

Figure iii Arable farmland in Berkshire.

The area of land used for arable farming had fallen to 34,000 hectares by 2010, most of it in the west and north of the county.

cultivation of other crops including field beans, linseed, poppies for pharmaceutical use and fuel crops such as miscanthus has also increased.

The change from spring-sown to predominantly winter-sown cereals is likely to have had an effect on many of the commoner species, both through loss of suitable open breeding habitats (eg Lapwing, Skylark) and loss of winter stubbles (eg sparrows, finches and buntings). Some of the changes in arable cropping though seem to have had some beneficial effects on some species. The spread of oilseed rape and other alternative crops has apparently benefitted species which otherwise are in decline, and may account for an increase in the number of tetrads occupied by Yellow Wagtail, a species in serious decline nationally and formerly associated with damp pastures, which now breeds almost exclusively in arable crops in Berkshire, and the increase in the number of tetrads occupied by Linnets and Reed Buntings on the Downs. It is assumed that the different structure of these crops bring diversity to the arable landscape, mitigating some of the effects of modern farming practices.

The area of grassland in the county (Figure v), approximately 24,000 hectares in 2010, has changed

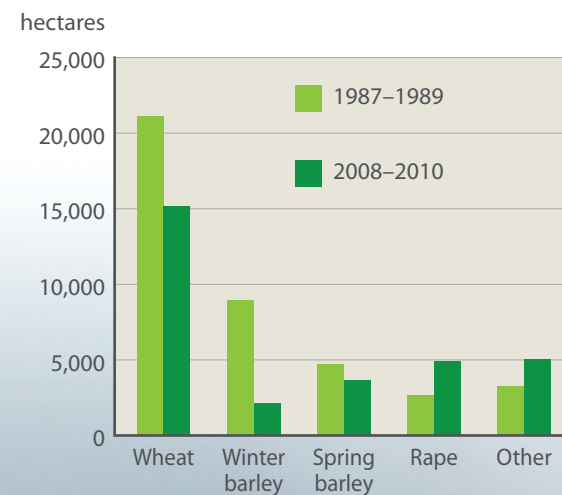


Figure iv Arable farming in Berkshire. Areas of main crops in thousands of hectares: foreground 2008-10; background 1987-9.

The total area of arable land fell from 41,000 to 35,000 hectares over the 21 year period. Cereal production fell and the areas of oilseed rape and other crops, such as linseed and biofuel grasses, grew. Defra farm statistics

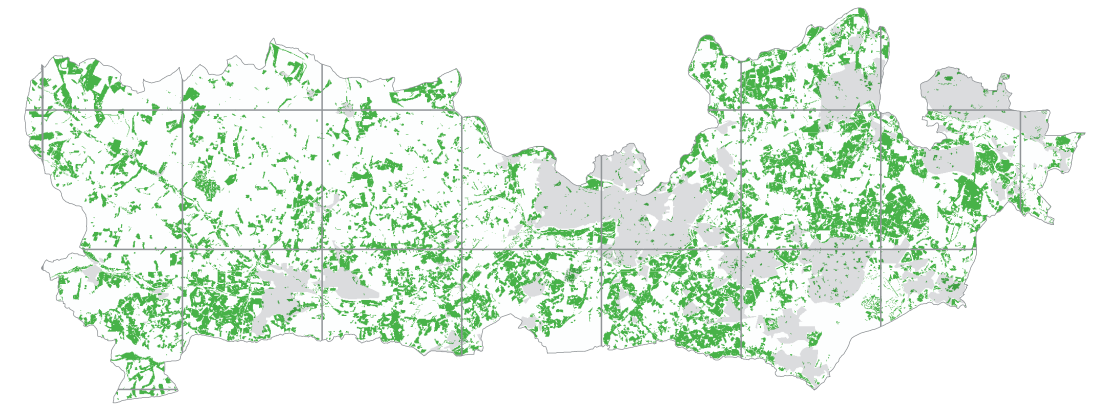


Figure v Berkshire: grassland.

TVERC habitat data. The total area of grassland, which includes both farm and non-farm grassland, was approximately 42,000 hectares in 2010, over 95% of which is classed as improved.

little since 1975. However most has been agriculturally improved, a process which accelerated in the latter half of the 20th century with reseeding using commercial grass varieties and the use of artificial fertilizers and silage or hay-making occurring early in the season. These are conditions which are not conducive to biodiversity or the successful breeding of most ground-nesting birds. Some consider that its adverse ecological impact may have been greater than the changes to arable farming, as indicated by the dramatic decline of many traditional farmland birds in the western parts of the British Isles between the first and second BTO Atlas, the surveys for which were carried out in 1967-72 and 1988-91 respectively (Shrubbs, 2003). Nonetheless, close grazing by sheep and cultivation and reseeding to grass in the spring can produce areas suitable for ground nesting species.

The number of mixed farms has declined, and livestock numbers have fallen substantially in recent decades (Figure vi), animal husbandry being increasingly focused in fewer, larger units. Dairy farming used to be a significant part of the agricultural scene in Berkshire, and in the early 20th century the fresh milk trade supplying London by rail was important. The number

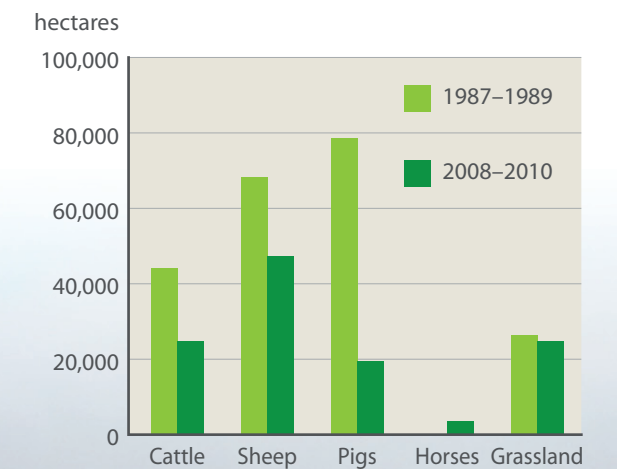


Figure vi Farm animals in Berkshire: foreground 2008/10; background 1987/9.

Despite decreases of 44%, 31% and 75% respectively in cattle, sheep and pigs, the area of farm grassland (23,000 ha in 2010) has changed little. The number of horses had increased to 3,395 in 2010 from 1,720 in 1975, the figure for 1987/9 is not available. Defra Farm Statistics.

Extensive fields of arable crops, such as at Cow Down, are an intrinsic part of the West Berkshire landscape.

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