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A Celebration of 150 Years of the Park Grass Experiment

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History and Design

Rothamsted Research

Rothamsted Research (2006) *History and Design ; A Celebration Of 150 Years Of The Park Grass Experiment*, pp 5 - 6 - DOI: <https://doi.org/10.23637/ERADOC-1-253>

The history and design of Park Grass

150 years
Park Grass Experiment

Park Grass is the oldest experiment on ungrazed permanent grassland in the world. Started by Lawes and Gilbert in 1856 its original purpose was to investigate ways of improving the yield of hay by the application of inorganic fertilizers and organic manure. Within 2-3 years it became clear that these treatments were having a dramatic effect on the species composition of what had been a uniform sward. The continuing effects on species diversity and on soil function of the original treatments, together with later tests of liming and interactions with atmospheric inputs and climate change has meant that Park Grass has become increasingly important to ecologists, environmentalists and soil scientists.

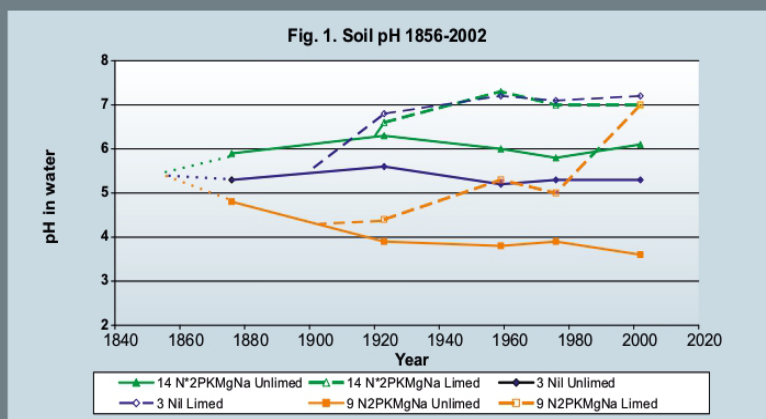
The experiment was established on c. 2.8 ha of uniform pasture for at least 100 years old. Treatments included controls (Nil - no fertilizer or manure), and various combinations of P, K, Mg, Na and N as either sodium nitrate or ammonium salts. Farmyard manure (FYM) was applied to two plots but was discontinued after eight years because of adverse effects on the sward. FYM, applied every four years, was re-introduced on three plots in 1905.

Harvesting

The plots are cut in mid-June and made into hay. For the first 19 years the re-growth was often grazed by sheep penned on individual plots but since 1875 a second cut, usually carted green, has been taken. The plots were originally cut by scythe, then by horse-drawn, and now tractor-drawn, mowers. Yields were originally estimated by weighing the produce, either of hay or green crop, from the whole plot but since 1960 yields have been estimated from strips cut with a forage harvester. However, for the first cut the remainder of the plot is still mown and made into hay; thus continuing earlier management and ensuring the return of seed. For the second cut the whole plot is cut, with a forage harvester.

Liming

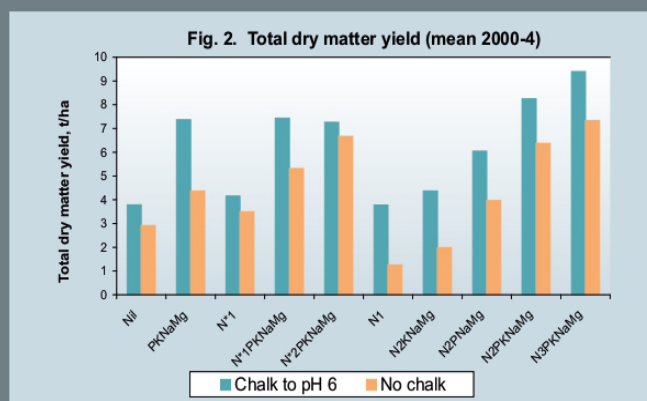
Park Grass probably never received the large amounts of chalk that were often applied to arable fields in this part of England. The pH of the soil (0-23cm) on Park Grass was therefore about 5.5 (in water) when the experiment began. A small amount of chalk was applied to all plots during tests in the 1880s and 1890s. A regular test of liming was started in 1903 when most plots were divided in two and 4 t ha⁻¹ CaCO₃ applied every four years to the southern half.



However, on those plots receiving the largest amounts of ammonium sulphate this was not enough to stop the soil becoming progressively more acid; making it difficult to disentangle the effects of N from those of acidity. It was decided to extend the pH range on each treatment and in 1965 most plots were divided into four; sub-plots "a" and "b" on the previously limed halves and sub-plots "c" and "d" on the unlimed halves. Sub-plots "a", "b" and "c" now receive differential amounts of lime, when and where necessary, to achieve and/or maintain soils at pH 7, 6 and 5, respectively. Sub-plot "d" receives no lime and its pH reflects inputs from the various treatments and the atmosphere. Soils on the unlimed sub-plots of the Nil treatments are now at c. pH 5.3 (Fig. 1) whilst soils receiving 96 kg N ha⁻¹ as ammonium sulphate or sodium nitrate are at pH 3.6 and 6.1 respectively. The latter two treatments required 63 and 14 t ha⁻¹ CaCO₃, respectively, between 1965 and 2005 to increase and/or maintain the soil at pH 7.

Yields

Yields of total dry matter (not hay) are shown in Fig. 2. Largest yields are on limed sub-plots given PKNaMg and 144 kg N ha⁻¹. Yields with 96 kg N ha⁻¹ as either ammonium or nitrate (and PKNaMg) are similar; where P or K has been withheld yields are reduced. Similarly, yields on plots given N only are no better than the Nil plots because lack of P and K limits yield. Interestingly, on soils receiving PKNaMg but no N fertiliser yields are as good as those on plots receiving PKNaMg plus 96 kg N ha⁻¹ because of the large proportion of legumes in the sward (see main table). However, where no lime is applied soil pH is about 4.9 and legumes are less common; consequently yields are less. On all treatments, yields on unlimed sub-plots are less than those on soils maintained at pH 6, or above. However, even on the acid soils (pH 3.6 - 3.7) dominated by one or two species, yields are c.7 t ha⁻¹.

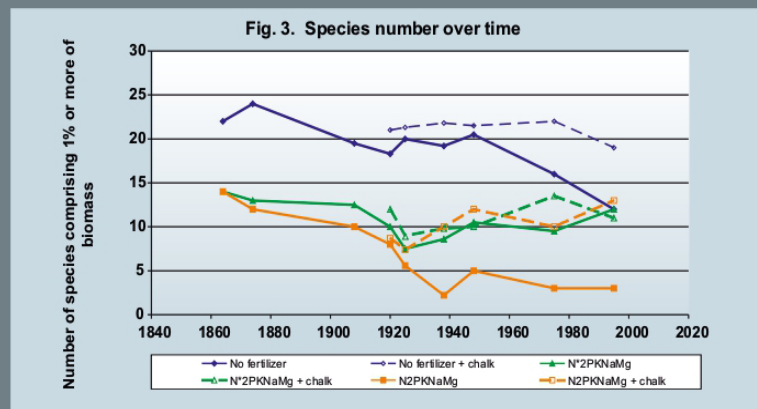


Archiving Samples

Soil samples (most 0-23cm, some deeper) have been taken periodically from the experiment, infrequently at first, more regularly in the last 40 years as we have sought to control soil pH more closely. The soils, together with unground samples of herbage from each plot every year, have been archived. Such action was incredibly far-sighted and has allowed us to retrospectively analyse samples for many factors which could not have been anticipated 150 years ago. Such analyses have included ¹⁴C, ³⁴S, cadmium and other heavy metals, dioxins, PAH's and DNA. Recent analysis of archived herbage for plutonium and uranium provided the first evidence that fallout from atmospheric bomb tests carried out in the Nevada Desert in 1952/3 reached northwest Europe. (Warneke *et al*, 2002, *EPSL* 203, 1047-1057)

Botanical composition

The table overleaf shows soil pH and those species comprising 10% or more of the above ground biomass together with the total number of species identified on each sub-plot (mean 1991-2000 data). There are many interactions, some clear, some not, between fertilizer and manure treatments and pH. Figure 3 shows the impact of selected treatments on the number of species comprising 1% or more of the biomass. Numbers of species have decreased, even on the Nil plots, through acid deposition. Applying N as sodium nitrate or ammonium sulphate reduces diversity further, and in the ammonium form also rapidly acidifies the soil, reducing the number of species to one or two, *Holcus lanatus* (Yorkshire Fog) and *Anthoxanthum odoratum* (Sweet Vernal Grass). Lime aids recovery from acidity. Withholding N also causes more species to return (not shown).



150 years
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Rothamsted Research
Harpenden, Herts AL5 2JQ

Tel +44 (0) 1582 763133
Fax +44 (0) 1582 760981
web <http://www.rothamsted.ac.uk>