



Little Chalfont Nature Park Farming & Land Use

1. Introduction

The Chiltern Hills do not provide much good arable land for crops. The sloping terrain of hillsides and generally poorer, thinner soils do not make for the best conditions for the most popular cereal crops such as wheat and barley or for the most common vegetable or salad crops and make modern highly mechanised farming more difficult. Using Buckinghamshire County Council's *Buckinghamshire Agriculture Survey* as a source, most farming in the local area of the Nature Park today is given over to grazing land for livestock such as pigs, poultry, sheep and beef cattle, mowing grass, cereal crops like wheat, barley and other crops such as oil seed rape, and mixed farming with both livestock and crops. By far the largest category of farming is defined by DEFRA 'as not fitting well with mainstream agriculture' and is often not in any commercial use of any kind.

Snell's Farm within which the Nature Park now exists would have found commercial farming challenging. Although we know from records the farm was engaged in arable farming in the 19th century, crops are still grown on fields today, but on the part of the farm where the Nature Park is situated, poor clay soil on chalk is only suitable for grassland and orchards or remained as woodland.

2. Orchards

One source of income from farming was the cherry orchard, which were once common in this part of the Chilterns. The clay and underlying chalk provide the right combination of damp conditions and drainage that cherry trees prefer. A few of the cherry trees still remain from the orchard, they are old but you can still see flowers and fruit. Trees in orchards were once allowed to grow much larger and were more widely spaced than today, allowing more grassland between trees. Grazing would keep the grass shorter and there was space available for the very long, wide based ladders used to pick the cherries.

Several types of cherries were grown; the most distinctive one locally was a late ripening jet-black dessert variety called Prestwood Black. Often referred to as 'Chuggies', people came on the Metropolitan Line from London to admire the cherry blossom in the Chilterns and possibly help with the harvest. Traditionally the first Sunday in August was 'Cherry Pie Sunday' when it was the custom for cherry pie, or other delicious recipes such as cherry turnover or cherry duff, to be served in cottages and farmhouses. The nearby village of Seer Green still celebrates a 'Cherry Pie Fair' as part of Village Day. There were also two small apple orchards – for eating and cooking – some of these trees survive.



Changes in agriculture meant that orchards of cherry, plum and apple which were once common in Buckinghamshire south of Aylesbury were reduced by over 90% between 1938 and 1994 and are continuing to disappear.

You can still buy Prestwood Black cherry trees to plant and in the spirit of the 'Great British Bake Off' you can revive a local custom by using recipes for Cherry Pie, Cherry Turnover and Cherry Duff.

3. Grazing Land

Snell's Farm was arable but would have had livestock let out on to the fields and orchards (left largely to look after themselves) with grass to eat and a water supply, they would be used for local needs. The farm needed some shelter for the worst storms of the winter, a place for milking, shearing and butchery and a dry place to maintain a stock of hay stored for winter feed and for bedding. The land in the Nature Park was suitable primarily for grazing by cattle or sheep and also horses essential as working animals for riding, pulling vehicles and ploughing.

In the resources section, there are details of the sort of domestic livestock that can still be seen a short walk away in or close to Little Chalfont and these animals could have been found on Snell's Farm as a vital part of the Farm's economic survival. They are not found in the Nature Park today, but you can see the young of milk and beef cattle grazing locally, along with sheep and lambs, pigs, horses, goats, chickens, ducks (Aylesbury Ducks) and geese. You can also find exotic domestic animals nearby such as llamas. Many farm animals can be observed every day in Little Chalfont if you know where to look and can be seen most easily today at nearby Odds Farm in High Wycombe.

There is no firm evidence that this happened on Snell's Farm, but many woodland trees produce 'mast' the botanical name for the nuts, seeds, buds, or fruits of trees and shrubs eaten by wildlife and domestic animals. Typically, beech woods produce beech nuts which provide food for pigs and chickens foraging in the woodland. Beech trees start flowering and producing mast when they are mature – usually at 30 years old. Individual trees have cycles and every three or four years they produce a bumper crop of mast, but in some years no mast at all. There are plenty of oak trees too and acorns are useful food for pigs.

4. Chalk pits & brick making,

Builders in Buckinghamshire often used cheap and readily available materials for building houses which came from deposits of flint, of clay for daub and wattle or for brick making and chalk for making lime and for adding colour to bricks.

On Snell's Farm part of the farm had deposits of clay, chalk and flint. These natural resources would be accessed through pits dug for the clay and chalk some of which are still visible today. To fire the clay and make lime from chalk, ovens or kilns were built on site to fire the clay to a high temperature to make bricks and tiles and to heat the chalk



to drive out moisture and make quicklime or slaked lime by quenching with water. The income this brought in was probably essential for the economic operation of the farm.

Lime would also make an essential ingredient in mortar for the bricks and in limewash to finish buildings in white and make plaster for walls. Earlier uses called daub and wattle was where the clay was interwoven with flexible branches to make walls. Roofs were often made of thatch, but that would have to be imported from other places with reeds or long straw from wheat. Alternatively, locally produced wooden shingles (small wooden tiles) could be used or locally fired clay tiles and in more modern times by imported slates.

Flint associated with the chalk strata has been mined for millennia in the Chiltern Hills. Flints were first extracted for making into axes during the Neolithic period, later as the ignition mechanism for 'flintlock' guns. Nodules are to be seen in houses such as Snell's Farm as a construction material for walls.

5. Woodworking

This area of Buckinghamshire was the home of a thriving furniture and woodworking industry and timber was managed to supply the industry often using techniques such as coppice and pollard to encourage the growth of long straight branches. The source of timber of the farm would have been valuable as a supply of firewood and as a construction material to build homes, barns and outhouses, and provide poles and fencing material for farm use.

One of the fascinating occupations in the furniture industry found in the Chiltern Hills was the bodger – self-employed workers who went into woods, set up hand operated lathes and made chair legs and wooden handles out of the wood they collected, transporting the semi-finished items to the manufacturers' workshops to be used in making tables and chairs or wooden implements.

Look for examples of pollarding and coppicing – there is an example in the Park in a hazel tree. Look for places where a lathe could have been set up – and look for the usable branches and timber they would have look for and the species of tree they would have preferred for hardness, ease of working, attractiveness and durability.

The Chiltern Open Air museum has an example of a working lathe and display of wood products made locally.

Look for the sort of trees farmers would have preferred for firewood, the ones they would use for buildings and what would they have used for fences. Examples of local wood and its uses are given in the resources section, typically wood in the park would have been used as follows:

- Furniture – oak, beech, - for durability, close grain, ease of working and strength;



- Firewood – beech, hornbeam, sycamore - that will slowly and steadily without smoke or sparks
- Fencing, poles, daub and wattle walls – hazel, alder– can be coppiced, flexible, easily worked, bends without breaking
- Wooden tools and implements - such as handles, brushes, gunstocks, wooden rakes and spades, barrels and wooden containers – beech, oak for strength and durability and resistance to rot if wet.