



PAST HARVESTS PROJECT

Informing Contemporary UK Land Use Policy Through a Sustainability Assessment of Farming Systems in the Medieval and Early Modern Period

A multidisciplinary project exploring how historical farming systems can help shape sustainable land use policy in the UK.

Why this project matters

Achieving sustainable land use in the UK remains a major policy challenge. Balancing:



Food Production



**Biodiversity
& Ecosystem Services**



**Rural Communities
& Livelihoods**

has become increasingly polarised and contested.

Past Harvests uses evidence from the verifiable past to provide an alternative perspective on current debates and to identify lessons from historical farming systems that may help inform future land-use decisions.

This project is focused on (1) achieving tangible public policy outcomes in addition to (2) providing landscape historians and archaeologists with a new methodology to better understand the forces that shaped farming systems from the medieval to the early modern period.

Achieving sustainable land use within the farmed environment – defined as enabling a multi-functional landscape producing food security and life supporting ecosystem services – is proving an intractable public policy challenge in the UK.

Study areas

Five historical estates have been engaged, each with comprehensive historical archives, professional archivists available to assist the project and a track record of progressive land management policies.

The reference periods being looked at:

Reference period 1: 1250-1450

Reference period 2: 1450-1650

Reference period 3: 1650-1750

Reference period 4: 1750-1850

Sustainability Appraisal

Using the **Global Farm Metric (GFM)** framework to evaluate the categories listed in the GFM, which represent different components of a land use system. The state (condition) of each of these components, which is influenced by farm practices and external drivers, determines the sustainability of the system.



System Drivers Analysis

Key drivers analysed

- Climate change & environmental conditions
- Population and labour dynamics
- Economic factors (GDP, markets, trade)
- Governance, policy and infrastructure

Method

- Develop a framework of drivers and indicators
- Compile historical datasets (e.g. Cambridge Group, CAGE)
- Analyse relationships between: Drivers → sustainability outcomes

Outputs

- Evidence of how systems respond to different conditions

Our Research

To undertake a **systematic sustainability appraisal** of farming systems from the medieval and early modern periods, assessing:

Environmental Sustainability

- The project will use state-of-the-art ecological models to reconstruct historical biodiversity
- Soil health
- Nutrient management
- Natural resources

Economic Sustainability

- Productivity
- Markets and trade
- Farm resilience
- Economic performance

Social Sustainability

- Employment and labour
- Community wellbeing
- Equity and access
- Tenure and governance

Impact & Knowledge Exchange

Working with: Defra Farmers • Conservation organisations • Landowners • Policy makers

Outputs include:



Policy Briefings



**Thought
Leadership Film**



**Farm Walks &
Workshops**



**Academic
Publications**



**Stakeholder
Engagement Events**

Evidence for Better Land-Use Policy

The project will:

- Provide historical sustainability benchmarks
- Help stakeholders move beyond entrenched positions
- Improve understanding of sustainability trade-offs
- Support future UK land-use policy development
- Create a new interdisciplinary methodology for historical land-use research