

Cropping consists of 90 acres of wheat, 70 acres of barley for stock feed, 8 acres of potatoes, 8 acres of carrots, 40 acres of fodder crops, and the remaining is grass, mostly temporary leys. We have our own milling plant to produce whole wheat flour, compost-grown and stone-ground. Any surplus wheat is sold to a miller who produces the same quality of flour. We find a steadily increasing demand for this flour and it has become an important sideline.

The potatoes and carrots are small acreage to bother with on a large farm but all are sold to people who really appreciate vegetables with good flavour. Up to last year all were sold locally, but we now find a demand coming from all over the country.

Lower costs

Turning to the economic side, we do not rely to any great extent on higher selling prices except in so far as our crops are of top quality. We do get some premiums but these only raise the value of our total sales by 2 per cent. Our production costs are lower, the saving on fertiliser bills alone being a considerable item.

There are two other factors. One is the age to which we can retain our dairy cows in the herd, which is well above the average for the country. This reduces depreciation, gives us an excellent choice of dams from which to select heifers for the herd and, of course, gives us more heifers to sell.

The other factor which we cannot measure is the increased value of our crops as food for the stock. Our cows have nothing but what is grown on the farm except for a little fish meal, a few beans and seaweed meal. Seaweed provides us with minerals in an organic form and with the addition of steamed bone flour has proved entirely adequate. We have been selling 950 gallons of milk per cow (total solids over 13.00 per cent) all on bulk foods (grass, hay, silage, kale) plus 2 pounds per gallon of home-mixed concentrates.

This question of the true nutrient value of foods is so important (for human beings as well as animals) that sooner or later official research stations must seriously look into it. Up to now they have shown little inclination to do so.

There are many different ways of carrying out an organic system. The Soil Association has members in 50 different countries. All that we have proved on this farm is that we have been able to find techniques that suit our own conditions, and that the fears of those who said that it was impossible have been proved groundless. It has been an intensely interesting experience and most satisfying. But we are only at the beginning, there is still very much to find out.

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AN ENGLISH ORGANIC FARM

by

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I BOUGHT Lea Hall Farm, which lies 5 miles from Shrewsbury, in 1923 — Shotton Farm was added in 1947, making 600 acres in a ring fence. For years I followed orthodox methods until one day, almost suddenly, I realised that all was not well with our farming system, that we had forgotten most of what our grandfathers knew, and had replaced it with methods which ignored the true fertility of the soil and sought to force production by chemical means.

Once I had got this firmly fixed in my mind, it meant a big decision must be made. Could I afford to change my ways and risk going back to a system based on more traditional methods by using farmyard manure, carefully composted, and rely on good husbandry instead of chemical aids?

My friends and advisers had no doubts at all. They gave me just three years, by the end of which time I should have learned my lesson the hard way, and would be forced back to the fertiliser bag.

But I had become convinced that the organic principle is right and I *had* to go on. I felt that there must be a way of making it come out right economically. That was in 1948. We are still here, with my son in partnership with me. We would not go back to the old way for anything, and our friends are rather puzzled. We are producing more, not less. Our livestock have better health, and we are making higher profits. I can fairly state that *an organic farm can be run profitably*.

Two things must be remembered. First, a good soil seethes with living creatures, many forms of life. All treatment of the soil must be based on this fact, and this life must be fed. It means that all animal and plant residues must be returned to the soil. There must be no waste. We were told that we would never have enough for this, and we ourselves were a little anxious about it. But it has worked out all right and in these 16 years we have not used any inorganic fertiliser whatever.

The second point is that everything on a farm depends on everything else. An inactive soil produces less healthy crops with a lower feeding value, and this affects the livestock. Insecticide sprays kill the useful insects even more effectively than the ones we want to get rid of. Insecticides also kill off the birds which normally keep down the harmful insects so that we are left in the end with more pests than ever. All life is a cycle and it is up to us whether we circulate what is good or what is harmful.

Two mistakes

Just as the two principles which I have just stated are the basis of good farming, modern methods seem to me to be making two major mistakes, which in the long term can prove serious. Firstly comes the neglect of the soil and the belief that it is just as good to feed the crop with soluble, inorganic foods in the form of modern fertilisers. I am quite sure that plants do not really do well on this treatment. This orthodox method certainly will grow heavy crops, and for many products one is paid solely by weight. But I have enough proof to satisfy myself that such crops have nothing like the true feeding value of our own.

I know how the health of our herds has improved since we made the change. This difference in quality is a very interesting question and there are further indications which cannot be ignored from our experience at the Haughley Research Farm which belongs to the Soil Association.

Here two sections are run, one on an entirely organic system and the other according to modern orthodox practice. Each section has its own small dairy herd originally formed from half-sisters. Each herd is fed solely from the produce of its own section.

For some years now the organic herd has given slightly more milk than the orthodox one, but the interesting thing is that it has done so on from 5 to 15 per cent less total intake of food. Analysis shows that the grass on the organic section has a very much higher percentage of dry matter at all seasons, and there appear to be significant differences in the nature of the proteins.

The second fault that I see in our modern methods is the massive use of chemicals as a cure for all our ills. There is no doubt that their use has revolutionised farming, but how often do they do more than remove the symptoms and leave the basic causes untouched? There is always a reason for things going wrong and the only lasting way to tackle any trouble is to find and remove the cause.

Economic pressures

Economic pressure is pushing farmers into specialisation, producing one or two products so as to be able to mechanise and produce more cheaply. In many cases this pressure is irresistible, yet I do not think this is good husbandry. The more that one can vary the cropping and the classes of livestock the better. This is another example of the struggle between what is good farming and what is expedient and profitable. Every farmer has to face this choice and decide for himself.

So far we have managed to maintain a fairly wide variation on our 600 acres. We milk 136 dairy cows of the Ayrshire breed and rear their female young stock. The bull calves are sold when a week old. Eighty breeding sows enable us to maintain our contract of 22 bacon pigs a week to the factory, besides providing "store" pigs to another farm which we have just recently taken over. We have also a flock of 250 breeding ewes for the production of fat lambs.