



**September 2007**

*"The skills required for sustainable growing take longer to acquire and require a more observant and reflective frame of mind"*

Patrick Whitefield

## Welcome

Over the North Atlantic Ocean weather systems constantly tussle with each other for dominance. Britain, being a country highly influenced by maritime conditions, is therefore constantly subject to the results of these tussles.

Meteorologists have identified something called the North Atlantic Oscillation, whereby depending on the relative positions of high and low pressure systems, the pattern of weather across North West Europe can be predicted.

What is changing in these days of global warming seems to be the slower change in dynamics of these weather systems. For the early and middle part of the summer, and most of last winter, cyclonic low pressure systems dominated the weather, bringing highly unsettled conditions.

For the last six weeks (and back in April), much of the country has been subject to anticyclonic high pressure systems emanating from the Azores. These settled conditions have brought sunshine and very little rain.

What is worrying to those of us that are farmers and growers is that these maritime conditions are in a way becoming more continental in their patterns – i.e. hanging around for longer and much less subject to change. This is bringing long wet and windy spells, followed by long hot dry spells.

There are no two ways about it, our food production systems and lifestyles must change to reflect changes in the climate. This year has been one of the strangest in the British Isles for a long time and is a stark reminder that climate change is here to stay.

## News...

### Organic Market Report

The Soil Association's annual Organic Market report was released on 3rd September with much therein to cheer about as the press release highlights:

*'UK organic sales nudge £2bn - up 22 per cent – averaging £7 million growth per week. Sales through local, direct marketing schemes such as veg boxes soar by 53 per cent'*

2006 also saw particularly strong growth in the health and beauty and textiles sector, hugely encouraging news as it indicates a growing awareness of the ethical and healthy choices we make extending beyond food and onto the clothes that we wear and the products we use on our skin.

For more comprehensive digest of the report's findings, please click [here](#).

### Foot and Mouth Disease

12<sup>th</sup> September brought with it the devastating news that a new case of foot and mouth disease has been confirmed in Surrey. This is particularly alarming coming as it has so soon after the county had been declared disease-free.

It is very early days in this latest outbreak, and investigations are also under way into another suspected case in Scotland.

For detailed coverage, advice and the Soil Association's position, please click [here](#).

## Organic Fortnight

As many of you will be aware, we are now coming to the end of the second week of organic fortnight, the nationwide celebration of all things organic.

This year, the Soil Association focussed their efforts on encouraging us all to **'wake up to an organic breakfast'** to fuel and kick-start the two weeks of events nationwide. From promotions and samples, gardening demonstrations and breakfast ingredient offers – there has been a wide range of activities to tempt and tantalise and inform.

In addition, the Organic Food Festival was held on the weekend of 2<sup>nd</sup>-3<sup>rd</sup> September on Bristol's Harbourside. Cookery demonstrations came from the likes of the highly esteemed and infectious warm and passionate Darina Allen from Ballymaloe Cookery School and taste-tantalising stalls sold everything from leeks to muffins. There was also an organic fashion show that attracted unprecedented attention from both the public and the media, indicative of the growing awareness surrounding organic textiles and fashion.

Fret not if you missed the buzz of the Bristol event, there is going to be another Organic Food Festival in Glasgow's Old Fruit market on 13-14<sup>th</sup> October. For more information, click on [Soil Association Scotland's website](#).

**\*\*\*\*\*Please Note\*\*\*\*\***

**The planned Organic Futures Social that was due to be held at Abbey Home Farm this coming weekend (15-16<sup>th</sup> September) has been cancelled. Hilary and Will at Abbey had very kindly allocated us a whole field to ourselves but unfortunately there wasn't enough response to be able to fill it. So, much to our disappointment we have had to hand the field back to some now, very happy campers.**

**For those of you who expressed an interest in this event – worry not – there will most definitely be another one in the not too distant future. Social events are a great place to meet**

**up, catch up and share and air thoughts and ideas... let's hope you'll all want to come along to the next one!**

**As ever, any suggestions/ideas are always welcome.**

## **Removing barriers**

### Careers 'advice' - Jemima Roberts

I have a confession to make: *I want to be an organic horticulturist*. I realise I'm treading on distinctly furrowed ground here and risk being given the well by organic horticulturists far and wide affronted by my reducing it to a guilty secret. Let me explain.

I am, among other things, a freelance writer and anthropology student living in Brighton. The closest I get to horticulture is tending the peppering of plants in my flat and small garden and deriving naïve delight at each and every sign of new growth.

I haven't always lived in the city. I grew up on an organic smallholding in Wales. As idyllic as my childhood was, it certainly wasn't deemed worthy of continuing into the next generation as a future career prospect or life choice. Well, certainly not if the resounding frowns of the careers advisor at my secondary school were to be heeded. Farming and horticulture were not only considered to be enviable 'career' paths, they were not even deemed worthy of a position on the radar of possible ambitions or aspirations for us school leavers. Those considered to be academic or bright at school were practically frogmarched out of the farmyard and ushered far beyond the farm gate into top-notch universities and 'respectable' careers in medicine, law or teaching. The academic 'drop-outs' were left with the 'condescension' of farming on the family farm or horticultural college as their lot in life.

Today, much to my chagrin, I realise that I have touselled with my own priorities and passions

ever since. With further horror I can see that I have implicitly imbibed the limited and misguided advice and consequently have followed, with fickle attention, a rather uneven path in a desperate attempt to find the 'right' one. Within this remit it is no surprise that I have often floundered.

What did surprise me is that I am far from alone in this. The experience of confessing my sentiments to friends and peers and hearing my own echo in their voices was akin to stumbling upon a field of drought-stricken crops: both heart-breaking and heart-warming in turn. Is it any wonder, as Lucy Siegel remarked in an *Observer* article last year, that 'in today's countryside, young farmers are as rare as hedgerows?'

Hardly. Certainly for me, today's hindsight unfortunately doesn't grant any dilution to my anger at such short sighted and misguided careers *advice*. It has only begun to dawn on me in recent years the extent to which the precious words of guidance or direction to our teenage selves can come to shape and direct our lives. On a personal level I have recognized and I hope risen above such blinkered sentiments, but what appals me still is that farming and horticulture are so routinely and blindly sidelined in favour of tunnel-vision notions of where we as a society 'should' be placing our values and esteem. I have no wish to deionise or devalue the important and valuable place that medicine, or law, for example have in our society. But I would like to see a radical unpicking of the precedence such professions are given over the also hugely valuable, indeed vital place that farming and horticulture have in society: namely producing food to feed people. Surely this is a pretty fundamental spoke in the societal wheel?

Good husbandry and good land custodianship is also about more than food. It entails conservation of our environment, of wildlife habitats, of flora and fauna as well as increasing the fertility and quality of the soil on which we live and live from. The deflation of farming and horticulture to a mere condescension of 'well,

that's your lot' is indicative not only of the gaping crevice between society and our relationship with the environment but also a profound detachment from real food, where real food comes from and the skill that is needed to produce it.

My careers advisor and many others so it would seem, is merely reflecting and mirroring the values that society has manifest. So if we are to have a future of high quality organic food, and a countryside buzzing with abundance, we need to ensure there are some farmers and horticulturists learning the skills and planting their seeds today. There is no time like the present.

### **Future farmers**

A circuitous route via the Scilly Isles, Edinburgh, London and Sweden brought Will Johnson, 25, to Coleshill Organics where he is currently working as an apprentice grower. Here, he offers us a glimpse into his world.

"They were bloody lovely, them tomatoes."

That's what I keep hearing, every time I go to play darts at *The Folly* in Faring don. I cycle three miles there on a Monday for the league match. I practice on Sundays quite often too, as they put on a free buffet for the drinkers. It was to this buffet that I decided to contribute some tomatoes a few Sundays ago. I filled a plastic pint pot up with a few beauties from the greenhouse at Coleshill walled garden and planted them on the table at The Folly a couple of hours later. I didn't advertise them in the least.

Tony had hit 26 on the dartboard (very, very poor...) so I said, "You'd get a nice bed and breakfast for two shillings and six when you were a lad," and with one clever line not only made sure that I hadn't advertised my tomatoes to anyone, but encouraged the room to mock Tony's poor darts and poked fun at his aged appearance. That's the way it goes in pub darts.

I took a stool at the bar and chatted to Richard about his job on an industrialised silage farm. He works eighty hours a week quite often. He brags about that, but I don't know why. He always makes darts on a Monday night though. So in one ear I was getting, "When the boss is away, I go a little bit faster, though its not allowed..." and in the other I could here a murmur from the buffet table. 'Them tomatoes' were causing a stir. "Who's brought 'em?" someone finally said to the landlord. He pointed to me and said, "young Will," and then ate a tomato, raised his eyebrows in appreciation and then washed it all down with a swill of 'Shakespeare Bitter'. Lovely.

There was a mixed reaction to the news that these were organic tomatoes. A few people were put off by the revelation that, as far as they were concerned, these were expensive tomatoes for 'posh' people or 'health freaks'. Well, organic food is relatively expensive when it comes to processed food, and it is healthier. So what could I say to that? Do you think I said, "If you enjoy cooking from basic ingredients then an organic diet is really inexpensive!!!"? I think coming out with that pearl of wisdom in a town pub might have found me a little bit alienated in future weeks!

Still, there were a few people who asked a lot more questions - about the box scheme and the shop and my job and my caravan. Some people were a lot more interested in the farm, and in my lifestyle, just from a few tomatoes. I had my bread making techniques dismissed by one drunk man, but somehow a bridge had been built with him, because two men in a pub were discussing yeast, and before that day I'd never thought it possible.

As I left the pub last Sunday (about a month since the day I have just described), Richard was telling me that he'd tried to stop someone stealing my bike but hadn't quite managed it. I told him I'd walked up today and that he'd tried to stop this person unchaining their very own bike. He laughed and asked what vegetables we had in the shop at the moment and said he would pop down one day soon. "I know it's

expensive," he said, "but it's good stuff."

As I rode off I heard him shout, "They were bloody lovely, them tomatoes."

## Conference review

*The Spirit of Land, Sea and Soil* conference took place on St Martin's, Isles of Scilly on the weekend of 7<sup>th</sup> - 9<sup>th</sup> September. Jonathan Smith reports on this ground-breaking conference organised by the Biodynamic Agricultural Association.

People in the developed world are, in general, highly disconnected from the source of their food. But even amongst farmers and growers, those who till the soil, many are also disconnected (in the truest sense of the word) from the land. These disconnections drive us further and further from living within our means on this planet with finite resources.

This conference explored our spiritual connections to the land and how this affects our relationship to each other and the very soil that sustains us. The Celt that once inhabited much of the Western British Isles – and whose influence remains today, were a culture intimately connected to the land by which they lived and died.

In a comparison of the Celtic (mostly Northern and Western) and Roman (mostly Southern and Eastern) cultures, it was identified how holistic and sustainable the Celtic culture was compared with the Roman's emphasis on money and power through linear thinking. This has enormous implications for our own culture. The landscapes of the West offer inspiration, energy and a real life force that can help teach us how to tread lightly on the Earth. A deep connection to the landscape in which we live invokes a deep sense of care and responsibility.

The unique setting of the Isles of Scilly, sitting in

the centre of the Celtic Ark running from Shetland to Gibraltar, offered a wonderful venue. Delegates experienced the history, culture, food and magic of the landscape and seascape. By day we experienced a deeper spiritual connection to the land on which we walked and the sea over which we travelled. By night we experienced incredible starlit skies, experiencing the same sense of inferiority that would have been pressed on people scores of generations ago.

We can all learn so much from the lands and seas of the Celtic ark to help us in troubled times.

### **Land's End to John O' Groats**

This is a long bike ride with a difference. The three cyclists, two of them organic growers, are going to be powered by local organic food on the way and will be wearing organic clothing. Their aim is to raise awareness of climate change, the importance of reducing our Deco footprint and encouraging more young people in organic food and farming as a career.

Alice Holden, Kate Aldridge and Jonathan Smith will be setting off on Saturday 22<sup>nd</sup> September and hope to arrive at John O' Groats on Thursday 4<sup>th</sup> October, 13 days later. There is a website giving full details of the ride and the ethos behind it:

[www.powertopedal.org.uk](http://www.powertopedal.org.uk)

You can also donate to the selected charities online and view progress of the ride, updated during the event.

A full report will appear in next month's newsletter.

### **Poetry**

#### Two-Loved Clover

Wind chased her breath,  
Carried his echo  
Grass tickled her legs,  
Teased his feet

They ran, they ran,  
Turn-twist, up-over  
A gallop, a can-can  
Through fields of clover

She picked four leaves,  
He only found threes  
She tripped then skipped,  
He skipped then tripped  
They fell in a field of clover

He laughed,  
She laughed  
And they wished,  
In a field of clover

### **NGO focus**

S.O.I.L is an abbreviation of 'Stewards of Irreplaceable Land'. Based in Canada, SOIL links farmers willing to take on and train apprentices with people wanting to work and learn on an organic farm using sustainable practices. They aim to create apprenticeships which transfer lasting knowledge to both the farmer and the apprentice.

Established in 1989 as a non-profit organisation, their goals are :

- To encourage the growth of sustainable agriculture.
- To expose potential apprentices to a rural lifestyle. For those with little or no farming experience an apprenticeship can offer a valuable hands on learning environment in which to acquire the basic skills or even provide the basis for an agricultural career.

- To assist the farmer with the necessary support required to successfully run their organic operation. The farmers and farm community can also benefit greatly from the influx of new ideas, energy and enthusiasm of apprentices

SOIL can offer much inspiration to people in the UK. Our fledgling Apprenticeship Scheme is very important but a long way behind many other countries.

### **Biodynamic Organic Agriculture Training at Emerson College**

Big changes to Biodynamic Organic Agriculture Training!

If you have previously thought about doing the Biodynamic Organic Agriculture Training, but have been put off by the fees or the length of the training, then this is the moment to think again!

There has never been a better moment to get trained in organic and biodynamic farming at Emerson College: fees have gone down, the training can be completed in just two years and we've added a lot more practical work.

Click [here](#) for more information:

### **Organic Futures...**

[www.soilassociation.org/organicfutures](http://www.soilassociation.org/organicfutures)

- Is a ground-up movement led by young people
- Aims to break down the barriers preventing young people entering the organic food and farming professions
- Provides inspiration, facilitates networking and offers information
- Wants to engage with interested people of all ages and levels of experience
- Wishes to help foster a new, positive culture of farming and growing in Britain

#### Podcasts

For those of you that have generic MP3 players (or on your PCs), there are [Podcasts](#) available from the Soil Association too!

#### Classified adverts

If its classified adverts on organic food and farming you're looking for, click [here](#) for an up to date list.

#### Information

The Soil Association [Library](#) has lots of very useful and interesting articles

#### Technical information

Lots available on the Soil Association's [Food and Farming](#) pages

#### News

Get [Today's News](#) from the Soil Association to keep bang up to date with news from home and abroad

#### Biodynamic agriculture

Our cousins practising biodynamic agriculture and horticulture have an excellent [website](#) detailing courses, events and much more.

#### Land exchange

Soil Association have added a new land exchange section on their [website](#) – please look at it if you have land to offer or are trying to access land.