

Summary of PACE Field Trip on Tuesday 4 June 2024.

30 PACE Members joined our field trip to South Heath Farm, Great Bentley – a 260acre farm growing cereals, potatoes, onions and turf. Lucy Shepherd, daughter of the farm owner, met our group on the farmyard and lead the walk, accompanied by Michael Wadham of The Big Green Internet which has planted over 200,000 trees and shrubs on this farm and many others to provide connecting corridors for wildlife.

Lucy explained that they have had to diversify to remain profitable and the crops are only part of the balance sheet. Her father started caravan storage and rented out the farm buildings to a Removal company, to a machinery workshop and for self-storage. Most of the land is now cropped under contract farming and many of the awkward corners have been planted with trees under The Big Green Internet.

In the fields Lucy introduced the group to the challenges of arable farming showing us a wheat crop which had been invaded by black grass – a very pernicious weed which is difficult to control, and which out-competes the crop and downgrades the grain. Other pests – weeds, fungi and animals like pigeons, slugs, aphids etc are threats which can require expensive control. Fertilizers are also a major expense under intensive agriculture which relies on high inputs and high yields to make a profit. Sometimes a crop has to be abandoned if the costs get too high.

Small, narrow or wet field corners are difficult for large machinery. Michael showed us areas which have been planted with trees and shrubs (mainly native species like oak, ash, birch hazel, hawthorn and a smattering of fruit trees). The Big Green Internet seeks willing farmers (of which this farm owner was one of the first), then secures trees, mulch and biodegradable tree guards (made of cardboard to avoid plastic) with help from Essex County Council Forest Initiative, Woodland Trust and Charities. Our PACE group was impressed that Michael employs a crew of young people with special educational needs who are paid a full commercial wage to plant up the woodlands and hedgerows. As well as providing essential habitats for the recovery of nature, The Big Green Internet nurtures young people into the world of work.

We passed fields of potatoes (being watered from a local reservoir), onions (which can do well on these soils) and turf (being grown and stripped off for new housing developments). Each crop has its own challenging issues.

‘Three Sisters Wood’ (named after Mr Shepperd’s daughters), was our final stop which Michael planted about 12 years ago as a woodland corridor about 30metres wide and over 500metres long to connect two small ancient woodlands which were otherwise isolated in a sea of arable. There are many small woods like these in Essex which are oases for threatened species like dormice, stag beetles, nightingales, owls and a host of other interesting animals and plants. If a small woodland is damaged, for example by the vagaries of weather, then its residents can be wiped out – they will only be able to recolonise and reinvigorate their gene pools if there are woodland connections like Three Sisters Wood.

Perhaps some PACE members expected an organic farm, but this field trip was a wakeup call to the facts that growing food crops is fraught with challenges, that there are big issues with intensive agriculture, and there are opportunities like the Big Green Internet and the new Environmental Land Management Schemes (ELMs) recently announced by government. A field trip keeps us grounded and stimulates a wide range of conversations. We can also appreciate that farmers face a big administrative workload attached to what seem like good environmental schemes. We will plan a future field trip to a regenerative or organic farm. Huge thanks to Lucy Shepherd and Michael Wadham.

Photo: Michael Wadham (front left) and Lucy Shepherd (front right) leading the PACE field trip about South Heath Farm and The Big Green Internet.