

Sustainable Farming in a Natural Environment



Farm Walk, Glen & Churchill, Co. Fermanagh

Oliver & Diane Keown

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About the farm

Oliver and Diane Keown are third generation farmers who run an exemplar farming system that makes the most of the local land types, with a dual focus of low input environmental management and a market-focused sustainable beef enterprise.

Oliver, Diane, and their three children live and farm in the LFA region of Fermanagh. The farm extends to approx. 525ft above sea level and is dominated by heavy clay soils and peatland. In this environment they have developed a system of farming which produces sustainable beef to meet the exacting standards of the AA Beef scheme whilst also farming within the constraints of low fertility, wet and peaty soils within an ASSI.

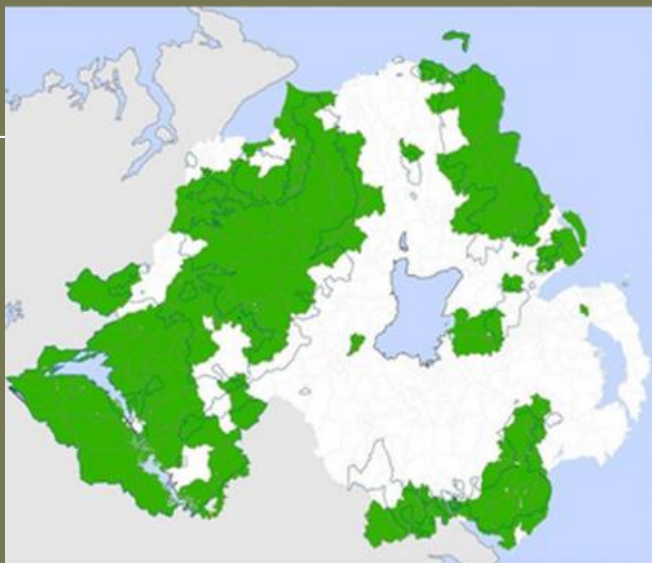


Oliver Keown with Peter Gallagher (Ulster Wildlife) & Shannon McLaughlin (QUB)

Whilst most LFA farmers sell youngstock at the mart to finishers based further east, the Keown's have a block of fertile lowland on limestone. This is paddock grazed based on regenerative principles and allows them to finish homebred stock on the holding. The Reliance on imported feed rations has reduced through good grassland management, careful selection of genetics and the recycling of spent grain from the local distillery.

Farming in West Fermanagh

A map of the LFA
(Less Favoured
Area) in NI



Fermanagh is predominantly LFA land with most of it classified as Severely Disadvantaged (SDA).

Whilst production within the LFA is somewhat hampered by many natural aspects it is important to remember the contribution it makes towards Agriculture in NI.

- ♦ The SDA has approx 70% of all NI Farms
- ♦ Employs approx 35,000 people
- ♦ Home to 76% of Beef Cows

Ulster Wildlife EFS Group supports over 550 farmers with habitat that is eligible for the Environmental Farming Scheme (Higher). Much of this land occurs in LFA's, particularly Fermanagh. The aims of the Group are to encourage uptake of schemes. Help with scheme delivery. Assist in the development of new schemes by listening to farmers and feeding back on scheme proposals.



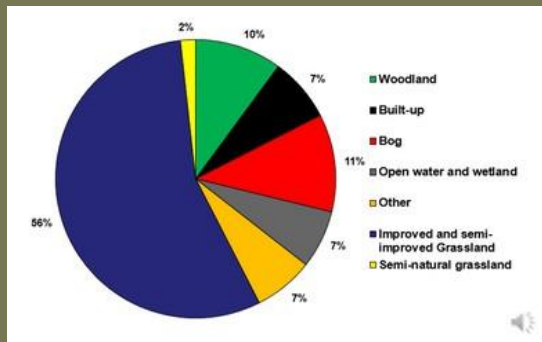
Semi-natural grasslands

Semi Natural Grasslands are rare (<2%) and have been in major decline since the 1970s.

Semi Natural Grasslands of the quality occurring on the Keown's farm have become extremely scarce as agricultural production methods have intensified. It is estimated that there has been a 98% decline in these grasslands since the 1970's in the UK.

NI holds around 1/3 of the UK's 'Purple Moorgrass and rush pasture' (characterised by devil's bit scabious) with most of this is in Fermanagh

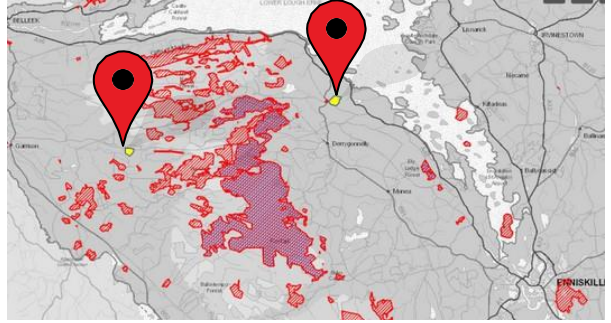
West Fermanagh is a stronghold for traditional hay meadows. Despite the intervention of agri-environment schemes the areas of meadows has declined from 1200ha in 2002, to around 522ha in 2024. Changing climate, inflexible prescriptions and nutrient enrichment are factors in their decline.



Meadows and grazed species-rich grasslands can support a huge range of wildlife including wildflowers, fungi, bees, flies, beetles, spiders, moths, butterflies, reptiles, amphibians, small mammals, bats and birds. In the UK, more priority species (for conservation attention) are associated with grasslands than with any other habitat type.



Field visits



Site 1

Glen, Co. Fermanagh

- 12.3ha in a mosaic of species-rich 'purple moor grass and rush pasture' & 'wet heath'.
- Shallow peat soils
- Zero fertilizer inputs
- Extensive summer grazing for cows and calves
- In EFS Higher



Site 2

Churchill, Co. Fermanagh

- 20.3ha improved pasture
- Limestone substrate
- Paddock grazing system
- Part of cattle finishing platform

Livestock & husbandry

24 month old
Aberdeen Angus
heifers



The Keowns have experimented with different breeds of cattle on this farm, and like other farms, the breeds have also changed over the years to best match the government policies of the day.

Following trials using Hereford, Stabiliser and Angus sires the Keowns have settled on Angus sires as the most suitable for this farm and finishing system. Targeting this breed is further helped by the bonuses available from some retailers for Angus certified beef. The Keowns supply Tesco via Foyle Meats in Omagh and received a 20-30ppkg bonus for in spec animals.

Farming within the constraints of the natural environment and relying on natural forage, a more native, lighter breed is able to stay out on the hill for a longer season, do less damage to peat and waterlogged soils due to lower hoof pressure and is more efficient at converting natural, rough forage into bodyweight or milk. These are also good traits for sensitive habitat management compared to heavier continental breeds.

Calving ease, good mothering ability and easy fleshing are important traits in the breeding stock.



Discussion points

Opportunities & challenges on LFA farms

- Beef Carbon Reduction Scheme
- Changing climate
- Farming with Nature
- Food Security
- Improved animal health and genetics
- Low Carbon Farming
- Profitability
- Succession and farming families
- Waste management



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