



INTERVIEW TRANSCRIPT

Farmer's Name: Peter Brown

Age:

Location: Tablehurst Farm, Forest Row, Kent-Sussex border

Size: 600 acres

Type: Mixed; Community Farm, with 600 members.

Interviewed by: Baely Saunders

Filmed by: Joe Spence

Date: November 9, 2015

Baely: Ok so, to begin with maybe if you just kind of introduce yourself and the farm and say a little bit about what it is that you do here?

Peter: Ok... So I'm Peter Brown and I've been farming here 21 years, although the last couple of years, there's a young team have taken over. And this is Tablehurst farm, and it's a biodynamic farm, but it's also a community farm, so we have about 600 people that own the farm business with us. And that means that we have a lot of community input which is very nice. The farm is about 600 acres now, it's sort of grown over the years, and it has beef, sheep, pigs and poultry plus lots of vegetables and cereals, a bit of everything, a bit of fruit, and that also makes an interesting place to work. And we have about 21 employed people now, if we include the shop staff - we have a little shop, and a tiny little café - as well as 3 people with learning disabilities and some apprentices on the farm.

Baely: Ok, so you started here 21 years ago [Peter: Yes, 94] How did it, what was here when you took it over and how did you develop it over those 21 years?

Peter: Ah, ok. Well, it was about I think maybe 200 acres at the time and it had been biodynamic but it had been struggling to be viable and was in fact losing some money when I came, partly because there wasn't really the demand for the animals out there - for the produce - in the way that there is now. And, well I came with very little money and quite a, bit of a run down farm, so that's why by involving the community we were able to raise some money. We eventually managed to raise about £150,000 which we were able to put into the farm to help turn it around. And we did a couple of things which helped make it viable. Before it was in fashion to ..., oh what's it called, oh dear, I'm not very good at this.... You're gonna edit this anyway aren't you?

Baely: Yes that's fine.



Peter: Um, I can't think of the term now, anyway, well never mind. Yes so, economically, we did two things: we started, in a very small way, a farm shop and because my wife and I had experience with people with learning disabilities, we started a very small care home with 3 people with learning disabilities. And the local councils paid for that and we were able to integrate that into the farm.

We were very lucky because that was just, we started just about the time when the BSE started in this country and, one of the factors on a biodynamic farm is, is that you try and see the farm as a whole, and you try not to buy a lot of inputs in. So, for instance, you'd only keep as many animals on the farm as you could feed off the farm itself. So for about 25 years previous to my coming, the cattle hadn't had any bought in feed, so no concentrate. If, presuming that the bone meal was part of the problem, those cattle hadn't had any, so that helped us generate a lot of interest around here - Mr Gummel was eating his hamburger we could say that this is gonna be, you know, the safest meat that you can get because it's organic and it's also biodynamic which means that they haven't had bought in concentrate. For many years. Yes, so...

Baely: Have you found that, in recent years, there's been growing interest into, either the health benefits of eating organic, or, equally, the health risks of the kind of, more...

Peter: ...Industrial type farming...

Baely: ...commercially used chemicals. Have you seen a peak in interest in things like biodynamic farming?

Peter: Yes, well I think the interest in biodynamic farming is ever growing but, I mean If one goes back 20 years, we were still seen as a bit mad in those days. But, and so what came first and astonished me, was this thing about food miles and local food. That has really caught on in a way that I wouldn't have imagined 20 years ago. And so our farm shop built up and was the only 1 for many miles around in those days, but now there's other little farm shops springing up and so we've got more competition in that sense. And local even seems to take precedent over organic I would say, generally, with many people. But no, we keep expanding nonetheless, and we have a good demand and it's partly because we're organic and biodynamic, but partly I think because we just have very, very good produce, and we're buying in hardly anything, so it's all produced on the farm, it's very transparent for people. We do farm walks and so on, to show people that that is the case, and so there's a lot of trust there from our customers. So I think it's a number of factors which make it work.

Baely: Over the years have you noticed any change in the type of people who are flocking towards organic, local, biodynamic... has that changed over the time that you've been farming?

Peter: Well, it's definitely in a sense become more mainstream and, I don't know that there's been any difference in the customers, I mean, we get a whole range here, some who are



students, and people who haven't got much money, and others who obviously have enough that, you know, the difference in cost is not a factor.

But I think, yea, as I said before, it's also the taste and the quality of the produce generally. And I think there is a growing awareness of the destruction that industrial-type farming is causing and is creating in many, many ways. Notably of course with environment, with the bees, with bird numbers still declining generally. And then there's this question of GM, which is very controversial and a lot of people are very, very wary of that, and quite rightly. And for me, I think, it's become more polarized in a way and the conventional, industrialised type of agriculture which our government so strongly supports and, dare I say it, but the NFU as well, where they are, kind of, pro GM, they think we should be out there doing that, and the trouble is that that type of farming is subsidized in many hidden ways. We talk about externalities which are not taken into account, and I'm thinking of things like our drinking water; if our farmers, who put on artificial fertilizers, and used the pesticides and herbicides and other chemicals, had to pay for that pollution, by, you know the water companies have to clean the water and their customers are charged rather than the polluter, and if that was different, industrial food wouldn't be so cheap. And you can go on looking at many of these externalities and, for instance, you know, we get these subsidies and a lot of these subsidies are more and more aimed towards the environmental benefits, and, of course, it's the tax payer that's paying for those subsidies. And that is, quite rightly, to help protect the birds and the bees and so on, and the general biodiversity. But the irony is that it's directed to maybe 5% of the land was, you know, the saying you can be ever more intensive than the 95%, whereas if the countryside was biodynamic and organic farms it wouldn't be necessary, the subsidies for the environment wouldn't be necessary. On this farm here, we've got so many birds and insects, and diversity of crops and landscapes, and we're producing at the same time. So, and then you can go on to endless other things like, the quality of the foods - you know, industrialised farming very much directed towards processing more and more of our food, and the health effects on people, the cost of the NHS, diabetes, all of those things, it's all interwoven with this industrialised-type agriculture as compared to the more biodynamic, organic, or you can also say agroecology - Basically working with nature rather than against nature.

Baely: Just talking about the subsidies, because with a lot of the other farms we've been speaking to, subsidies is something that's consistently comes up [Peter: Yes] I'm completely ignorant about what... do you as a biodynamic, organic farm, are you eligible for the same subsidies or is it a different...

Peter: Well in some ways, yes we are, in some ways.... It used to be, in the old days, when we started, that, you know, you got a subsidy per head of cattle or, you know, production orientated, and now of course it's changed over to so much per hectare, so it's much more of a fair playing field there because - as I mentioned - a biodynamic farm, you know, we are only going to keep as many animals as we can produce the feed [for] on the farm. Whereas a



lot of conventional farms, you know, they would buy in lots and lots of food, of course not just from this country, we're also talking about Soya from South America and everything else; again, nowadays most of it being GM, but that's another issue. But yea, so in a sense that is fairer for us, that it is a per hectare subsidy, but we basically get virtually nothing for it being organic per say. And the subsidies keep changing there - we used to get £60 instead of £30 for the per-hectare subsidy, but it goes not very far. I mean, you know, we have to prove that we're not using the chemicals, so we have to pay for inspections and so on, whereas your conventional farmer can put all these poisons on and it doesn't cost them any extra, so it's all completely back to front.

Baely: So the other thing that's consistently come up with the other farmers that we've been talking to is kind of what you just touched on there, the regulations, and that they are constantly fighting against. They develop a spraying regime with one chemical only to find that just before they're about to use it, the regulation's changed and that chemical's no longer allowed - they have to find a different one. What kind of regulations do you follow as an organic, biodynamic, farm?

Peter: Well there are minimum EU organic regulations. If you're a biodynamic farmer you've got more on top, but it's not necessarily a problem, because as a biodynamic farmer that makes sense, because it is to ensure that you are doing good farming and it's just to prove to the customer that that is what you're doing - so a biodynamic farm would never dehorn its cattle for instance, our cattle all have their horns on. But that is not a problem in itself because that creates the kind of animals that we want and we think that is a very important factor. So I'm all for putting regulations in place that ensure that the land is farmed properly, but again, there's a big fight against a lot of these regulations because it's basically seen that farming has to be competitive economically, and competitive on a global scale. So, for instance, the pig crates to keep sows in were banned in this country, quite rightly, because it's cruel to keep an animal cooped up in a cage where it can't even turn round for a large part of its life. But of course, pig farmers complained that then they couldn't compete on an international market and quite rightly, you know, we're still importing meat which is produced in that way - which is not fair. So, anything which affects the short term economics of agriculture is seen to be bad by farmers, and one can understand that because it makes them less able to compete, so therefore society has to decide what is acceptable and what is not. And you know biodynamic farming is way of farming where, as I described already, we don't have inputs. But what that means is that you have a very, very sustainable form of farming. All conventional farming, all industrial-type of farming, are based upon these inputs which are basically nonrenewable inputs. So they are mining out rock phosphate from Morocco and they put that on the land as a fertilizer. They, I mean there is lots of nitrogen in the air, but they use vast amounts of energy, based on oil, to extract that, so they can put it on their fields. Of course, a large part of all that leaches into the ground water and away anyway. But, but that can't be right and it's only on very short economic...I mean they reckon there's only about forty years left of rock phosphate there - why are we



doing that? Why are we allowed to do that? On a biodynamic farm...biodynamics has been going for over ninety years, so it's proven that you can, through rotations and so on, have the fertility. And so the government and the EU tries to introduce, well not the government, it's the EU fortunately, tries to introduce laws to help safeguard our environment. For instance, one of them is that you have to, if you're over a certain acreage, you have to have at least three different crops in your rotation, and that's fought against, and yet we have many more than that because we can see that that is how the fertility comes. But, you know, if wheat is the most viable crop they want to be able to plant the whole field, the whole farm, to wheat on this short-term economics. But it's depleting the soil, it's not good for nature. And the thing with these neonicotinoids, which have been affecting the bees, and yet it's argued that it isn't doing any harm - and there scientists seem to not to be able to agree on things and it seems to be very much depending on who's paying the scientists, but it's also that they're not even using the precautions. It should be proved that it's safe, not proved the other way around. So there's some very very weird policies and politics going on there. And I've been grateful that we're part of the EU because they've helped our government go in the right direction, but it's very worrying that there's talk of leaving the EU, and even now, this thing with the GMs, where the country can decide or not if it's going to be producing it, and I just hope that society generally will stand up to government and the NFU and realise that its very short-sighted to go that route.

Baely: You mentioned GM products, and what you say is a kind of short sighted approach to sustainable farming, where farmers just want to plant the most profitable crop but ones that aren't good for the environment, one of the things that people level against biodynamic and organic farmers is that it's all very well and good on a small scale, locally, but over the years we've seen a huge increase in population and that's only going to continue. How do you feed so many people? One of the things they say about GM is that you can feed so many more people.

Peter: Ach, it's all rubbish though! (laughs). There no bigger yields with the GM than with conventional breeding. Most of the GM crops are to enable you to use more chemicals because you can spray on the herbicides and it doesn't kill the plants that you're trying to keep. Of course meanwhile there's massive, massive, problems in America and South America with weeds becoming resistant to these, and they're now talking about using 24D and other chemicals that we'd banned ages ago, trying to bring that back to deal with these weed problems. And that is one of the benefits of being a biodynamic farmer and being attached to a worldwide organisation. Because we've got farmers in these other countries, and in America and they can tell you what's really going on. Even if our media doesn't tell you. And the lack of transparency in this whole issue is very disturbing and sad. I've been to the Serolini (sp) talk, a French researcher who did the experiments on the rats for over two years as compared to the three months, and he's been slated that it's not scientific and everything, but when you actually look into it, he's actually using exactly the same rats as the GM companies themselves. I think the science stands up very very well, and with horrific results. The things is that everybody says that GM is safe, but its only been going,



what, ten years on a big scale, in America? And that's equivalent to the three months that the rats were put to. But we've got to look at forty years, fifty years, the lifetime of a rat compared to the lifetime of a human - then what's it going to be like? The health system is struggling now, America is going to be bankrupted by the problems that they're going to have because these rats, you know, came out with all of these tumors and kidney problems, and a whole host of things. Sorry, this is not about GM, but I think that our government is shutting their eyes and they're blindly following America, and people have got to wake up, and some people are waking up. But there's no doubt in my mind that biodynamic and ecological agroecology can feed the world, and what they don't say is that at the moment seventy or eighty percent of the world is fed in that way, at the moment. And we've already discussed the issue that industrialised farming is based on mining stuff out of the ground which isn't going to last much beyond 2050 anyway, and that there's lots of research now showing that we could actually feed that number of people now if we had a different diet so there's many many different angles you can take to that. And it's not that I'm against livestock per se, particularly I think the ruminants are important. I think they are necessary for the fertility and if they are kept as a biodynamic farmer keeps them, they do no harm, they only do good. And I very agree with and support the Alan Savoury method of mob grazing, particularly in large parts of the world like Africa. I farmed for 15 years in Africa and I can see how that could change the landscape and the productivity of vast areas, which are now tending towards desertification. And so if you, you know, if you include that, if you include this whole food sovereignty movement, what they stand for, which is not about specifically organic, it's more, you know, that, realising this industrialised system we have of getting food to our plates is not the way forward. And that definitely to have, you know, around every town and village, locally produced vegetables and what we can, and then further afield we can do the bigger crops, that is the way that we should be looking to go. And more and more people are realising that. I actually, just a few weeks ago, attended a food sovereignty movement up in Hebden bridge, in this country, I think 280 people, many of them very young and very motivated by seeing what is going wrong with the food system in this country and over the world. And this is a worldwide movement and I very much support the 6 pillars that they are saying are so important - like a fair price for the producer, like, that food is not a commodity like other industrialised products, and that local food, and control should be local for the food production, and so on. And that is just absolute common sense and then, of course, working with nature. And there's really, really exciting developments and so it's not like organic farming, or biodynamic farming is still back, you know, 40 years ago. The yields there are increasing as our understanding increases and, you know, with vegetables there's not a big difference in the yields; with cereals and that we're maybe 30% less than the top yields being produced now chemically. But that equates to what was happening, you know, in the 80s and 90s, in what was then modern agriculture, so we're not way behind. So I'm absolutely convinced that you can feed the world, even with 10 billion people, if we do it the right way.



Baely: Something else a lot of farmers have mentioned, which I think will be different for you because, like you say it's a community run farm, is that over the past 50 years they've been seeing this kind of, like mass exodus to the cities and so lots of them, the family-run farms, are now family homes with the land rented out to bigger neighbouring farmers because their sons don't want to take it over or their daughters don't want to take it over: they have families and jobs and things in the city. And yet, from what you've said, that's not, you're not struggling to find people to assist with this, or to..

Peter: I see. No, I mean, everything depends on people and, it's not to say there might not be some biodynamic farms that are struggling with finding the right generation of farmers, but that's not been the case here at all, you know. Altogether on this particular farm, because we have a little farm shop and so on, we've got, you know, over 20 people employed, and the farmers are all in their 20s or 30s and I feel very, very lucky that that is the case, and, at this food transition, not this food, this food sovereignty meeting I've just been at, you know, it was nearly all young people who were basically asking for a right to be able to get onto the land and are very, very keen. It might be that they don't all want to go the route of modern industrialised agriculture because they can see the harm that it does, but it's not that they're not prepared to roll their sleeves up and get really stuck in. And on this farm we have got some very big equipment too, and it's not that we're against machinery per se, it's just the right way to use it, and we do minimum tillage and we only cultivate that deep most of the time unless we're actually just loosening the soil. We got rid of our plough.. you know, building up the humus and having a healthy environment is what it's all about and I think there's a lot of people out there very keen to do that.

Baely: So do you think..

Peter: Sorry, maybe I should just say that I think it's this economics which is bugging things up, if you want to put it like that, because, you know, our poor dairy farmers, you know, they should be on fair trade, they're not getting a decent price for their milk, that puts people off. You slog your guts out and you don't make a living - nobody wants to do that. It's not, it's to do with not giving a fair and a right price to the producers, and this just goes on and on, and it goes in cycles. And it's true, like what we've done, if one uses one's ingenuity to build a farm shop, or to take people with learning disabilities, do some care farming or, that you can just about make it happen, but it shouldn't be that you have to do that. So something has to change there. I mean the percentage that society spends on their food now is a very, very small percentage, whereas, you know, 50 years ago it was quite a substantial percentage, and I'm not suggesting that food prices go skyrocketing, but I'm suggesting that there should be a fair price. I mean if bottled water is more expensive than the milk in the supermarket, what sort of society are we living in, something's wrong you know? And I think that is a large part of why people are still going to the towns, and so what I'm saying is that we shouldn't have these hidden subsidies for farming. The polluter should pay if he's polluting, there should be a problem if you can't keep the birds and the bees and keep a



diverse countryside, and if you're doing it right, you should be paid for it. And that is not an agricultural problem, it's not an agricultural problem of feeding the world, it's a societal problem. If you've got a billion people obese in the world, apparently officially now, and you've got a billion people starving, that's not an agricultural problem, it's to do with society and how they're dealing with money and dealing with other people. And the people don't come first, and farmers are really struggling, be they conventional, be they organic, it's not right. And, again I think our government's not going to change it, they've got these blinkers on - people have to wake up in society, yeah. Sorry, I get quite, it's what life is all about and it's, it can make me quite cross, the way this government seems to be so blinkered, and a lot of people... it comes down to, kind of, greed at the end of the day, where people are only looking for themselves and not for their neighbour. Yea, that has changed, and there's a lot of fantastic people who are not like that, and I think that's actually how most people are in their hearts, but how to bring that change around within society is the question. And I think, you know, that's why we run a community farm here, because it's not just the farmer's responsibility in how we farm the land and how the land is cared for, it's a question for society, and so what we're saying to our 600 members who co-own this farm business is, you know, take on the responsibility with us - try and help us guide it in the way that's right for the land and for people. And they're not getting a subsidy, I mean they're not subsidising the farm. We have an annual general meeting, they can get very involved in going you know, and helping dictate the direction we go in as a farm, and people appreciate that, and I think it's very important. Sorry, I'm blithering on a bit.

Joe: That was why we wanted to speak to yourself so much, because one of the big themes from the project is people don't know where their food comes from, you know, and that's perhaps one of the biggest changes we've seen over the 50 years, you know, of food corporations have got bigger and food productions become more centralised. It's really interesting to finally meet farmers who are actually working to try and, you know, correct that balance in some way.

Peter: Yes, it's not easy because everybody does have a very fast and busy life and, sort of, people have to prioritise what's important, you know, and so sometimes one would wish the community round the farm to be more proactive, and get even more involved, but I understand when they don't because, you know, we are in a bit of a rat race and they just don't always have the time. And, you know, we do farm walks and we used to have a lot of help in the early days, when we didn't have the machinery and when it was more of a pioneering stage of the farm. People used to come and help transplant the leeks, and harvest the potatoes. But then you get a machine, which can harvest the potatoes, and then the people are not needed in that same way. And maybe there's still docks to be dug up but people are not going to do that more than a few times because they like to do something a bit more fulfilling. So, you know, it asks a lot of the farmers on such a farm to help share one's knowledge. And the biodynamic apprenticeship scheme has been going for something like 30 years and you know the base of what that is, is very, very good, where, you know, you've got farmers with the knowledge, and you've got young people who can do some



work, and there's an exchange there. The last years, we now have a level 3, so we do have to ask a little bit of payment for that because we have to evidence now, what they know, but they do go away with a qualification, but it's still the same basis that the farmer gains the satisfaction of sharing his knowledge and helping young people learn, and the young people can get that for very little money, but for a bit of work and enthusiasm. And so the basis of that we now, we don't really call it an apprenticeship, we call it 'work based learning', but it's the same thing, and it's, yea, I'm very pleased that that is there, and that it's very popular, you know. We haven't got enough places for the number of students wanting to do it basically.

Baely: Is... With the people who are employed, and then with the apprentices, is it a diverse group of people, or do you find that it's mainly students, or... A lot of the other farmers, one of things that they were saying they have seen change over the past 50 years is, like you were saying, it used to be, you know, the potatoes would need digging, or something would need harvesting, they'd need help with the getting the grain into the silos and, it would be neighbours and friends and local people, whereas now they're almost completely dependent upon people from Eastern Europe coming in through agencies that specialize in, you know, 'help with the harvest' and I'm just wondering about where your workforce is from?

Peter: Well, again we're in the lucky position where we're not dependent on that...where, you know, we have up to 4 apprentices and we have a full spectrum of machinery here rather than use contractors. So that gives them the possibility to really learn, it asks a lot from them as well and they have to be serious about wanting to do that. We do also have volunteers, I mean we also do things like barn dances and, every Christmas, we've never advertised it, but we actually go round and sing carols to the cattle, and the sheep, and the pigs, which has become very popular. It just goes by word of mouth, but people are seeking that connection to the land, and so it's how can one offer that within the parameters of a farm team, because it does ask something from us as well, but it's very rewarding. So farming hasn't changed in the sense that it's a way of life which, you know, if you're wanting to get rich, this is not the way to do it, but it is very fulfilling. So we do use students and apprentices and some local help, and permanent staff as our team, yep.

Joe: We seem to be.... Like, we live in a society now where people are very, very disconnected from things, disconnected from food, disconnected from their labour, disconnected from the land, and it was interesting, I was speaking to a very, very, very big hop farmer, big as in he grows a lot of hops not.... And he was saying, actually his benefit's suddenly changed from sort of, I don't know whether you'd call it an ideological shift, in that actually, suddenly people are after these 'craft' beers, in his case, where it's small microbreweries, and they know who's made it, and suddenly they can feel some kind of connection with the food, or drink in this case, that they're consuming. Do you think we are, sort of, going through that process now, where people are actually starting to think 'actually, you know, I'd quite like to know where my food comes from'?



Peter: I think absolutely, and I think that's the way it has to go, and that's why I'm so enthusiastic about this whole food sovereignty movement, which basically started in the southern hemisphere where people are really being badly exploited by industrialized agriculture on a scale that, we don't have it here in Britain, and... But it's spreading all over the world because, I think this local food, I mean I mentioned at the beginning, I was so surprised, you know, because 20 years ago local food was not known, but now it seems to be really important to people and I think that's got to keep going that way, but I think that the local councils and the government and everything should be supporting that much more, and making it possible for people to make a living in that way. And, I mean, I think that the town transition movement of the, was heading in that direction but of course, with the whole global downturn and oil price dropping, that's kind of stuck in it's tracks, but it was going in that direction of trying to find how we order society and agriculture around producing local foods, with very few food miles, for local people. And they love it. And it makes much more sense than driving the produce, you know, to a depot in the middle of the country and then all out, it should be local food. And I think that the supermarkets are waking up to that's what is happening and... But I think it's only at the very beginning, but I think it could happen a lot quicker. I think that's what producers actually would prefer and I think that's what society would prefer and so it's just a matter of how it's organised. And I think that you would find that, you know, a vegetable farm is very, very productive if you look at what you sell off, per hectare or whatever, or what you produce per hectare. And, you could argue it's labour intensive, and it's not that I'm against machinery in the right place, but it's just creating that right balance and, of course, it was the chemicals, the herbicides which solved a lot of the labour problems but now we're getting very clever machinery, which isn't dependent upon, you know, which can help with the weeding, you know, it's got the cameras and it's got the computers in there to help and, so I think it's getting the right balance between mechanisation and labour, and what's fulfilling, and what's healthy, and what's good for the environment.

And I think it's really exciting, and I think, in the last years, in all sorts of realms, I mean, people are realising, we had the international year of the soil this last year and.... you know, one hand full of soil has got more living organisms in it than the whole of the world has people. I mean there's all sorts of facts one can reel off but what it comes down to is we actually know very, very little about what's happening in our soils, and it's the same with our gut, people are realising that, you know, antibiotics and things they kill all the gut bacteria, and how dependent we are on what's living in our guts, not just our bodies and, we're just on the edge of a whole lot of new advances, I'm quite sure, which will all consolidate the importance of biodiversity, of not using chemicals, of finding other ways to find health and nutrition and food. And, yeah, so it's exciting I think, you know, I think organic and that *is* going to be the way forward, and *is* going to feed the world.

Joe: So anthroposophy, is that the correct [inaudible] system of, which underlies....



Peter: Anthroposophy is the kind of the wisdom of man that came from Rudolph Steiner, from which biodynamics also came. So basically he started the Steiner school movement, the Waldorf school movement, something called Anthroposophical medicine, looking at medicine in a bit of an alternative way, and basically in 1924, after years of a number of farmers pestering him for advice, because they already were hitting a lot of agricultural problems, he gave these 8 lectures over 10 days on a massive, big estate in what is now Poland, and that was the basis of what is now modern biodynamics. And, of course, since then there's been lots of science gone into it, and lots of experiments, but it's basically just reconfirmed indications that he was giving on how to do it. And, you know, I think it's quite ironic that it's wine and vineyards which are... which is the product where you're really going for quality, you're going for the aroma, you're going for the taste, you're wanting it not to be bland, you want it to be as distinguishable for the soil and the climate, and that's where biodynamics is flourishing because these vineyards are realising, by using the methods of biodynamics, that they're getting these exceptional wines, and very distinctive wines... not all necessarily good - but real. And actually, you know, we should be connoisseurs of our carrots and our potatoes and everything else in the same way, and that might come. At the moment it sticks with the wine. And it shows that humus can be built up, and as biodynamic farmers we're constantly learning, and again, you know, that's the beauty of being a world-wide movement. We've just had a workshop a week ago where we had this guy from France, Vincent Maison who makes these preparations and sells them to these vineyards, and it was just fantastic. So you have, yes, you were asking about Anthroposophy. Now to practice biodynamics you don't have to know about that, but that is a kind of, I suppose you could say a world view, which is basically a Christian and a spiritual view of the world, based on somebody like Rudolph Steiner who could access the spiritual world, and one can poo-hoo all of that, but one can't poo-hoo the fact that you get exceptional wine, and it works. I've been doing biodynamics since I was about 21 and I'm just very, very convinced of that, but we've got a long way to go, I still am learning all the time, which makes it very fulfilling, yeah. And there's some great biodynamic farmers out there, you know, because it's comparatively easy to do minimum tillage on a conventional farm if you spray off the weeds and that, but how do you do minimum tillage, you know, organically, or biodynamically? In other words to deal with the weeds or, and it's all about creating a balance in your soils, it's through that balance that you don't get the pest problems. I mean we've got poly-tunnels, I can take you round the farm, and we're maybe not producing quite the yield level of conventional farming but, we haven't really got major health issues or disease issues - the stuff is healthy, and the pests and that only come when the produce isn't healthy.

Joe: It sounds like one or two supermarkets are cottoning on to biodynamics, Waitrose, Selfridges are now stocking biodynamic products. I don't know, is there, how much interaction has there been over the years?



Peter: Well I think the continent are still away ahead of us there, with their supermarkets, and a number of supermarkets which concentrate very much on organic and biodynamic produce. And I don't know all the answers but, you know, there is no doubt that there has to be a fair price for the producer and, what is a fair price? And I just met with some farmers in Holland who are selling to supermarkets and are having good experiences where they don't feel they're being 'done' by the supermarkets, but I think that is the exception, because maybe they've got a product that's so exceptional, they can't just go somewhere else to find it. But, generally, the supermarkets are guilty, like the government, of just looking at short term profit, short term... you know they're not building up the relationships with the farmers, really, like they really have to if they really want the benefit to both, because that's what it should be, just like I described for the apprentices - you know, if the farmer tries to extract a lot of money to teach, apprentice doesn't get a good deal, if he just uses cheap labour; same time, you know, they're not gonna find a farmer if they're not prepared to put their weight into doing some decent work, and it has to, you know, to the benefit of both, and basically that's how it has to be between the supermarkets and the farmers, or between society and the farmers, and that's why a lot of farmers are now going the route of having their own farm shop, or using farmers markets to try and bypass that, to create a relationship which is fair. A relationship which is fair though is going to, at the end of the day, be dependent on society forcing government to protect nature, to protect the bees, to protect our soils, and paying a fair price for doing that. But how that's going to happen, we'll have to see, that's part of the story we're in.

Baely: Over... Within recent years we've seen several, almost 'fashions' amongst, sort of the wealthier members of society, first there was, you know, the huge boom in eco tourism, it was no longer acceptable to go and, kind of, pillage these countries without giving something back, without making sure it was sustainable and beneficial to that community. So that one came around, and then there was, you know, there was solar panels, and green travel, and things like that. And certainly, tying in the Steiner schools, and the emphasis on local foods, and being connected to the land, I think in recent years there's been a rise of celebrity endorsements [Peter: There has] of Steiner education and of this style of farming [Peter: Yeah] Do you think that that is a helpful thing for you, or do you worry about the, kind of, how it's almost making it a commodity, and once the next fashionable thing comes along it will dissipate?

Peter: No, it doesn't really worry me because I think that most of these celebrities are not just doing it as a fashion thing, they do actually believe it, and I don't think it's going to be easy - I think, you know, there's an awful lot of money behind industry, and behind fast food, behind... And a lot of power that goes with it and I think, that's why I'm so saddened by the way government behaves, particularly for instance with the GM thing, where, you know, there's not a transparency, they're not saying 'ok, well if this experiment causes a problem, let's repeat that properly with government money' They just siding in and being lobbied by industry and going along with that, so it needs somebody like the celebrities to draw attention to the society that there are issues there. And so I think it's helpful in that sense,



it's not that they have got any better knowledge as a celebrity than any of the rest of us, but they can help draw attention to things, so I like to think it's not all superficial attention, it's what people really believe and I think, you know, a lot of wealthy people perhaps do go for something like biodynamics, I'm sure Cameron and Obama and those people are feeding organic food to their kids, although they're not saying it, and they daren't say it, but they have that possibility so.... you know. One can see that unfortunately in society that it's the less well off that are eating the less good food, and their health, and obesity and everything, and it's a very gross statement to make but the facts do seem to say that, whereas if you do have a great deal of money, you can afford to feed yourself well. But it shouldn't be like that, just like the NHS should be for everybody, good food should be for everybody, and that's how society should be, and what a society we have to aim for. Yeah...

Baely: I think we've got a pretty good interview...

Joe: Yea, I think we've got a pretty expansive [inaudible]

Peter: I hope it comes across alright

Joe: Is there anything you think, if we look at the broad idea of change, is there anything we should have asked or...?

Peter: No, I mean, you've got various people looking at different factors, so you've got Patrick Holden, the sustainable food trust, looking at this question of true cost accounting and everything. And there's different people focusing on different areas but, you know, I think someone can, one can feel a bit upbeat about all, some people waking up to it but I find it quite frightening speaking to a lot of people, even people who might eat some organic food or that, but they seem to get their blinkers on as to what's really happening in the world, and the power that these governments and big organisations are using, and in the wrong way, on behalf of us in society. And I don't know how to wake people up to that, 'cos it feels sometimes, 'cos it feels sometimes because we're within certain circles, if I go to the food sovereignty meeting you know, you meet people who are really passionate about it, but compared to society as a whole, it's still a very small number of people. So, I think we're heading the right way and I think people are waking up, but it just seems to me that we're gonna' have to hit a lot of crises before people are really gonna wake up, and that's a bit sad, but I'm sure that's gonna have to happen...

Joe: We'll see where we are in another 50 years

Peter: Yea, you know, the question is, will it be too late? You know... I mean, my daughter is a diver, and she does that professionally, making films, but also doing surveys and things, and, you know, she can see what's going on in the ocean floors, and in the sea, the pollution and what is happening there, and, you know, I'm more aware with agriculture, but there's all these different areas. And it's very, very sobering - one can get depressed about it, which one musn't, 'cos you have to kind of go forward with no fear and realise that that's not

50 Farmers' Tales

An Archive of Interviews with Kent Farmers



gonna help. But there's a lot of work to be done. And how do you wake people up to that?
So, I'm basically an optimist, one has to be.....