

St Anthony's Trust Limited

Custodians of the Future: Training Biodynamic Farmers in Leadership and Management

Setting the Scene

Introduction

This report summarises the findings of a workshop exploring the need for improved management and leadership training for biodynamic farmers and growers. The workshop, which took place at Emerson College on Saturday 9th March 2024, was organised by St Anthony's Trust, the owner of nearly 400 acres of biodynamic farmland, and comprised 50 participants drawn from the biodynamic, agroecological and agricultural education sectors across the UK. The workshop commenced with small group sessions to scope the key issues, followed by a World Café approach to deepening understanding of these issues.

In keeping with St Anthony's Trust's charitable aims, this report has been prepared as a contribution to developing the education and training of biodynamic farmers and growers, with the intention that it will foster further training collaboration within the biodynamic community.

The training gap

There is growing ontological debate about how agricultural practices in the UK respond to the emergent environmental, health and food security crises. At one extreme it is claimed that neither land nor farmers are any longer necessary to produce the quantity and quality of food required – because meat can be grown in laboratories and vegetables can be grown in vast soil-less containers. In contrast, biodynamic farming offers a radically different regenerative holistic and spiritual approach to producing highly nutritious foods through attention to soil fertility, plant and animal health and environmental sustainability. While the health implications of controlled environment food production are yet to be established, it is axiomatic that eating biodynamic food contributes to improved human health, while soils farmed biodynamically are highly effective in storing organic carbon. Yet, less than 1% of UK farmland is currently farmed biodynamically.

Understanding and addressing the reasons why biodynamic agriculture is so marginalised is undoubtedly complex, informed by a combination of social and cultural, as well as economic factors. Yet one constraint is increasingly clear: the UK does not have enough well qualified and experienced biodynamic farmers able to maintain, let alone increase, the area of land under biodynamic cultivation. Contributing to this is a lack of training in, and exposure to, management and leadership, which constrains the personal and professional development of biodynamic farmers and growers. This is, to some extent, an issue facing the whole agricultural sector, and it is far from clear that the complexities of biodynamic agriculture lend themselves to the reductive and materialistic approach to management found in most conventional and commercial agricultural settings. The issues facing biodynamic farming are thus concerned not only with the attributes required to be a good manager and leader, but also with a deeper understanding of the custodianship of the biodynamic farm organism. As such, the problems facing biodynamic farming and growing relate fundamentally to the superficiality of current agricultural management training and the resulting need for a new educational organism that supports farmers and growers in becoming custodians of the health and sustainability of their land and production enterprises.

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Key Findings from the Workshop

Limited support for career progression

- There has recently been a rapid growth of interest in most forms of agroecology. Some education and training centres have sought to address the desire for new programmes, although there is as yet little evidence about the scale of demand and employment opportunities for those gaining new agroecological skills.
- There are already many training opportunities available for new entrants, including the Biodynamic Agriculture College's level 3 BD apprenticeship. However, there is little management training available, particularly in terms of support for career development towards farm management and leadership.
- Some new level 4/5 programmes, including foundation degrees in sustainable agriculture and horticulture, may help address the gap. However, none are wholly specific to the needs of BD farmers and none are yet addressing advanced management training;
- Where training programmes are available for experienced farmers – often through uncertificated short courses - it is widely observed that experienced practitioners – including BD farmers – are often reluctant to ask questions and seek new information.

The availability of, BD training programmes beyond level 3 is currently poor, despite many in the sector calling for improvements.

The future for BD training programmes

- Many in the sector have suggested that BD training should be incorporated into the wider post-industrial agroecological approach to farmer training. BD certainly ticks all 12 principles of agroecology and joining with other agroecological approaches would offer new training opportunities for those interested in BD.
- But is this really what is required to support a vibrant future for BD agriculture? Is the purpose of BD training to offer new tools and practices that, when combined with other approaches to agroecology, enable farmers to bring agriculture back into better health? That is, do we see our primary purpose as the *curation of modified agricultural practices*? Or is it necessary to foster *a paradigm shift* away from contemporary agricultural – and agroecological - practice towards unlocking the full range of regenerative health and environmental benefits uniquely offered by BD?
- While curating better practice might be an attractive – and valuable - short term goal, there is no guarantee that it will lead to the wider adoption of BD principles.

The future for BD training must lie in fostering the paradigm shift needed to address fundamental questions about the future of BD agriculture and how BD training can become accepted as a source of excellence that encourages people to get involved.

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BD as the agriculture for our time

- BD farms are necessarily complex organisms that produce high quality, health-enhancing food through care for the land and community. They are inherently connected to locality (products, services, requests from the public) and have a spirit life that is absent from all other forms of agriculture. Becoming the custodian of a BD farm thus requires the development of self and connection to place and land – the farmer having to learn what each piece of land needs and can offer.

Can a BD farmer really train in one place and be ready to manage any BD farm, as is the norm in conventional agriculture?

- BD farms require a range of specific higher management/custodianship skills, focussed on the curative potential of BD agriculture, allied to a well-articulated business rationale. For example, enterprise efficiency dominates conventional agriculture, but is this really appropriate for BD farms? Instead, BD agriculture needs to be understood in three-fold terms – developing healthy relationships between the land, the farmers and the community.
- Thus, should we really be asking questions about training in farm management per se? What is it that we are trying to solve? Most management tasks are relatively straightforward and easy to learn. But holding a vision, a spiritual direction, an organism, a space, or an entity is another matter – and is at the root of the custodianship of BD farms.

From where do we source the future BD farmers? Can we really expect to recruit them from the existing stock of conventional farmers, or do we also have to start with those showing interest and train them to be farmers and, eventually, farm custodians?

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Components of the new BD farm custodianship paradigm

Bringing spirituality to the core of BD farm custodianship and leadership – the cosmos, the community and the individual:

- o The need for a phenomenological audit of where spirit can be found on each farm - the farm as a self-contained spiritual entity, relating to the Cosmos and the soul qualities of the land;
- o The individuality of farm leadership as the source of spirituality – requiring support for developing self, farm and community – the ability to develop practices, connections, serenity and phenomenology as a way of knowing and growing;
- o What does the right spiritual leadership training look like? How do we take responsibility for personal values and beliefs?
- o A leader as an individual who fosters self-enquiry, follows cycles and rhythms of the days and years, and celebrates rites of passage.

Identifying the components of a new custodianship curriculum appropriate to BD farming

- o Holding a curative and regenerative vision of BD that is fostered through the three-fold order:
 - embracing the rights realm in ways that embed it as part of the duty of care to the land, farmers and community;
 - developing a keen sense of place – observing, listening and responding to the needs of the land and nature – to embed a culture of agriculture as a source of human health and environmental sustainability;
 - developing a new associative economic model that focusses on total value to the farm, and community.
- o Fostering emotional intelligence - empathy, caring, listening, self-awareness, compassion, humility, knowing boundaries, accountability and responsibility;
- o The farm manager/custodian as ‘conductor’ – with a passion to lead and develop excellence in the craft of farming and growing and all related areas, as well as in the craft of leadership and management, including enabling delegation and teamwork; fostering communication; conflict resolution; core business skills of decision-making, prioritisation, planning, finance, strategy, sales and marketing; mentoring, mediation and facilitation;
- o A BD farm manager/custodian needs to embed their work within meditative practice, meaning that the curriculum should include some element of consciousness studies and wisdom tradition.

Developing a new educational organism designed to deliver the new curriculum

- It is clear that no current farm management training, nor conventional education provider, fully meets the challenge of the new curriculum; we need to work with existing providers – the Biodynamic Agriculture College and Ruskin Mill Trust, for example – to take a fresh and bold approach to education and training – one that celebrates all aspects of the three-fold order as a prerequisite to fostering the paradigm shift required in UK – and World – agriculture;

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- At the core of the paradigm shift the new educational organism has to focus on agriculture as curative/regenerative and productive practice, with farmers and growers trained *in situ*, according to their individual circumstances and needs, so that place, land and individuality become central – that farmers are equipped with the practices that will enable them to farm their specific land and farm, with training and assessment designed to reinforce the place-specific and curative nature of BD farming;
- This shift goes well beyond current concepts of work-based learning by requiring an individualised curriculum that is designed to meet place, time and individually specific training needs. Informed by an andragogical approach to learning, techniques such as problem and case-based learning can be used, facilitated not only by teachers, but also by experienced BD farmers and growers – creating a dense learning network designed to meet the needs of each individual farmer, farm and local community;
- There is an established qualifications framework that can potentially be adapted to offer recognition of the progression of BD farmers, perhaps following the German system of apprentice (level 3), journeyman/trainee manager (level 4) and master farm/custodian (level 5/6). There are, of course, many questions to be addressed about how assessment would take place and how assignments would be graded;
- This new organism should thus be developed around a heart-centred approach that embraces the three-fold order. It is built on Goethean observation, phenomenology and ways of seeing the overall farm and its parts. Critically, it should be developed around study of the Agricultural Lectures – ideally as part of group practice within each farm organism.

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Synthesis – A New Education for Biodynamic Farming and Growing

Core principles

- The new education builds on current Level 3 BD programmes, offering the opportunity for candidates to gain an Honours degree in Biodynamic Agriculture and Horticulture;
- Biodynamic farming and growing is understood as curative, productive and regenerative practice, in terms of the production of food to support human health and environmental sustainability;
- Training takes place *in situ* – stressing the significance of learning from and through the land;
- The training programme is flexible, allowing candidates to study at their convenience;
- Training is organised by current master farmers/custodians, supported by professional educationalists who train the master farmers, set the assignments and verify the marks achieved;
- Training is certificated centrally via the National Qualification Framework, to provide benchmarking and transferability, with each farm registered as an official training centre;
- The three-fold order is at the core of the curriculum – ensuring that all learning relates to the farm organism in its social, economic and cultural context;
- A problem-based learning approach is used such that generic assignments can be addressed individually at the farm level, ensuring that learners develop a deep understanding of the farm organism of which they are part;
- The tuition fee is kept to minimum by integrating the training into the life of each participating farm.

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The Trust owns most of the land and buildings on which Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms operate and it supports their biodynamic farming activity. This underpins one of the Trust's charitable aims, of furthering education and training in biodynamics for new farmers and growers, schoolchildren and the general public.

The Trust's education and training activities include:

- Visits by school children and college students to the farms (regular attendees include the local schools).
- Apprenticeship and staff development programmes in all aspects of farm and garden work – Currently four apprentices are registered for a 2-year structured programme leading to a level 3 qualification.
- Farm and garden walks led by volunteers and/or farm staff.
- Tablehurst Young Farmers works in collaboration with Tablehurst Farm to provide a farm-based curriculum which offers opportunities for children of all ages to care for the farm animals, grow vegetables, harvest, weed, stack wood, build structures, help with seasonal events and much more!

The Trust also has a commitment to wider educational and cultural objectives, which remain central to St Anthony's aims. Indeed, the Trust would seek, in a very practical way, to implement the ideal of the biodynamic farm as 'a university of the future', as envisaged by Dr Manfred Klett. To this end, St Anthony's Trust has consistently supported local initiatives of a wider cultural nature.

This report has been prepared by Dr Neil Ravenscroft with input from the four workshop convenors, Dr Julia Wright, Dr Jonathan Code, Berni Courts and Nir Halfon. The workshop was organised by Leticia Armengod and the trustees of St Anthony's Trust.