

OUR DAILY BREAD

FOOD IN GOD'S CREATION

Discussion group resource

for Creation Time 2011



Based on a *Church of Scotland* text

made available to CTBI for Creation Time resources 2011

Photo: [Susy Morris](#) 

Sustainable farming in the UK: times of change and challenge

Introduction

What does sustainable agriculture mean in the UK and Ireland in the twenty first century? As part of a study considering this question the Church of Scotland's Church and Society Council visited two Scottish farms to hear at first hand from the farmers concerned. The two farms described below are snapshots within a much bigger picture. They have been successful, but many other farms are coping less well with difficult times and many other farmers, in Scotland or in other parts of Britain or Ireland, would paint a different picture.

The two farms described are both family farms, but in other ways they are very different. One grows vegetables and raises stock for meat that will sell in supermarkets; the other is a small organic farm selling directly to the consumer. Both appear to be coping well with difficult and challenging economic circumstances, but by adopting radically different approaches to farming.

Groups are invited to read the text and then to discuss issues relating to the food we eat, how it is produced, what 'sustainable farming' means in the twenty first century.

1. Drumness Farm, Auchterarder, Perthshire

Drumness Farm is owned and managed by Sandy and Helen May Bayne and family and is situated between the villages of Muthill and Auchterarder in Perthshire. The Bayne family have farmed in the area for well over a hundred years and Sandy and Helen-May's son Andrew is now taking an increasing role in managing the business so continuing the family tradition. In the past century the size of the operation has increased both through the purchase of additional land and leasing from other landowners and is now over 700 acres.

The farm produces both livestock and crops. There is a herd of seventy suckler cows, and there are also 400 sheep. Crops grown include barley, wheat, potatoes, swedes and carrots.



Productivity and Compliance

Sandy stresses the need for the farm to be run productively in the current business environment. In this process the supermarkets play a huge role. Tesco's programme of farm compliance, called 'Nature's Choice' requires the farmer to draw up policies and provide supporting evidence on a range of issues including use of fertilisers and plant protection products; pollution prevention; wildlife and landscape conservation; energy use and recycling; and health and safety¹. The fat file of paperwork Helen-May must keep up to date demonstrates the paper trail that this compliance demands. At the same time the supermarkets keep a firm lid on prices with the consequence, according to Sandy, that supermarket shoppers in Britain continue to get vegetables at a relatively low price.



¹ For further details about Tesco's demands of farmers see: <http://www.tescofarming.com/tnc.asp>

Growing potatoes for supermarkets

The potato crop at Drumness illustrates the scale at which farmers supplying supermarkets now operate. There are four large storage sheds on site each holding up to 2000 tonnes of spuds. Potatoes are entirely planted and picked by machine. 'Tattie howking', the back breaking work that once gave seasonal work to a small army of casual labourers including children, was replaced by machinery over twenty years ago, reducing the need for labour on the farm but increasing its carbon footprint. On the farm potatoes are graded by size on a long conveyor, then stored in one tonne wooden pallets boxes and, when they are needed, shipped by truck to packers such as Albert Bartlett for packing and onward delivery to supermarkets – some of Sandy's spuds may end up on your local supermarket shelves. Sandy noted that supermarkets are now using more produce from Britain and that imports of produce including potatoes from European countries such as Portugal had declined.

The farm is not organic and spraying, which is carefully monitored using a sophisticated GPS system, is carried out both to provide fertiliser and to control weeds using herbicide. The farm has just taken delivery of a new self propelled spraying machine at considerable cost.

At the same time other techniques of pest control such as swede nets, rolled over the growing crop to reduce attack by turnip flea beetle, are employed on the farm to reduce the need for spraying.

A family farm in a time of change

Sandy is clearly proud of the operation of the farm, which has been able to thrive at a time of great uncertainty and when some other local producers have faced serious financial difficulties. He employs five staff including two seasonal workers from Slovakia. The quality of farm produce has met the high quality standards required by the supermarkets but at the same time this is no agricultural desert. The farm is set in beautiful rolling well wooded countryside and was alive with wildlife on the March day we visited: we saw hares, buzzards and roe deer. But there is large carbon footprint associated with this form of agriculture. Storing the spuds to keep them in shelf condition requires air conditioning units to keep four large barns at two degrees Celsius. Sandy has considered installing a wind turbine on to generate low carbon electricity to meet this demand but was doubtful that, in such a scenic part of the country, he would get planning permission.



2. Whitmuir: The Organic Place

Whitmuir is a small upland farm of 140 acres at Lamancha in the Scottish Borders owned and managed by Pete Ritchie and his partner Heather. Pete came into farming by an unusual route – he used to be community social worker. Ten years ago he and Heather sold their house in Edinburgh and took the plunge by buying a farm and starting to build a business as an organic farm.



Farm supporters

Pete's fresh start is reflected in the way he has developed a farm business that builds a new relationship with customers. Rather than selling to supermarkets (for which the farm is probably too small) he is selling directly to the consumer. This started with an organic box service in 2005 and a small farm shop open on Saturday morning. Both expanded rapidly and have been transformed in the process. Whitmuir now has a farm supporters scheme which has attracted 250 members. Supporters pay a monthly subscription for which they can receive a weekly delivery of a food box or can buy at the shop and eat at the restaurant. There is no discount: supporters are choosing to offer their support to help build a local viable business. It is therefore impressive that the farm has attracted such a loyal following.

A small farm, but a growing business

The farm is a mixed operation like Drumness but much smaller in area and stock numbers. There is a herd of suckler cows and 50 ewes and they also raise 400 turkeys for Christmas. The farm is growing two acres of vegetables, including salads and soft fruit in polytunnels. There is a pig unit, mainly composed of Tamworth sows with a Duroc boar. When we visited a 'large white' sow had just given birth to a litter of 13. The piglets feed enthusiastically and will put on weight at an impressive pace. However cute they look, this is still a farm, and after a few months they are destined for the butchery. There are also 300 laying hens.



After just ten years Whitmuir is now a limited company employing over 20 staff and hosting over 70,000 visitors a year. In 2009 a new building containing the shop, a restaurant and a gallery was opened. The structure is a timber frame building with sheep wool insulation and ground source heat pump. The investment in the new building and the location close to Edinburgh has helped make the business a success with visitors, as have the farm walks and website. This was recognised in April 2011 when Whitmuir won the 'Best Organic Retailer of the Year' award in the UK Natural and Organic Awards.

Which way forward for agriculture?

Could this style of agriculture play a more important role in Britain?

The number of supporters who have signed up to the scheme suggests there are consumers who are prepared to commit a portion of their food budget to a trusted supplier. There may be an opportunity for church congregations to investigate this kind of link with local farmers. At the same time the great majority of food in Britain will continue to be purchased at supermarkets whose advantages of price, product range and convenience give them an enormous influence over British agriculture. There will also continue to be arguments over the relative merits of organic agriculture both for consumers and the environment. The majority of farmers are likely to continue to embrace developments in technology and science while caring for the countryside.



Food is clearly more than just human fuel and agriculture is more than an industrial activity. To quote Pete Ritchie: 'food is a service, not just a product, with benefits to the environment as well as the consumer and food should be a public good'. What does this mean for congregations in the twenty first century?





Discussion session

Most people in Britain buy food in supermarkets washed, prepared, pre-packed or already processed or precooked. Some people grow their own food in a garden or allotment but relatively few people in the UK now work on farms or are part of a farming community. Yet we are all dependent on farmers for our most basic needs.

Questions

1. Think about where your food comes from. Do you grow any of your own food? Do you generally know where the food you buy in a shop comes from or how it is produced? Share this information within the group.
2. Supermarkets now have a huge influence over the way we shop and eat and over UK agriculture. What does this mean for you as a Christian called to care for creation?
3. Has your congregation or group any connections to farming? If you are in a town or city consider any links to farms nearby or to other food producers.
4. What can you or your church do to help ensure that good food is available to all, not just the affluent?
5. Are good food and organic food the same thing or should we be more critical of such claims? Do organic foods have any merit in scripture? Should we welcome GM crops as a gift from God, or be wary of them?
6. The Jewish and Islamic faiths both make special dietary demands of believers and kosher or halal food must be produced to a special standard. Should Christians likewise be more careful of what they eat?