



IN CONVERSATION WITH SCOTT NORRIS

In the first instalment of our ***In Conversation With*** series, Rural Asset Manager Zara Gower talks good husbandry, technology-enabled agriculture and succession plans with Scott Norris, a second-generation farmer in Brentwood, Essex, awarded a new farming tenancy of Tan House Farm on the Church Commissioners' Navestock Estate.

As Scott explains, his new occupation of Tan House Farm is an opportunity to manage agricultural land responsibly, and to raise environmental standards through carbon audits and considered on-the-ground actions.

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Could you tell us a little about the history of the family’s farming business and who is involved?

We are a second-generation family farming business that began with my father and uncle post-war. We operate over 3,000 acres around Brentwood, Essex, engaged in arable farming. I joined the farming business in 1982 after graduating in Agriculture at the University of Nottingham, and, together with my cousin Claire and nephew, Sam, we have grown our landholdings to incorporate a mixture of in-hand and contract farming with local landowners. There is succession planned for the farm. My son recently graduated from the University of Reading, and I’m fortunate that my father and uncle gave me a lot of responsibility at a young age, which I hope to pass on. The new Farm Business Tenancy at Tan House Farm on the Church Commissioners’ Navestock Estate presents further opportunities for our family.

What does the composition of the land and your rotation look like?

The land that we work is principally composed of heavy London clay or boulder clay. Our rotation is based around all three cereals, in addition to grass ley and pulses. It creates more work, but we’ve always had a wide rotation and do not do



any block cropping in the belief that each farm that we preside over should have its own rotation. It’s less taxing on productive areas and supports the creation and stewardship of natural habitats. At the heart of our approach is good husbandry. A good farm rotation, care of soils, soil structure, soil health, and good drainage, are all basic elements of land management that have to be right for any successful form of agriculture to work.

What attracted you to Tan House Farm, and how do you farm the holding?

We were attracted to Tan House Farm as it's an adjacent farm with the same soils that we work ourselves and know well. There's an opportunity for further economies of scale using our existing infrastructure and experience. The subsoil is in good condition and with the right interventions in place we can move it from monoculture to more of a sustainable rotation. We're also looking at no-till options, as well as traditional and mixed tillage, and ways to support the land's productivity through better drainage systems.

What do you hope to get out of the Church Commissioners as an active landlord?

We've been impressed that the Church Commissioners have taken so much interest in us, and their rural holdings more generally. Environment and responsible stewardship is a huge focus of the Church Commissioners, and we want to be part of that journey. It's all about keeping in touch and having the agility to switch gear as we build up the natural capital of Tan House Farm. We're aligned in our values. We want to farm in a responsible and considered way, and be good custodians. I felt that this came out in the tender process and it was clear what was expected of us. Of course, we need to earn a profit to reinvest in the farm and have something to live on, but this can be reconciled with environmental considerations and positive stewardship that helps us reactivate underutilised land.

How do you intend to monitor and optimise the productivity of the land? Is technology important in your decision-making?

One method is satellite imagery. We can learn a lot by looking at the land from above. At the point when we were taking on Tan House Farm, we surveyed the land by taking drone images. We intend to use new technology to take biomass imagery, too, to identify areas in greater need of remediation. We can also use on-the-ground technology, like modern GPS and precision farming techniques that help minimise inputs.

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How do you feel you can enhance the biodiversity and environment during your tenancy?

We plan to enter Tan House Farm into mid-tier stewardship, with an application made in June 2022 for a January 2023 start. This will involve creating buffer strips abutting watercourses, hedgerow planting and management, woodland edge management and dedicated areas for pollinator flower mixes. We are keen to foster a better environment for nature.





Do you consider or have you measured the carbon emissions of your farming business? If so, have you made any changes to reduce these?

At Tan House Farm we're in the process of undertaking a carbon audit using the Farm Carbon Toolkit. This survey takes in different information about our holdings, such as machinery, inputs, planting and crop rotation, and determines a rating with a report on how to further improve carbon emissions. The result of this survey will form a baseline which captures greenhouse gas emissions,

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allowing us to monitor what we can do to ultimately reach net zero. We also hope to undertake a similar exercise across our wider agricultural business.

Is there any intention to transition from Countryside Stewardship into the Sustainable Farming Initiative (SFI) environmental land management scheme?

We're not in an SFI pilot scheme, but we're interested in the findings of those who are. The Church Commissioners have already incorporated a clause within our tenancy agreement to allow for the introduction of bio-solids from water treatment by-product into our day-to-day operation at Tan House Farm. This is used to create compost rich in phosphate and micronutrients, which functions as an excellent fertiliser. This should benefit both the soil quality and yields achieved.

How do you collaborate as part of your business? From a social perspective, how do you see the local community's involvement taking shape?

Farmers have always been good at sharing information and being mutually supportive. We're also very fortunate to collaborate with our local community. Volunteers support us by planting new trees, and we're keen to engage with these groups and maintain

good relations with our neighbours to support and understand our sustainable objectives.

What is your opinion on the future of the farming industry?

Farming undoubtedly has a prosperous future. Food security is at the forefront of the national agenda, and self-sufficiency is key. There are even more people to feed on this island than ever before. It'll be a bumpy road, and some will find it easier to cope than others, but I'm positive in what the future holds.

What one piece of advice would you give to future farming generations?

Don't put off to tomorrow what you can do today.