

Image: Hugh Campbell Adamson
on the banks of the North Esk river

From the ground up

High-quality land management drives every decision at Stracathro Estates, and it's having a hugely beneficial effect on the local environment

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'One obligation of land ownership is the need to work with nature and to let nature work with us'

Can an agri-business and nature co-exist in harmony? It's a question that governments, conservationists and farmers have been asking for years. I am always saddened when vast machines move in and important habitat such as hedging is grubbed up. When driving on the A90 from Brechin northwards to Aberdeen, you are struck by huge fields – an example of arable farming at its most progressive. But what is unexpected is that here, on Stracathro Estates, hedgerows are also a major feature, and with this comes an impressive wildlife tally.

'I'm really not sure about the exact length, but I believe we have 17 miles of hedgerows spread out over the estate,' says Hugh Campbell Adamson when I meet him at the estate office. 'We are very fortunate to have big, well-shaped fields at Stracathro that are ideal for precision farming. But between them is an impressive amount of hedging, bolstered by using our greening obligations to create five metre-wide strips. Our land is blighted by pylons and telegraph poles, so where appropriate we have created beetle banks along the line to help mitigate the lack of wildlife caused by large fields with distant field margins.'

Campbell Adamson is eager to demonstrate that large land ownership (Stracathro's 4,220 acres include 500 acres of commercial and amenity woodlands, six tenanted farms and 2,270 acres of intensive cropping) can be of benefit to the community, the environment and the economy. He welcomes visits from groups, including schoolchildren. There are no secrets; facts and figures are readily available. He understands issues relating to poor land management, but equally makes a strong case for those who manage land properly.

His approach is impressive, and so is he. A shrewd businessman, he was director of the Scottish Football Association for 12 years, and is past Chairman of Brechin City Football Club. He is trustee of the Salmon and Trout Association, and past Chairman of both the Esk District Fisheries Board and the Association of Salmon Fisheries Boards, to list but a few of the bodies that consume his time.

His track record shows a dedication to the lifeblood of the area of his birth. The recent conversion of farm steadings into affordable housing with a communal heating system, solar power, and play area for children, has proved a huge success, and he has ambitions to do other similar



– we need to use diesel. So we try to reduce carbon outputs in other ways – through wood-pellet-fed communal hot water and heating systems servicing seven houses and our office, and wood-burning stoves in many of our other houses. This has reduced our consumption of kerosene by 20%. We have two solar-power schemes on roofs, and have planning permission for a 120-acre solar farm. And we have a turbine generating around 1,800MWh of clean energy annually.’ Each of these schemes can be justified on business grounds, but they also offset the carbon that is released by farming.

What do the locals think? ‘When we applied for permission for the 80m turbine, we told the local community exactly what we were planning,’ he says. ‘We received 24 letters of support, and no objections. It is vital to inform people, and that is what we always strive to do.’

Campbell Adamson gives me a tour of the estate. Every track is bordered by deep hedges; some date back to the Victorian era, but many are more recent. A kestrel hovers over the flower-rich verge. Down at the stunning North Esk river, we chat to four fishermen who have been coming here for years. The river waltzes soothingly past. The water is low; a fish leaps in the background. As the banter continues, it’s clear the fishermen have huge respect and great liking for Campbell Adamson. ‘My concern for nature is heightened by my admiration and

love of salmon,’ he admits. ‘These incredibly doughty fish, capable of swimming 5,000 miles for food, and returning to their birthplace to lay eggs and die, are at the mercy of man. We dam their rivers, pollute their water, dredge their habitat, net them in ever more sophisticated ways, yet they return year after year. Not surprisingly, their numbers are in decline.

‘Huge improvements have been carried out to many of the river habitats they depend on, and anglers have reduced the number they kill. The Government, too, has shown commendable leadership by proposing a licensing system that will greatly reduce the numbers being killed.’

The ongoing criticism of lairds is a matter to which he has given much thought. ‘There is no doubt that it’s driven by envy fuelled by ignorance,’ he says. ‘I challenge anyone to explain why a large landholding is wrong. It gives me no more social or political power than that bestowed on a smallholder. We are a business that needs land to operate. I cannot see what would be achieved by a change in governance and management. We seek the best advice we can, and I believe we are well managed. We do need to work on our PR, to divorce the image of the tweed-clad laird collecting rents, and adopt the corporate image of an environmentally aware, community-responsive and, most of all, open and responsible entity.’

And that is no easy task. ☺

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schemes in future. Community involvement is part of his remit.

‘No one has absolute rights to land,’ he says. ‘One man may own the land but that does not give him sole rights to that land; law restricts him, whether planning, agricultural or environmental. But it goes further than that. He has to recognise that others may also have an interest in that land. They may live on or near that land, they may look at that land, smell that land, or they may just feel hefted to that land. Whatever, that interest has to be recognised. That is why we have planning laws. It is the degree of interest that is critical; when does that legitimate interest become interference?’

‘The second obligation of land ownership is less tangible,’ he continues. ‘It is the need to work with nature, and to let nature work with us. We have embraced Integrated Farm Management

to maintain the highest standards possible. Instead of five tractors, we now have two larger ones; this has cut our fuel consumption by 25%. We restrict our fertiliser and spray inputs through the use of satellite imagery and GPS technology. This obviously reduces costs but it also reduces the danger of run-off. Minimum tillage and the creation of small ponds at the bottom of our ditches reduces silt flowing into the North Esk river. Some believe we are over-controlled by SEPA and SNH. I regret that man’s behaviour has necessitated the establishment of such organisations; without them, those few careless and selfish individuals would continue to wreak damage on our environment.’

Agriculture, he argues, can never be entirely carbon neutral. ‘Leaving aside the carbon released by working the land, no substitute has yet been found to provide power for our tractors

