 [by Friends of the Earth campaigns](#) against road schemes. Now it's a RSPB nature reserve and one of the few places where turtle doves still breed.

The principal cause of this biodiversity-wipeout, as in much of the European Union and in many countries worldwide, is intensive agriculture. In the UK the impact has been particularly acute as over 71% of the land is farmed, about a third of which is arable (54% in England), and not much nature exists elsewhere.

As Michael McCarthy pointed out in his book about loss of abundance in nature, *The Moth Snowstorm*:

'one of the key characteristics of wildlife in Britain, especially in the lowlands of England, is often overlooked because it is so obvious: it exists on farmland. It has nowhere else to go'.

As he says, nobody in the US would think of going to Kansas grain prairies for a wildlife holiday: you'd head to wilderness in somewhere like Yellowstone. But Britain is too small, and our countryside has:

'long been an intimate mix of habitats where wildlife and farming had to coexist and traditionally did so, indeed this is what gave the scenery its loveliness and charm. A cornfield did not just contain corn, it contained blood-red poppies and glowing blue cornflowers as well, and clouded yellow butterflies flew about it and skylarks sang above. It was a landscape that delighted'.

It's not news that this is no longer the case. Most of our nature has been lost and more is still being lost, to the industrialisation of agriculture. Since the 1980s countless books, reports, papers and even a few campaigns have focused on this but the UK's largest conservation NGOs have fought shy of tackling agriculture through campaigns. Why that is, and what pointers it offers to what now might be done about it, is what I focus on in this paper.

This started as a blog and got out of control. It's in four chapters.

1. The Significance of *Land Healer*
2. An Historic Failure To Protect Nature
3. How Pesticides Ran Amok
4. Where To Go Now

Fundamentals

One reason the main UK nature NGOs have not campaigned on intensive agriculture is that they have been unable to divide farming into good and bad, solution and problem, which is vital to developing an effective campaign. By much the same token, the conservation groups haven't managed to establish an alliance with a progressive wing of any real clout inside farming. Fiennes has given them the bones of a remedy to both these shortcomings.

In practice, the main NGOs [1] have essentially focused on expanding their nature reserve estates where they can conserve habitats and satisfy their members with a nature-rich experience, celebrated a small minority of pro-wildlife farmers in the hope that they'd influence others, produced periodic reports about countryside nature disappearing, and sent out polite emissaries, not to take on agribusiness but to lobby mandarins and politicians in Whitehall for a more sustainable agricultural policy.

Overall, it's not gone well (for recent signs of change see Chapter 4). Protected areas only cover one eighteenth of the land area occupied by farming in the UK, about a quarter to a third of the minimum regarded as necessary to protect nature. Politically and socially, UK and especially English farming is by default represented by intensive agribusiness, while 'alternative' agricultural voices are marginalised as they have been since 1947. For decades most farmland has been covered by some sort of public-funded AES or agri-environment scheme, yet most farmland birds regarded as common in 1970 have disappeared. Plus the general public is generally blind to what's going on. It's crying out for a campaign.

All that is why *Land Healer* a new book by the very English Jake Fiennes (from the famous acting family including Ralph and Joseph Fiennes) has been causing some excitement in UK media, farming and conservation circles. It dangles the possibility of a nature revolution *within* farming, by farmers.

Fiennes book describes his work on large intensive mainly arable estates, where he has managed to restore much of the nature lost in decades of chemical-intensive farming, while maintaining profitability. This comes at a time when national farmland biodiversity is still falling, while interest in rewilding and regenerative farming is exploding. These 3R's –

Restorative farming, Rewilding and Regenerative farming – could have a revolutionary effect and Fiennes' *Land Healer* is part of that.

'Farming Can Save The Countryside'

"Farming" claims *Land Healer*, "can save Britain's countryside". It's a positive, can-do, optimistic book and the *idea* that farming can save 'the countryside' is attractive because it's what a lot of people want to hear.

Farming representatives have long claimed that farming can save 'the countryside', even if for many of them that did not include saving nature, and was code for 'leave it to us'.

For their part, mainstream UK conservation groups have long hoped that would turn out to be the case (so far it hasn't), and to bring it about they pinned their hopes on a combination of more, bigger and better joined up Protected Areas (mostly not farmed), plus the positive effects of AES on farmed land.

As for UK politicians, they would love it to be true. Nature and farming have not often been high on their agenda but it would be very convenient for politicians in government to resolve the persistent conflict between the two.

The book's headline claim is not novel but in Fiennes' case it is grounded in practical proofs, and is far from being farming lobby greenwash. Indeed, although (arguably because) he is a farming insider, Fiennes explicitly denounces the damage caused by conventional industrial agriculture in a way that the established conservation groups have long been too timid to do.

Whistleblower

A charismatic messenger with a pithy turn of phrase, Fiennes calls nature-hostile farming 'Taliban-style Farming', "which kills everything it does not want". Coming from someone with a growing following in agriculture, from a campaign-making point of view, that's a shift with strategic potential. In that respect, the most significant thing about *Land Healer* for campaigning is that it *does* distinguish 'good' from 'bad' in clear and uncompromising terms. Although it's not how the book is promoted, as a hands-on land-fixer for the landed classes, Fiennes has blown the whistle on intensive farming.

Land Healer is a conversational autobiographical how-to story, about Fiennes' time restoring nature as an estate worker, gamekeeper and land manager in East Anglia, mainly at Raveningham in Suffolk and Holkham in Norfolk, as well as his spells as a Jackaroo in the Australian Outback and doing PR in a West End nightclub. If that makes Fiennes an [interesting](#) messenger, the East Anglian provenance of his farmland experiments endows them with reassurance for farmers and landowners. It helps make his revolutionary ideas more palatable for an instinctively conservative industry.

In British farming, East Anglia is not where alternative ideas would be expected to spring from. This unromantic arable heartland is to UK agriculture, what Detroit is to US car-making. It's a region more ruled by potatoes than poetry, where innovation spreads by the practical process

of copying what works. For a long time that meant you could have any sort of farming you wanted, so long as it was intensive.

Land Healer has been called ‘revolutionizing’ and ‘radical’, because Fiennes has made on-farm changes to increase bird, insect and wildflower populations by measures such as rearranging fields to create wider hedges and uncropped margins while making them more time-efficient for machinery, along-with longer crop rotations with cover-crops, re-watering drained marshes, and cutting use of artificial fertilisers and pesticides.

These are all developments of familiar farming practices, things that farmers do, so they can adopt them while retaining their ‘agency’, their sense of control, and develop pride in being good at it, without having to adopt a new identity (for some, a big psychological barrier to ‘going Organic’ which involves many of the same practices). Plus he’s achieved this while maintaining profit margins and yields. It’s regenerative farming to restore nature and improve soil health and structure.

Moreover some of the changes he champions are also beguilingly simple and tangible to non-farmers, such as what I term ‘hedgerow fattening’ (expansion by less cutting, allowing twigs to get old enough to flower and produce fruit, multiplying numbers of breeding birds, insects etc). And if they are detectable by non-farmers, that holds out the possibility of engaging public support, even possibly participation.



Hawthorn – a widespread hedgerow tree The organisation Hedgelink [found](#) that changing from cutting every two years (the most popular AES option) to three years would increase the weight of berries produced by Hawthorn by 40%. Frequent cutting reduced the amount of flowers 75% and berries 83%. [Allowing](#) a single hedgerow Hawthorn to grow to maturity can produce as many berries as 200 metres of hedge cut every year.

In *Land Healer* Fiennes describes how he took over fields with names like Brick O’Longs and Tinker’s Hole at Great Farm on Holkham estate, where the soil had been degraded by a ‘relentless cycle’ of high-chemical sugar beet, potato and cereal growing, and in a few years turned the area in to ‘hot spot’ for farmland nature, doubling the number of breeding birds, and attracting over 45 species of wasps and bees alone. I happen to live near Holkham and have noticed that a lot of the hedges around here are definitely getting ‘fatter’.

Nature writer Mark Cocker has [rightly said](#) that Fiennes is “a radical in the sense that this can actually be delivered”. “It’s a change in the entirety of British agriculture”. And it can spread farmer to farmer. The question is, how much will it be done?

Fiennes himself sees it as evolution rather than revolution but if it’s at sufficient scale, a rapid evolutionary change would be revolutionary in its effect.

‘A Bloody Long Walk’

It's true that ecologists have already proved that ‘ecological intensification’ is possible but few farmers spend much time poring over ecological journals, and Fiennes is a salesman who can reach the parts that science alone struggles to reach. He has the potential to make nature aspirational in mainstream farming, which would be a huge change in itself.

Land Healer mentions many scientific studies including (p94 – there’s no index) at Hillesden Estate in Buckinghamshire. Here in 2005 researchers from the Centre for Ecology and Hydrology (CEH) began a meticulous and carefully controlled study to see changes prescribed in the more demanding types of AES, Agri-Environment Schemes, actually worked, and if they affected farm yields. In 2015 they [reported](#) that creating 50-60 patches of wildlife habitat taking up 8% of the 900ha arable farm estate had significantly increased insect populations while maintaining overall crop yields. Yields of field beans had actually increased.

The higher yields probably resulted from natural predators of pests such as ground beetles being able to reach crops more easily, and better pollination by insects such as bumble bees. As CEH leading researcher Richard Pywel [commented](#) regarding a test of wildflower strips across the middle of fields: “If you imagine the size of a [ground beetle], it’s a bloody long walk to the middle of a field”.

The scientists said the Hillesden experiment was ‘a clear demonstration that wildlife friendly management which supports ecosystem services is compatible with, and can even increase, crop yields’.

These and similar results from other countries, contradict assumptions of politicians like Rishi Sunak, the former UK Chancellor, who’s recently [claimed](#) that AES schemes mean “paying farmers to produce less food” which would damage food security. As Fiennes says, governments often have only a ‘nebulous understanding of food security’.



"Yellowhammer" by Andy Morffew is licensed under [CC BY 2.0](#) The Yellowhammer is something of the 'canary in the coalmine' for UK farmland birds.

In August 2022 [a paper](#) in the *Journal of Applied Ecology* compared ten-year population trends of twelve widespread bird species and nine types of butterfly on the Hillesden Estate, to those on equivalent farmland with no habitat creation. The Hillesden populations of Chaffinch, Blue Tit, Great Tit and the grain-eating birds Linnet, Yellowhammer and Reed Bunting all showed statistically significant positive effects compared to those on the business-as-usual farmland. Most of the butterfly populations at Hillesden also increased, and whereas Gate Keeper and Green Veined White declined significantly on the other farmland, they still showed population increases at Hillesden.

At Raveningham Fiennes persuaded the landowner to take 20% of farmland - "essentially the fields that were uneconomical" - out of food production. He says (p89):

"We saw remarkable changes ... Very quickly, plants that had been absent, like marsh foxtail, started flowering, and we noticed that after flowering, when the seeds became available, they attracted thousands of wigeon to the marsh. On the land set aside for nature we used no fertiliser, no fungicides, and no pesticides ...".

Grey Partridges increased and 'after a 140 acre patch of land that had been deep drained in the 1970s' was reverted to cattle-grazed wetland, 'something incredible happened: snipe, marsh harriers and lapwing started turning up and then nesting'. Redshanks colonised the farm from a nearby RSPB reserve and breeding Lapwings hit double the number of chicks judged necessary for a healthy population by the [BTO](#).

Fiennes says of Raveningham, "What we achieved with habitat restoration and regenerative farming didn't result in the estate losing money. It was the opposite: the fields improved, and revenues also rose".

Groundswell

Fiennes is off to a good start. He undoubtedly has fellow travellers among other farmers, who he likes to meet face to face. He's a show-you person and an inspirational talker, perhaps partly as he's dyslexic. Sam Knights wrote *Land Healer* with him and Knight's piece in the [New Yorker](#) is the best encapsulation I've read of Fiennes's vision.

When Fiennes attended this year's [Groundswell](#) conference and agricultural show, stocks of *Land Healer* sold out within hours. Groundswell is a sort of farming Glastonbury Festival, or perhaps more like a Farming Tent at Latitude Festival. It's run by the farming Cherry brothers, who were inspired by Gabe Brown, whose book [From Dirt to Soil](#) is the 'bible' of the US regenerative farming movement. At the brother's Lannock Manor Farm in Hertfordshire the plough has been retired in favour of regen' no-till agriculture and in six years numbers attendance has grown to 5,000, a good number of whom are actual farmers.



Sarah Langford @wigsandwords · Jun 23

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Six year ago The Cherry Brothers hosted 450 people in a **shed** at the first ever @Groundswellaguk. Now there are over 5,000 of them. They're no longer in the **shed**.



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That's not many of Britain's maybe 105,000 farmers [2]. Even 5,000 would be less than 5% but the real target audience that people like Jake Fiennes most need to reach is far smaller: perhaps less than 10,000 big arable farmers.

In any case the idea of regenerative farming seems to be spreading rapidly among crop-growing farmers. In April [one survey](#) among the arable-farming customers of England's largest supplier of used agricultural machinery, found a majority now claim to be convinced that regenerative farming is key to their future. Many see it as involving a return to more traditional mixed farming with longer multi-crop rotations.

If that translated into farm practice – a big 'if' - it really would be revolutionary. It would turn the tide on maximum input maximum yield intensive farming, blow a big hole in the UK agrochemicals chemicals market from fertilisers to fungicides, increase soil health and fertility through recovery of the soil ecosystem, store more carbon, and boost the quality and quantity of groundwater, and even air quality. It would be hard for that *not* to benefit flora and fauna but combined with Fiennes' particular formula of restoring habitats on and within farms it certainly would.

The 3R's

Fiennes may find the kernel of a revolutionary vanguard among the Groundswellers. He and the Groundswell audience are at the intersection of three movements and ideas: the '3Rs' of Restoration of nature, in his case within farms and within individual fields, Regenerative Farming, and Rewilding. Fiennes himself worked for a time at Knepp, which became England's best known rewilding experiment. It is Knepp's chronicler Isabella Tree, author of [Wilding: The Return of Nature to a British Farm](#) who calls him 'revolutionizing'.

Fiennes is at pains to point out that *Land Healer* is about farming not rewilding but the 3Rs are closely linked. Tree and her husband Charlie Burrell have now also taken up regenerative farming, and it's also practiced by rewilders-farmers at Wild Ken Hill in Norfolk, well known to BBC Springwatch viewers, and by the Suffolk estate-owners behind [Wild East](#).

Fiennes is currently Conservation Director at Holkham, a rich Norfolk estate which also includes a National Nature Reserve where he and his staff have significantly increased bird populations. He's also closely involved with groups from the NFU (National Farmers Union) to the RSPB.

Fiennes is already a serious agri-influencer challenging agricultural orthodoxy but the emergence of Fiennes and the 3Rs also poses a challenge and opportunity to conventional conservation, as it lowers the bar to making UK farming truly nature-friendly. Making more change possible ought to raise ambition levels but to make the most of this opportunity, in my opinion, conservation groups need to change their strategies (see suggestions in Chapter 4).

To appreciate how profoundly disruptive a 3R's Fiennesian revolution might be, consider that the tide of intensification in UK farming started to rise in the 1950s, and has gone on flowing in one direction, almost ever since.

[Chapter 2 looks at intensive farming's impact on UK nature, mainly since 1970, and how a calamity occurred without triggering a major campaign to stop it, and Chapter 3 at the case of pesticides in the UK, and why the major conservation groups for so long failed to campaign on those. Chapter 4 looks forward to what might be done An Annexe discusses the State of Nature reports produced by consortia of UK NGOs from 2013-2019, and how they could have but didn't serve as a springboard for campaigns].

notes

[1] It's arguable as to who the 'major' NGOs are. The RSPB (Royal Society for the Protection of Birds) and The Wildlife Trusts (TWTs) certainly are, with some claims to being campaigners, and a lot of boots-on-the-ground involvement in land management for nature. The National Trust (NT) is the NGO giant in this sector and a huge private landowner but hyper-cautious. Friends of the Earth (FoE) has made sporadic forays into the intensive farming arena but has not sustained them. WWF UK has no on the ground presence but like RSPB, the TWTs and in a smaller way the NT, is active at the policy advocacy level (advocacy not being the same as campaigning). As is the Soil Association (SA), Britain's biggest organic farming group. The Woodland Trust hardly touches agriculture but has probably had a bigger impact on woodlands than the others have had on farmland. Many smaller organisations have played a role on specific aspects of the intensive farming issue.

[2] Current UK [official figures](#) show 94,000 full-time farmers, business partners, directors and spouses, and 85,000 part-time. Figures for [farm size show](#) that of a total 105,000 holdings or individual farms (suggesting a similar number of actual 'farmers'), just over 11,000 were over 20,000ha. Just over 33,000 farms had cereals and 8,000 had more than

100ha, making up 1.8m ha of a total 2.7m in cereals. This suggests just 8,000 large farms control about two thirds of the UK's arable land. [Figures](#) for farm type record 23,500 cereal farms and 7,500 'general cropping'. This is in line both with the Deloitte's forecast [cited by](#) Graham Harvey in 1997, that by the C21st, decision-making for 80% of UK farmland would be in the hands of just 12,000 people, and, his observation that 'When Rural Affairs Minister Tim Boswell published guidelines on how to conserve dwindling populations of farmland birds, he sent them to just 11,000 arable farmers'.