



Visiting Prince Charles's Highgrove estate, with a hundred organic farmers

by Patrick Wright

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KOZO KONISHI, agricultural attaché at the Japanese Embassy in London, put his elbows on the wooden fence by the pond and closed his eyes in the sun. There were mule ewes and polo horses nearby, and a herd of beefy Aberdeen Anguses browsed placidly in the lush Gloucestershire parkland only one dry-stone wall away. All was quiet except for the dull clanking of 15 large cowbells - presented, as we had been informed, to the Prince and Princess of Wales during a holiday in Italy.

A hundred organic farmers had signed up for this tour of Prince Charles's Highgrove estate, jointly organised by British, Organic Farmers and the Organic Growers Association. And we had seen a lot by this time, We had stood in bird-friendly woods and admired burgeoning fields of Maris Wigeon wheat — a long-stemmed and traditional variety that produces reeds for thatching as well as grain. We had seen leys drilled with white clover and a 1,000-ton mountain of silage cut from the increasingly potent soil of Broadfield Farm, added to Home Farm in 1985. We had studied the crop rotation and heard about the hedge-planting programme too.

As we passed Highgrove House, we glimpsed yew hedges topiarised by Sir Roy Strong, the thyme walk that HRH had planned and planted himself, and meadows sewn with wild flowers like corn-cockle — now a rare species but counted as a common weed before the chemical revolution. The outside world being imperfect, we had also seen guardhouses built of local stone and woods planted with security cameras.

But now we had arrived at the organic 'sewage garden' — a primary metaphor of Prince Charles's remarkable endeavour. A man from the Duchy of Cornwall explained its holistic principles, The Royal effluent is piped from the house to a tank with stones in it. It then passes through another container filled with chips of bark before being pumped into a compartmentalised tank in which thickly planted reeds grow. By this stage, as tests by the National Rivers Authority had



recently established, the emerging water is sufficiently clean to permit discharge into a river.

But it still has to run through perforated pipes into a bed of willows - recently pollarded to provide material for basket weaving - and then out with a purling trickle, into the pond over which specially reared dragonflies will soon be hovering. By this time the liquid is up to the standard of 'high quality' river water, and technically quite drinkable.

Martin Pawley, that hater of greenery who made tabloid headlines when he compared Prince Charles to Hitler, has dismissed the Highgrove experiment as so much spurious 'organicism' and 'New Age vegetarian codswallop'. But it is hard to hate a reed-bed when it is just sitting there in front of you, emitting vague vibrations of cosmic melancholia and hinting at our equality before the great law of Nature, which binds all alike — housemaid, security man, visiting VIP and prince — to the discipline of the reed-bed. It was all very impressive, Konishi remarked, as we continued our 'farm walk' over the Gloucestershire acres into which Prince Charles has put his heart and soul.

And yet, as the prince himself knows, the suspicion of crankiness remains. In his bestselling book about Highgrove he tries to distance his experiment from 'agricultural hocus-pocus' and 'eccentric doom-mongers hankering after a pre-industrial, Arcadian past', and there can be little doubt about the practical nature of his experiment. Some 650 acres have already been converted to organic production and the rest of the 1,113-acre Home Farm will have gone that way by 1997. There are six men under farm manager David Wilson and, like him, they are after tangible results, not clouds of vision. They have, Wilson says, already established that the system works and next year they hope to be in the black.

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SOME MEMBERS of the party seemed unconvinced. The loudest expostulations of disbelief came from Anthony Rosen. As a former intensive farmer and an international agribusiness consultant who now writes for *Farming News*, he has been scathing about the Highgrove experiment. And here he was true to form, muttering about the 'lunatic fringe' and counting up the faults of these tolerant organic farmers who invite him to their conferences, laugh kindly at his antics and indulge him as the pet enemy who might one

day come round. The trouble with this lot, Rosen says, is that too many of them are self-righteous zealots.

Our organic farmers are certainly different from their conventional namesakes. There is a much higher proportion of women in their number, and they are inclined to share information with an openness that would probably seem close to commercial recklessness in more orthodox farming circles.

Yet their interest in a place like Highgrove is fundamentally practical. They interrogated David Wilson on organic pessaries, clinical mastitis in cows, weed control and the worming of sheep. They chided him occasionally about his methods - disapproving of a huge pile of manure which had been dumped at the edge of a field, and wondering whether it was only for the sake of the birds that a number of half dead ash trees were still standing. Some wanted to know whether Highgrove appreciated the advantages of mobile slaughterhouses. They all wondered, sharply, to what extent the premium prices achieved under the Highgrove brand depended on adroit exploitation of royal charisma. The pilot 'Highgrove loaf' went through Tesco this way and, as Wilson explains, under the Duchy of Cornwall's 'Original' label. Meat is sold through the Q Guild of quality butchers, which also finds added value in the name.

Patrick Holden, director of British Organic Farmers, is in no doubt about the significance of Prince Charles's endeavour. As our convoy of tractor-drawn trailers drew up at a field of watchful sheep, he explained that agriculture is not just about food. Traditionally, it has been a source of religion and cultural identity as well, and who can tell what damage has been done by the intensive farming that has devastated large tracts of the British countryside? Some sort of reinstatement is going to be necessary, he suggests, and what Prince Charles is doing at Highgrove only frightens the conventional farming lobby because it shows something of what is actually possible. Health and uniqueness can be restored to the abstracted English acre, and the banished 'spirit of place' can be repatriated after all. And what else, as we may ask after all the jeering and ridicule has died down, could a prince possibly be for in the late 20th century?

Organic farming may only amount to less than one per cent of British agriculture, and the Soil Association may still be a chronically underfunded body with less than 5,000 members. But it is escaping from the cliché of marginal eccentricity. In the eighties, one of the four farms in ~Radio 4's The

Archers went organic - and not just for the sake of a laugh. The big supermarkets have also identified organic food as an expensive 'niche market' and the increasing numbers of conventional farmers who are expressing interest in becoming more organic, do so from commercial rather than mystical motivation.

There is, explains Holden, increasing awareness both here and in Brussels that organic farming holds many benefits. In comparison with chemical farming, it accords perfectly with the Common Agricultural Policy's present purpose reducing agricultural output: indeed, as every organic farmer will say, it is obviously preferable to the uniquely despised folly of 'setaside'. In response to the EC agri-environmental programme, the Ministry of Agriculture is about to introduce a new organic aid scheme – expected to produce a trifling £1 million in its first year (compared with the £1.2 billion going to British farmers this year in direct subsidy alone), but a start all the same. At last, organic farmers can see the prospect of breaking through the limitations of their 'niche'.

But triumph never comes without cost, and the conversion of Prince Charles's re-enchanted acres is matched by the transformation recently undergone by the entire organic movement. The essential character of this was identified by Mr Konishi, who observed that while the organic movement in Japan belonged largely to consumers forming co-operatives to contract farmers to produce for them, the British equivalent seemed to be more involved with state policy.

The Soil Association was founded in 1946. Mary Langman, who was then working with another organic pioneer, the Peckham Health Centre in South London, observes that while the desperation of the situation in the thirties did indeed lead some people to form extreme political affiliations, the early organic movement was passionate in its opposition to the centralizing state, and therefore closer to anarchism than to any other political movement. Its holistic message was connected to a vigorous 'defence of locality'. Those who dismiss the whole organic movement as so much 'muck and mysticism' may continue to emphasise the earlier period's queerer turns – and there were fascists among the founders - but the change since then has been remarkable.

In 1973, prompted by people who had joined in the sixties and wanted to consolidate the consumer interest, the Soil Association launched its Symbol scheme, and began setting and monitoring standards for organic production in the UK.

This side of its work has been hugely augmented since 1985, when the European Council recognized that organic farming could help reduce surpluses and improve environmental standards. From January 1991 an EC regulation has been in force, designed, as the man from Brussels told organic farmers at their annual conference last January, to create a 'credible market' with 'fair competition between producers' in different countries within the EC. The Soil Association is now responsible for certifying some 70 per cent of the UK's organic acreage to ensure conformity with this regulation.

So the body that started out in open distrust of the centralising state, and which was inclined to defend the diversity of organic practice against bureaucratic standardisation, now finds itself an instrument of the most labyrinthine bureaucracy. At the national conference a terrible chorus of groans went up from organic farmers. Not only did they have to submit to extensive regulation, but they had to bear the cost of inspection themselves. John Byng, a Ministry of Agriculture civil servant, summed up their situation: 'The quality of organic food is being guaranteed at the expense of the producer' while the chemically farmed competition 'is not being guaranteed at all'.

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HELEN BROWNING, who farms on the Wiltshire downs, enumerates further difficulties. People see injustice in the fact that the EC regulations are rigorously enforced in Britain but not, apparently, elsewhere in the community. Minced beef and hung poultry are threatened by the limited time allowed between preparation and consumption, and traditional cured hams and bacons by the banning of saltpetre. Regional and speciality foods are particularly vulnerable to over-regulation, and small producers who don't have their own shops are threatened in other ways: new inspection costs weigh heaviest on the small abattoirs used by organic farmers, and supermarkets like Safeway and Sainsbury have already stopped baking their own organic breads — reluctant to face the cost of the annual inspection that would have to be carried out on every in-store bakery. Helen Browning accepts the need for regulation, but fears that 'regulations designed to protect the organic market may well confine it to a niche market for ever'.

We contemplate this sobering situation while admiring a healthy and almost completely weed-free field of winter wheat. But at least, I suggest, organic

farming has it made when it comes to nature conservation? One might indeed think so, agrees Patrick Holden; But there have been considerable difficulties in this area too. Despite Its rejection of herbicides and pesticides, its crop rotation and its altogether less intensive practices, some conservation bodies have been heard going on about 'the threat of unchecked organic farming'. The Countryside Commission is less than convinced and English Nature recently announced that the conservation benefits of organic farming 'remain to be proved'.

The RSPB declares that the interest of the birds is divided on this matter. Curlews like an arable-style mixture of arable and grassland, nesting in the one and then taking their hatched young over to the other. But Brent geese are apparently attracted to pastures of well-fertilised arable crops. Plant conservationists have their own reservations: organic farmers may be inclined to increase the fertility of grasslands, thus reducing the variety of plants growing there.

To many organic farmers these arguments seem decidedly mealy-mouthed, if not plain bonkers. Some may suspect the influence of conventional agriculturalists on the boards or staffs of these charities. Patrick Holden dismisses conspiracy theories. The main point, however, is that the nature conservation bodies have been pursuing an 'oasis' strategy for the last 20 or so years; promoting what somebody recently described as 'islands of prettification' in 'seas of monocultural squalor'. Obviously it would be better to have conservation built into the heart of farming procedure, rather than tacked on as an afterthought. The scientific evidence in favour of organic farming is now coming in, he says, but in the meantime, the much put-upon organic farmers have had no choice but to burden themselves with yet more regulations.

So, after tea and organic cakes, our beleaguered organic farmers left Highgrove for their more modest patches of hill and dale. Mr Konishi from the Japanese Embassy would retreat to a council allotment in Enfield, North London, where he grows peas and potatoes and wonders, along with the rest of this hard-working bunch, what to do with the long-rooted thistles that keep sprouting on his patch.

Anthony Rosen was still banging on about money and the bottom line. 'What is the real cost of conversion?' he asked in the bus with the no-nonsense



truculence of an experienced subsidy farmer. 'And how much can you expect to make once you've done it?'

Helen Browning tried to explain why there could be no simple answer to these questions. 'You feel as if you're on trial constantly,' she said, breaking off to offer her sympathy to the exasperated colleague who was trying to explain how we got into the situation where organic food seems to be more closely regulated than toxic waste.

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