



# REFOREST

**Living Lab 7: United Kingdom**

***Mindrums Farm***



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# Living Lab 7

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Mindrum,  
Northumberland



## *The farm*

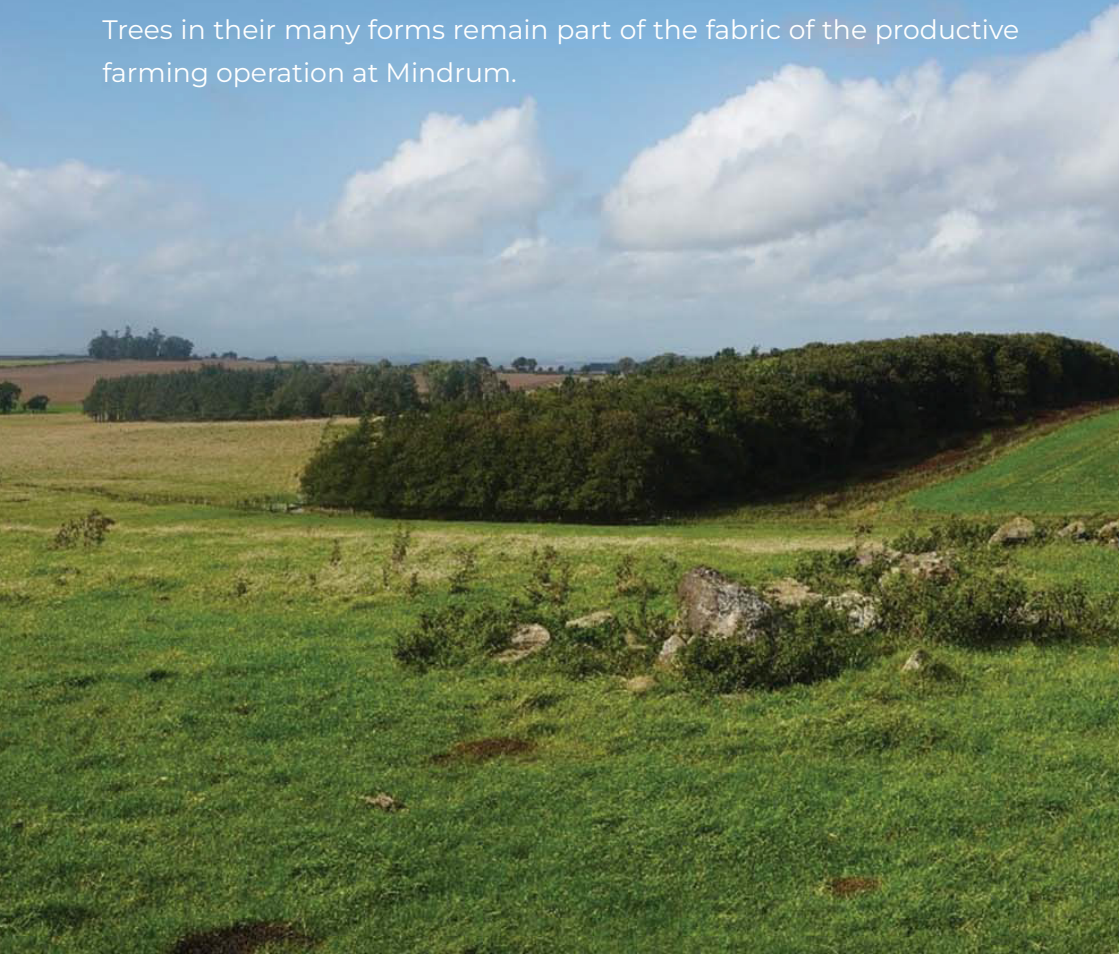
I run Mindrum Farm in north Northumberland.

We run 1000 Suffolk Mule ewes, 100 Shorthorn x Angus sucklers and some arable ground on 465 hectares (ha) / 1150 acres. We have recently converted to a regenerative organic business model. We have a number of agri-environmental projects and 49 ha (120 acres) of mixed woodland shelterbelts linked by hedges, walls and veteran treelines.

As part of our regenerative structure, we are introducing “in field” trees in a range of configurations in appropriate permanent pasture fields. We are experimenting with a number of planting models to suit the ground and the agribusiness, though much of the planting is inspired by local ancient woodlands still evident in the Cheviots. We have loads of archeology on Mindrum and whilst we avoid this with the trees, the historical perspective is instructive when choosing what and where to plant.

We see trees as being part of the infrastructure at Mindrum, providing shelter, browsing for livestock and enhancing soil health and fertility. We also have a biomass operation, replacing a significant amount of fossil fuel with some of our own thinnings, the rest being left to support biodiversity.

Trees in their many forms remain part of the fabric of the productive farming operation at Mindrum.





# ***The way to agroforestry***

About 5 years ago, I attended an agroforestry workshop thinking that this sounded like something that would fit at Mindrum. To my surprise, I found that we were already doing agroforestry, albeit under a different name! When my father first came to Mindrum in 1955, there were very few trees on the farm and over the next 45 years he planted a number of shelterbelts in order to provide rapid respite from the brutal Cheviot winds.

Today, we are still planting, often putting “bottom” and structure into the existing woods. In some areas, assisted in some cases by storm Arwen, we are creating clearings and letting light into the middle of the darker areas and broadcasting seed from understory species to promote diverse regeneration.

I am incredibly lucky to have a number of people and groups with diverse models and views to chat to. There is much information however, and it's important to keep a focus on one's objectives, across the operational spectrum.

It's very clear, if one takes the time on the ground to watch livestock and wildlife, that where trees are part of the farming landscape, they become an important and productive part of the system.



# Agroforestry in practice

Forestry continues to be a priority for Government attention, and while this is generally positive, we must ensure it doesn't become merely a passing trend that receives attention for a brief moment before being forgotten. Rapid surges in tree planting entail decades of heightened commitment and increased management costs. It is a strategic investment, carrying strategic cost profiles. The nice thing about woods is you can see where (and when) they have been loved... and when they haven't! No pressure, then, for those of us for whom they form a legacy!

Inconsistent Government policy and intervention, coupled with a lack of interdepartmental policy coherence often makes it hard or risky to plant or manage woodland that may not conform to formulaic Government doctrine, regardless of how suitable it is on the ground. This is coupled with increased reliance by many compliance agencies and planners on generic information systems which often seek to impose inappropriate design on the ground based on errors in datasets. Whilst this can and must be managed, it does represent a significant risk, particularly when ecologists don't actually visit a particular site.



Since we have switched to a holistic agroecological model, woodland and trees have become an integral part of the farming operation, rather than just contextual decoration. They contribute shelter, fertility, nutrient cycling, forage and often create microclimates and discrete ecosystems that enable specific operations. Microscopic assessment shows the stunning effect that trees have on surrounding soil, in terms of creating optimal conditions for a range of farming operations.

As ever, it's absolutely critical to challenge any silly recommendations, objections or dubious "best practice" and always important to spend some time on the ground with eyes and ears open! It's also really important to not be swayed from your convictions, even if other people disagree with you, especially if trying something that might be considered unconventional.



# ***What is ahead?***

We will continue to enhance the mosaic nature of the farm with agroforestry being an increasingly critical part of the productive system. We are also planning some syntropic agroforestry and permaculture incubator plots with a view to creating conditions for some start up permaculture businesses. Once we've cut through the compliance, I'm confident that this will provide an opportunity to show how productive agroforestry can really be.

The Living Lab is a stunning environment in which to explore options and opportunities to get more out of trees across the farm.







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