

Losing ground?

Wildlife flourishes alongside livestock at Yew Tree Farm near Bristol. But as the city struggles to provide housing for its growing population, farmer Catherine Withers faces losing her land to development. **James Fair** reports

Photos: Oliver Edwards

“Piggy, piggy, piggies,” Catherine Withers calls as we wander back from the fields towards the farmhouse buildings. “Do they come when you call?” I ask, unnecessarily as it turns out, as seven or eight joyful bundles of perfect pinkness come running towards us like oversized puppies, as giddy as spring lambs in their excitement.

“Yes,” Catherine replies laughing. “Piggy, piggy, piggy, piggies,” she calls again, this time emphasising the final word in her bliss at seeing them happy and healthy. A latecomer comes lolloping across the muddy paddock, ears flopping like a spaniel’s, and starts to

scratch itself against a well-used log. Of course, these pigs – Welsh whites, a rare breed renowned for being able to live outdoors all-year-round – are not pets, and in another six months or so, they’ll be sent to an abattoir to be slaughtered. A Bristol butcher will make sausages out of them, including ones flavoured with wild garlic that Catherine picks herself in the woodlands at the bottom of the farm, and she will deliver them to customers locally. Well, she’s a farmer – there’s no room for sentiment in this business.

There are also chickens (until recently free-range, now temporarily confined to barracks after the local fox took one a week

Yew Tree Farm’s cattle pastures boast magnificent views of Bristol’s skyline, but plans to build 200 new homes on this land put the survival of the entire farm in jeopardy





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“Skylarks nest in the hay meadow, swallows in the barns and dippers live on the brook”

- 1 Catherine’s rare breed Welsh white pigs come obediently when she calls
- 2 The farm’s Hereford beef cattle are used to the drone of noise from the South Bristol link road

I found her organic meat irresistible. And the farm is a haven for wildlife. Skylarks nest in the hay meadow, swallows in her barns and dippers live on Colliter’s Brook. “And a kingfisher – everyone says they’ve seen it, except for me,” says Catherine ruefully.

Brambles intrude into the cattle pastures like the tide lapping away at the shore, and the hedges – mainly hawthorn and blackthorn –

or so before I visit), and some 40 Hereford beef cattle roam the rough slopes that descend into a valley where the South Bristol link road cuts a noisy arc. Our conversation is momentarily crowded out by the deafening whines of an accelerating motorbike. It’s beautiful here, but not always peaceful.

But then this is a farm that is being enveloped by one of the UK’s fastest-growing cities. The view from the farm takes in the village of Long Ashton, the Clifton Suspension Bridge and the Bristol skyline, and it’s spectacular. From here, it’s just a hop, skip and jump to the edge of the city, and yet we watch a kestrel hovering high overhead and swallows weaving their magical flight paths closer to the ground.

THE LAST FARM

On her Facebook page, Catherine promotes Yew Tree Farm as “Bristol’s last working farm” and sells a range of organic pork and eggs, plus seasonal jams and chutneys (the beef is sold in Waitrose). It’s the perfect antidote to what she calls the “stack ‘em high, sell ‘em cheap” model – tasty food produced to high welfare standards with negligible food miles – exactly what the green lobby would have farmers do. Despite being vegetarian for the past 30 years,

have grown to the size of two-storey houses, unrecognisable as hedges you usually find in the countryside. There are several heart-stoppingly magnificent oaks, and one equally magnificent dead one. All this leads to a “wildlife hotspot within the city of Bristol that needs to be recognised,” Tim Curley of Avon Wildlife Trust wrote in an email to Catherine last year.

But it’s not. The council has prepared a draft local plan that has designated about five hectares of the land Catherine rents privately – including her wildlife-rich hay meadow with its precious skylarks – as ripe for development, reducing, at a stroke, her holding of some 24 hectares by 20%. If the plan goes through as it is, 200 houses will abut her farm, destroying her ability to make her own hay and bringing hundreds more people – and their dogs – on to the rights of way that criss-cross the land.

The consequence will be to make farming here unviable, she says. We watch as a woman and a large dog enter the field. “I know that lady,” she says. “Her dog’s crazy, she can’t let it off the lead, but she does sometimes. I’ve had to speak to her about it – it could definitely threaten one of our newborn calves.”

And then there’s the rubbish – Catherine patrols her fields every day, and never comes

- 3 Glowing yellow buttercups and ox-eye daisies grow knee-high in the summer meadow
- 4 Catherine’s grandfather took over the tenancy of Yew Tree Farm and its buildings in the 1960s

back without something for the bin. We find the embers of a small fire, plus discarded drink cans and sandwich wrappers and collect enough to half-fill a bin bag. She’s had dog-poo bags hung on trees, although posting on Facebook and, honestly, programmes such as *Countryfile* help to stop this sort of behaviour.

Catherine’s anger and frustration at the predicament she finds herself in comes burning through as we talk. Referring to the hay meadow, she points out that elsewhere in the

WILDLIFE OF YEW TREE FARM

As you would expect in a rural location, even on the edge of a city, badgers and foxes are both common, as are roe deer. Other mammals present include weasels and bats. Birds nesting on the farm include skylarks, house sparrows, blue tits, goldfinches, swallows (pictured) and buzzards. Kestrels and swifts hunt above the pastures. Dippers and kingfishers are seen on the brook that runs along the bottom of the valley. The hay meadow



alone supports 84 plant species, and these provide habitat for butterflies (including meadow browns, above), ladybirds and burnet moths. Wildflowers in the meadow (above left) and hedges include knapweed and shepherd’s purse.



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UK, landowners are being paid to create identical pollinator-friendly habitats. “There’s all this money available in grants, but if you have already got it, the attitude seems to be, ‘Well, that can go!’ It’s mental.”

Yew Tree Farm has been in the family since Catherine’s grandfather took over the tenancy in the mid-1960s. The Withers family has been farming in the area for at least 120 years, but they have been pushed further and further out as Bristol has expanded. Now, only this farm is left within the boundaries of the city, though her father and cousins still have holdings in Long Ashton, which is in North Somerset.

Now aged 51, Catherine has lived almost all her life at Yew Tree, and even as a girl of 10 took responsibility for some of the livestock. After taking her A-levels, she tried her hand at intensive pig farming, but found it soul-destroying and unviable. “I made £25 a week,” she recalls. Though she has done a variety of other jobs, she’s always been involved with the livestock in one way or another. “The place drew me back all the time,” she says.

PLANNING DILEMMA

Bristol City Council said in a statement that the draft local plan from 2019 does propose to



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“Yew Tree Farm should be a beacon for nature and wildlife. Bristol should be proud of it”

5 This field could disappear under 200 new homes if Bristol council’s draft local plan goes ahead

6 Pretty Colliter’s Brook runs through the bottom of the farm on its way to join the River Avon

develop land at Yew Tree Farm for 200 new houses, but added that “since then, the declaration of an ecological emergency has given renewed urgency to the need to conserve and enhance habitats”. The council won’t support “proposals where the benefits of new housing would be outweighed by losses of important habitats”, it added. When I show it to Catherine, she responds, “Do you think they are softening?”



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5 Catherine nurtures emerging saplings in small copses on her land
6 A magnificent old oak on the farm supports a wide variety of wildlife



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I wonder, what are councils supposed to do to find space for new housing? Bristol is managing to build about 1,500 new homes a year, but is under pressure to more than double that. Overall, this Government has promised to deliver 300,000 new houses every year. Where are these going to come from?

Sophie Spencer, director for CPRE Avon and Bristol, says the council should first be looking to develop brownfield sites closer to the city centre. “They shouldn’t consider places such as Yew Tree Farm until they have considered every other option,” she adds. “They need to be creative and think about [unused] retail spaces and car parks.” They should, she says, be building houses in areas that are already well-connected by public transport in order to reduce car journeys, too.

Catherine says there’s a massive over-capacity for self-storage in the city – you could lose some of that to make way for new housing. “A friend told me she was renting space near the centre for £28 a week,” she adds. “You couldn’t rent a place to live anywhere in Bristol for that.”

The day I visit Yew Tree, the hay meadow is splodged with bright-yellow buttercups and dark-red clover. Ox-eye daisies and vetch will

flower later in the year. Then we spot a couple of roe deer in the corner of the field, which flee with the occasional pronging back-kick. “This place should be a beacon,” Catherine says adamantly. “Bristol should be proud of it.” It’s hard to disagree with her. ©



James Fair is an experienced wildlife journalist with a longstanding passion for the environment. He specialises in investigating controversial issues such as badger culling and the illegal wildlife trade.

GROWING CITIES

The top five areas with the highest percentage of new homes built between 2010 and 2017 were Tower Hamlets in East London, Corby in Northamptonshire, Cambridge, Uttlesford (the Essex district that includes Stansted Airport and Saffron Walden) and Dartford.

Cambridge is predicted to be one of, if not the, fastest-growing cities in the whole of the UK over the next decade; its economy could grow by 25%, requiring up to nearly 67,000 new homes by 2040.



New homes in South Cambridgeshire

The Government has said 300,000 new homes are needed across the country every year. Between 2006 and 2012, 225,000 hectares of land – an area nearly as large as the Lake District National Park – were developed for housing.