Making do on the farm: What one farm taught me about the circular economy and agrarian life in North East England

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There is a barn in North East England where a black plastic lamb adopter (Figure 01) helps ewes foster orphaned lambs. The year before the same plastic was silage wrap sealing the farm's stored livestock feed. With each bale, the farmer peels away the black plastic, rolls it up, and packs it into half-tonne tote bags. At year's end, she hauls multiple totes cross country to a recycling company that then remakes the silage wrap into farming equipment. No regulatory policy requires this action. This is a solitary act by one farmer making a particular decision about material management on her farm.

Figure 01: Silage wrap becomes a lamb adopter (Muir, 2026)

How might lines become circles in agrarian settings? The circular economy (CE) has been defined in a multiplicity of ways, but one accessible understanding is that it is a way of managing resources such that 'products and materials are kept in circulation through processes like maintenance, reuse, refurbishment, remanufacture, recycling, and composting' (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, no date). The butterfly diagram below (Figure 02) is a popular depiction of this concept. This project examines how waste moves around the farm and asks the question: what does CE actually look like on working farms?

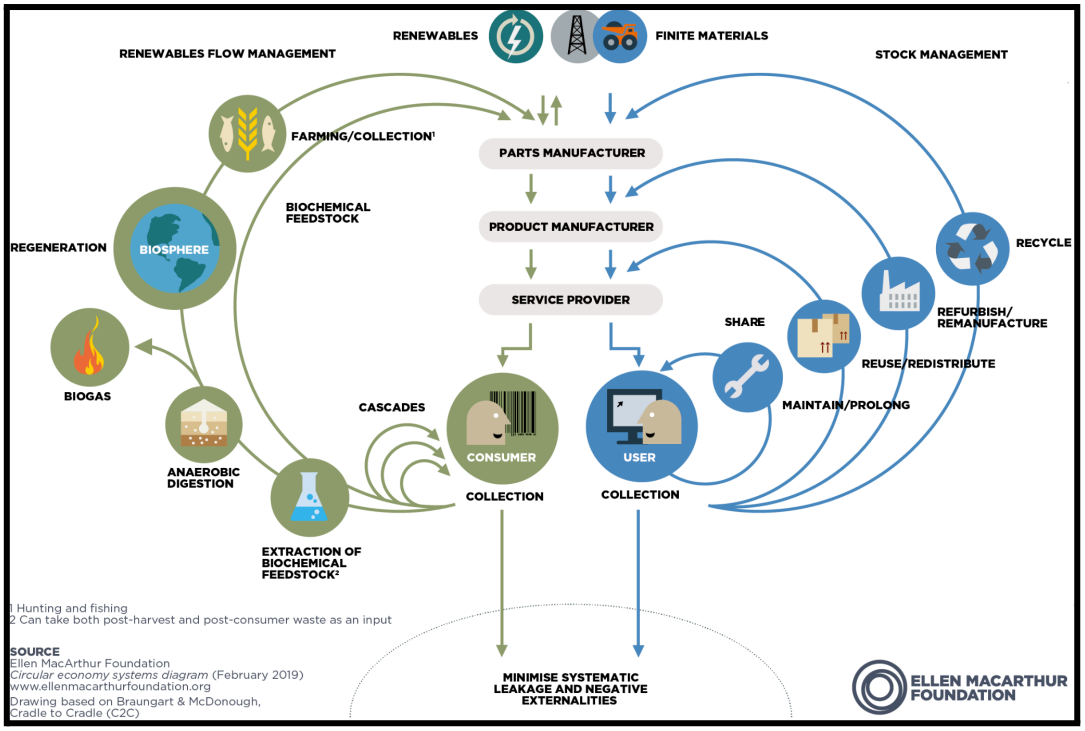

Figure 02: Circular economy systems diagram (Ellen MacArthur Foundation, 2021)

My interest in this subject originated far from the rolling hills and lush countryside of North East England. For the better part of two decades I operated an independent café and bakery in Chicago (USA), where only occasionally did I meet the farmers supplying our ingredients. The greater influence on how I ran the business was not adhering to a farm-to-fork strategy as much as following the entreaties of my grandmothers to *never be wasteful*. But it was the serendipitous re-watching of a favourite film that provided the spark for this research. At one point in the Ridley Scott film *The Martian* (2015), when the astronaut and botanist Mark Watney decides to grow potatoes in his own vacuum-packed excrement, it occurred to me that this act is not just a cinematic plot point. This circle making is what farmers have always done, but there seems to be little research on how farmers classify, maintain, or discard the agricultural materials. With few exceptions, most examples of CE come from urban and industrial areas.

The summer of 2026 throughout England proved to be a challenging time to conduct fieldwork centred on agrarian practices. Five heatwaves, prolonged dry weather and drought conditions, an earlier than expected harvest, and a livestock disease called bluetongue (Horton, 2026; Beament, 2026) muted responses to project invitations. Just one farmer on one farm agreed to participate (pseudonymised here as Clara Muir at Foxwinks Meadow Farm). At the time this seemed like abject failure, but after going through supplementary research, analysing the transcript, and reflecting more on the situation I feel differently. I feel that Muir taught me important lessons about how CE does and does not play out on farms.

Muir responded to the research invitation and allowed me to walk through how waste moves around the Foxwinks Meadow with a narrative crafted from her own photographs. Through the method of photo-elicitation (Harper, 2002) she showed how muck becomes the organic farm's only source of fertiliser. Manure combined with straw transforms into a valuable material that might otherwise be classified as waste. Bright blue Supalyx pails used for

supplementing sheep's nutrition become tomato planters (Figure 03). A tub of rusty metallic odds and ends sits in wait because these *things always come in handy*.

Figure 03: Supalyx pails repurposed for tomato growing (Muir, 2026)

What is and is not waste around the farm is as tricky as what is and is not visible. Summing up her thoughts about the challenges of managing resources and the flow of materials around Foxwinks Meadow, Muir landed on a phrase about *making do*. In sharing a story about her cousin's broken tractor she echoed a wartime slogan: 'There's some old saying, "You've got to make do and mend"...A lot of farmers have to sort of make do and mend' (Figure 04). Her speech conveyed an inherited way of looking at her work, hinting at a level of craft that was now second nature and a part of her everyday being.

Regardless of Muir's efforts, not everything moves on the farm (at least not without a lot of help). Tyres can pile up for years because they possess no recycling value. It can cost the farm '£400-£500 to take a trailer load of tyres down' to the closest disposal facility. If scrap metal finds no purpose on the farm it waits to hitch a ride with a piece of derelict equipment heavy enough to make a dealer's trip profitable. On a farm, materials circulate only as far as economics carries them.

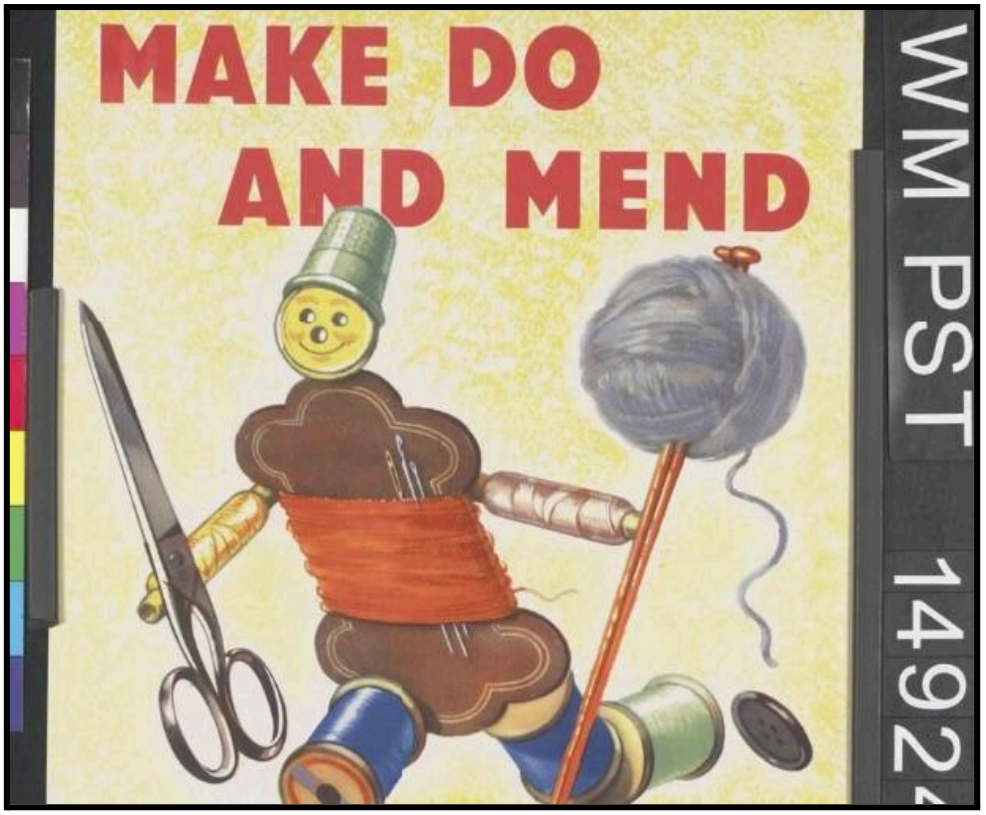

Figure 04: Make do and mend (Board of Trade, 1943; IWM, 2020)

This project concludes that the CE is not waiting to be unveiled on farms. It is an everyday reality which is a part of the daily decisions a farmer makes. As a sustainability practice it is largely invisible to the framework that shares its name because it happens in ways outside the targets and metrics developed by policymakers. As Muir's example shows, CE could learn much from the everyday actions of farmers. If expanding CE on farms is a desired outcome, Foxwinks Meadow seems best served at this time by schemes which assist in the collection of materials that resist movement.

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