

CASE STUDY DROUGHT 2026



The Drier it Got, the More Confident I Became

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Executive summary

How recovery time, ground cover and biodiversity kept one Essex farm growing through drought.

During an exceptionally dry summer, Sam Squier's herbal leys remained green and continued producing forage while fields around Humphreys Farm became brown and dusty. The result attracted independent coverage from Reuters and the Associated Press. Yet the most important part of the story began long before the rain stopped.

Over eight years, Sam and his wife Kate changed the way they ran the farm. Sam learned to manage holistically, giving plants sufficient recovery time, allowing some to mature and set seed, and using cattle to trample plant material onto the ground. Their hooves bring seed into contact with the soil, while the trampled material protects the surface from sunlight, rain and temperature extremes. A diverse and continually changing plant community now captures more solar energy, protects more soil and helps make rainfall more effective.

The outcomes are ecological, economic and social. Sam reports abundant grass, healthy cattle and returning wildlife. The farm has reduced the time cattle spend in winter housing by approximately five weeks, has not needed to buy winter feed for eight years and avoids an estimated £27,000 each year in redrilling costs.

Just as importantly, Sam, Kate and their children are happier. The case demonstrates that drought resilience is not a product bought when a dry spell begins. It is developed over years through decisions, observation, recovery time, ground cover, biodiversity and continued learning.

Humphreys Farm at a glance

Farm context	Detail
Farmer	Sam Squier
Location	Great Waltham, Chelmsford, Essex, England
Farm area	Approximately 198 acres
Brittleness	3 on the Brittleness Scale
Normal annual rainfall	Approximately 750–800 mm
Previous year's rainfall	447 mm
Rainfall by early September 2026	230 mm
Transition	Approximately eight years
Pasture	Herbal leys originally sown with approximately 16 species

Watch Sam tell the story

Christopher Cooke's short film captures Sam in the drought and introduces the decisions that helped preserve grass and choices.



[Watch the film on YouTube](#)

Two months without rain and the grass kept growing

“The drier it got, the more confident I became.”

— Sam Squier

By the time Christopher Cooke visited Humphreys Farm in early September 2026, the area had endured an exceptionally dry season following an already dry year. Sam had recorded only 230 mm of rain, compared with the 750–800 mm he would normally expect across a year. Fields nearby were visibly brown and dusty. At Humphreys Farm, the herbal leys were still green, in places standing above knee height, and the cattle were still grazing.

Sam did not dramatise the weather. “It’s just a hot summer in my eyes,” he said. But his next sentence carried the warning: “If you haven’t planned for it, if you’re not ready for it, you’re in trouble.” His confidence came from seeing that earlier decisions had left him with grass and choices.



Mature forage at Humphreys Farm during the dry summer. Photo by Christopher Cooke.

The change began when farming life was not working

Eight years earlier, Sam and Kate knew that something had to change. Sam was working extremely long hours. The pressure of farming life was creating stress in their relationships, and Sam was no longer enjoying the work. “Things were not working. I wasn’t happy,” he recalled.

The farm’s arable fields were waterlogged and compacted. As Sam’s father approached retirement, the family began considering another direction. An interest in herbal leys led Sam to FarmED and then to 3LM’s 12-day Holistic Management training. He says the training helped him “a hell of a lot” because it enabled him to see differently. It did not hand him a fixed formula. It helped him connect what he observed with the decisions he made and with consequences that might appear months later.

Sam did not make the transition alone. He describes himself as exceptionally fortunate to have a supportive landlord, parents who encouraged him to try, and “a wife that really sees it and is up for it”. Kate helped him develop direct retailing and other parts of the business. Her support gave the family more room to experiment with a different way of farming.



Kate and Sam in the herbal ley. Photograph courtesy of Sam Squier.

Recovery time changed what the plants could do

The herbal leys were originally sown with about 16 species of herbs, grasses and legumes. But sowing a diverse mixture was only the beginning. The result depended on how the plants were subsequently managed.

Sam gives plants sufficient recovery time before cattle return. Grazing periods are followed by enough recovery for plants to rebuild roots, flower, mature and set seed. Cattle then enter a relatively small area together. When cattle graze together in a concentrated group, they eat less selectively, while their movement tramples mature stems and leaves onto the ground.

That trampling is not a waste. Plant material lying against the ground protects the soil from sunlight, the physical impact of rain and temperature extremes. It slows surface water, reduces evaporation from exposed soil and creates conditions in which biological activity can continue. The cattle's hooves also press seed into contact with the soil, effectively planting the next generation.



Sam and Kate moving through a diverse herbal ley.

Photograph courtesy of Sam Squier.

A herbal ley reveals itself over time

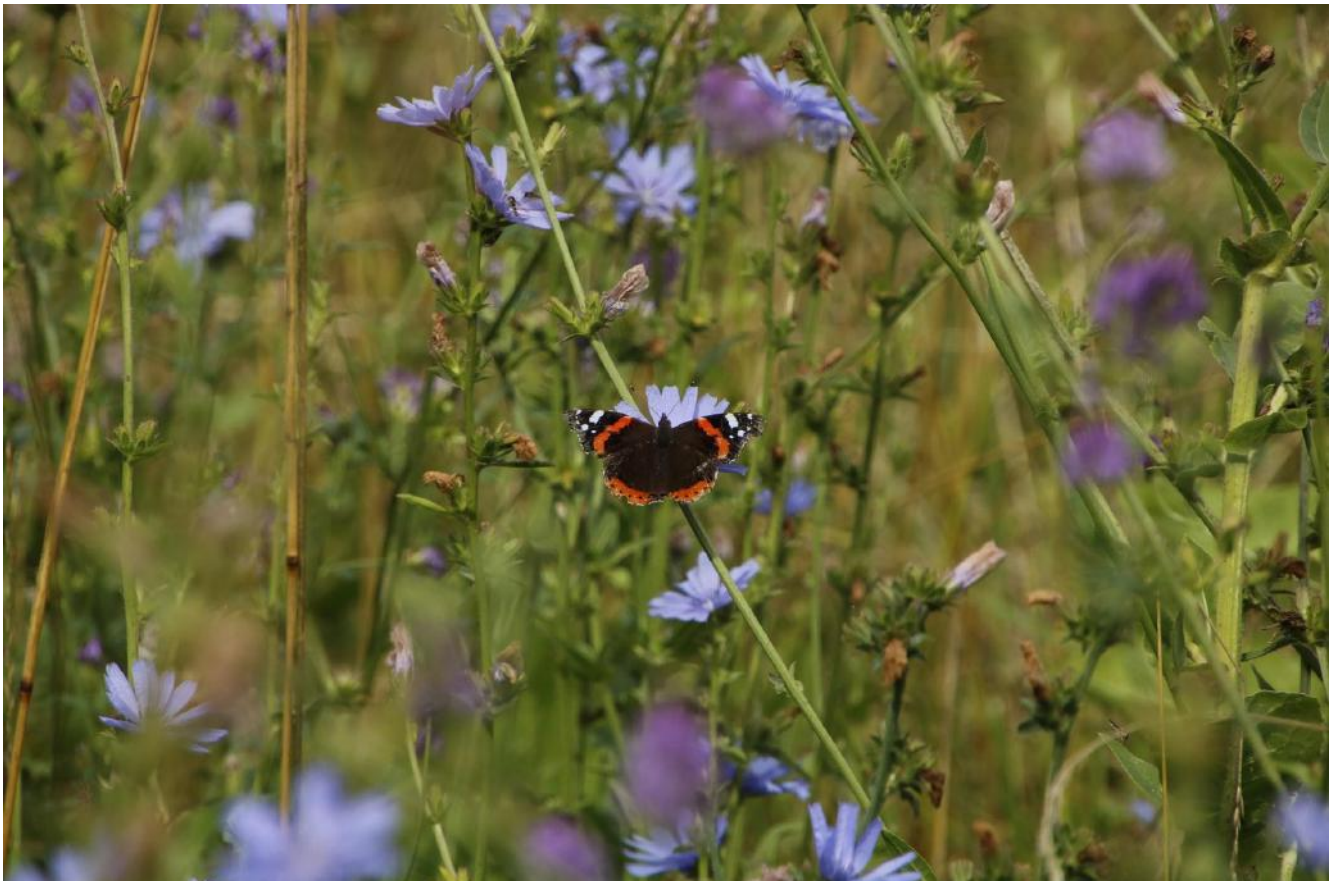
Farmers sometimes conclude that a herbal ley has failed when only some of the sown species appear in the first year. Sam's experience challenges that first-year verdict. The plant community in his fields does not remain fixed. Weather, grazing timing and the conditions present when cattle enter a field favour different plants in different years.

“Each year they change and you think you’ve lost plants, but then two years later all the plants will come back because the weather has been different.”

— Sam Squier

Seeds and plants that appear absent may be waiting for suitable conditions. Sam has seen lucerne, clovers and grasses reappear and flourish. Because he frequently allows the leys to set seed, the community also renews itself. During the interview he pointed to “billions of new plants” emerging and admitted with delight that he did not know exactly what the following year would bring.

This uncertainty no longer feels like failure. It has become a reason to observe. “I’m not sure what I’m going to get next year,” he said. “I’ve got no idea.” The variety creates possibilities: different species grow at different times, root at different depths and respond differently as conditions change.



A red admiral among the flowering plants. Photograph courtesy of Sam Squier.

Avoiding a £27,000 annual redrilling bill

Sam estimates that redrilling the farm would cost approximately £27,000 each year.

Instead, recovery time allows plants to produce seed and cattle help establish it. Their hooves bring the seed into direct contact with the soil while mature plant material is trampled over it. “We’re getting the cows to reseed the whole farm for us for free,” Sam explained in the Associated Press interview.

The same management decision therefore contributes to several outcomes at once: it renews the plant community, maintains protective ground cover, supports biodiversity and avoids a large recurring cost. Ecological and economic resilience are being developed together.



Cattle grazing a diverse pasture at Humphreys Farm. Photo by Christopher Cooke.



Sam's father, now 80, has known Humphreys Farm his entire life. Even he has been surprised by the increase in grass, the return of wildlife and the five-week reduction in winter housing for the cattle. Photograph courtesy of Sam Squier.

His father saw a familiar farm behave differently

Sam's father supported his decision to try a different way of managing, but even he was surprised by what followed.

"He could not believe the amount of forage we grew," Sam said. The farm is not yet outwintering cattle, but it has **reduced the time they spend in winter housing** by approximately **five weeks**. "He can't believe how long we can keep the cattle out in the winter," Sam added. His third surprise was ecological: "He can't believe how quick the wildlife bounced back."

These observations carry unusual weight. They are not a comparison with one recent season. They come from a man with a lifetime's knowledge of what that particular land had and had not previously been able to support.

The return of wildlife



Goldfinches above the herbal ley.



A green woodpecker on the farm.



A clouded yellow butterfly.



A charm of goldfinches in flight.

Photographs courtesy of Sam Squier.

The soil began to drink in more of the rain

Sam connects the farm's drought performance with keeping the soil covered, building fertility and organic matter, and carrying stored water into summer. A diverse plant community supplies living roots at different depths and at different times. Roots, soil organisms and decaying organic material help create aggregates and pore spaces through which water can enter and be retained. Ground cover slows water at the surface and protects it from rapid evaporation.

This is what Holistic Management describes as making rainfall more effective: more of the water that falls enters the soil and remains available to plants and soil life, rather than running off or evaporating.

“When you have an effective water cycle and healthy vegetative community, the effects of floods and droughts become less severe.”

— Savory Institute, Ecosystem Processes, Ebook 2, 2025, p. 9

Sam believes the farm's water-holding capacity has increased enormously. Soil cover, biological activity and improved water cycling can preserve more moisture and more management choices when rainfall becomes scarce.



Protective plant material covers the soil after grazing. Photo by Christopher Cooke.

The accumulated changes meet the drought

During the 2026 drought, Sam continued to see forage recover. “You come out of a field and you look at it and you think, ‘That will never be ready again in 35, 45 days.’ And then in about 15 days you walk past it and you think, ‘I could graze that now if I wanted to.’” He did not necessarily graze it early, but knowing that the forage was there gave him options.

That flexibility matters. Farmers around him were confronting the choice between selling livestock and buying expensive feed. Sam was not buying in feed and was not reseeding land. The drought exposed the difference between waiting for a crisis and developing the capacity of the land before the crisis arrived.



Sam Squier with cattle at Humphreys Farm during the dry summer of 2026. Photo by Christopher Cooke.

Healthier land, stronger business, happier family

Ecological outcomes

- A more diverse and continually changing plant community.
- Greater soil cover and more effective rainfall.
- Continued forage growth during an exceptionally dry season.
- Increasing organic matter and improved soil structure.
- The return of wildlife observed by Sam and his father.

Economic outcomes

- No need to buy winter feed for eight years.
- Approximately £27,000 in potential annual redrilling costs avoided.
- Approximately five fewer weeks of winter housing for the cattle.
- More choices about grazing, feeding and livestock when conditions become difficult.
- Healthy animals. Sam said vets regularly compliment the condition of his cattle and that he had not needed a vet during the year of the interview.

Sam is not suggesting that veterinary care is unnecessary. The animals' good health is another piece of evidence he uses to understand how the farm is functioning.

Social outcomes

“Myself, my wife, the kids are happy. We’re enjoying life. I’m smiling lots and I’m enjoying what I’m doing.”

— Sam Squier

This contrasts with the beginning of the transition, when the family experienced stress in their relationships related to the long hours of farming life. More grass and greater financial resilience have helped create more confidence, enjoyment and space for family life. Less stress and more grass are not separate achievements.

The human difficulty of change

The evidence may be visible, but that does not make change easy. The questions Sam receives from other farmers' wives show that the consequences of farming decisions are experienced by the whole family.

“I’ve had loads of wives get in contact saying, ‘How can I convince my husband to go down this route because he’s just not seeing it?’”

— Sam Squier

Sam has also learned that a person cannot be pushed into change. “I really don’t think you can convince anyone to change unless they want to,” he said. Once a person becomes willing, however, support and evidence can help enormously.

Sam learned about failure early in life. Losing his fear of getting it wrong gave him the curiosity and openness needed to experiment with a new way of managing. He still makes mistakes and encounters obstacles. His progress has not come from finding a perfect recipe, but from remaining willing to observe, take responsibility for decisions and learn from what happens next.



Kate and Sam at Wild & Rooted. Photo by Christopher Cooke.

Key learnings from Humphreys Farm

1. **Drought resilience is built before the drought.** Sam's results developed through eight years of management, observation and learning.
2. **Plant recovery is about more than growing additional forage.** Sufficient recovery time allows plants to rebuild roots, mature, flower and produce seed.
3. **Cattle help plant the next generation.** Their hooves bring seed into contact with the soil while trampled plant material creates protective ground cover.
4. **Covered soil makes rainfall more effective.** Ground cover protects soil from sunlight, rain and temperature extremes, allowing more water to enter and remain in the soil.
5. **First-year germination does not tell the whole story.** Different species can emerge and flourish in different years as weather and growing conditions change.
6. **Biodiversity creates possibilities and resilience.** A changing plant community brings different growth patterns, rooting depths and responses to changing conditions.
7. **Animal health is part of the evidence.** Sam's healthy cattle and limited need for veterinary attention help him understand how the farm is functioning.
8. **Supportive relationships make change possible.** Kate, Sam's parents and his landlord helped create the confidence and room needed to experiment.
9. **Ecological, economic and social outcomes are connected.** More effective rainfall and continued grass production contribute to healthy animals, lower costs, more choices and a happier family.
10. **There is no universal recipe.** Sam's experience demonstrates the value of observing reality, making decisions in context, monitoring outcomes and remaining willing to learn.

At Humphreys Farm, more grass, healthier land, healthy cattle and less stress have emerged as Sam and Kate learned to consider the land, animals, finances and family together when making decisions.

Resources

- [Watch Christopher Cooke's short film](#)
- [Visit Wild and Rooted at Humphreys Farm](#)
- [Watch the Reuters video on X](#)
- [Watch the Reuters video on YouTube](#)
- [Watch the Associated Press video](#)
- [Download Ecosystem Processes Ebook 2](#)
- [Download The Fundamentals of Holistic Ecological Monitoring Ebook 12](#)

Source note

Unless otherwise identified, quotations and farm figures are drawn from Christopher Cooke's recorded interview with Sam Squier at Humphreys Farm on the 5th of September 2026. Rainfall, avoided costs and changes in water-holding capacity are Sam's records or estimates. Reuters and Associated Press coverage provides independent visual reporting of drought conditions.



A barn owl hunting over Humphreys Farm. Photograph courtesy of Sam Squier.