Archived at https://orgprints.org/15097

1

This paper comes from my quest to trace the origin & development of the organic idea.
I have looked at "organic" as a meme, i.e. a unit of cultural transmission.
This paper is about the world's first "organic farming" association.
The results are surprising to me, let's see if they are surprising to you.

2

So, this is a detective story.
If you were looking for the world's first "organic farming" association,
ie the first association to call itself an "organic farming" association,
where would you start, where would you look,
& who are the candidates? Is it the UK, USA, Europe, Asia, Africa, or even NZ?

3

To put it in context:
This year organic farming statistics were reported from 138 countries;
The world organic market was valued at A$60 billion;
& organic food is either produced or sold in almost every country.
I have looked back to the beginning of the organic idea, the organic meme.

4

At the outset I want to make some acknowledgements & some exclusions.
Rudolf Steiner presented his Agriculture Course in Poland in 1924.
That led on to BioDynamic Agriculture & that predates the term organic.
I want to acknowledge Biodynamic,
but that is not what I am looking at here.

Not...

"ancien régime organic agriculture"

"Permanent Agriculture"

"BioDynamic Agriculture"

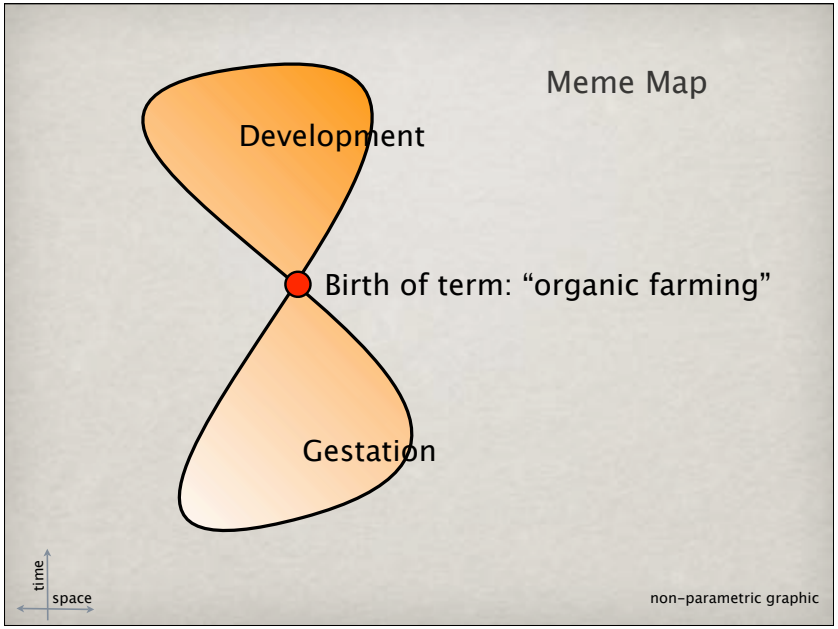
"Permacuture"

"Natural", "Bio", "Biological", "Ecological" etc

Not organic fellow travellers

5

This is a disclaimer.
I'm not looking here at 10,000 years of organic agriculture, what I call ancien regime Organic Agriculture,
& I am not looking at Permanent Agriculture, BD, Permaculture, Natural, Bio, Biological, Ecological, etc.
I am looking at when do we get the term "organic farming",
and then its diffusion, and its uptake,
over time & space.



6

There was a time & place where the term "organic farming" was coined.
SO the first question is where & when was that?
Before the idea was born, what of the gestation of the idea?
& afterwards, what of the development?
These are issues that I've been toying with.
So AFTER we receive the term "organic farming", one question is:
How quickly - or slowly - does it blossom into an association? and where?
& these are questions that I am addressing in this presentation.

US Organic myth...

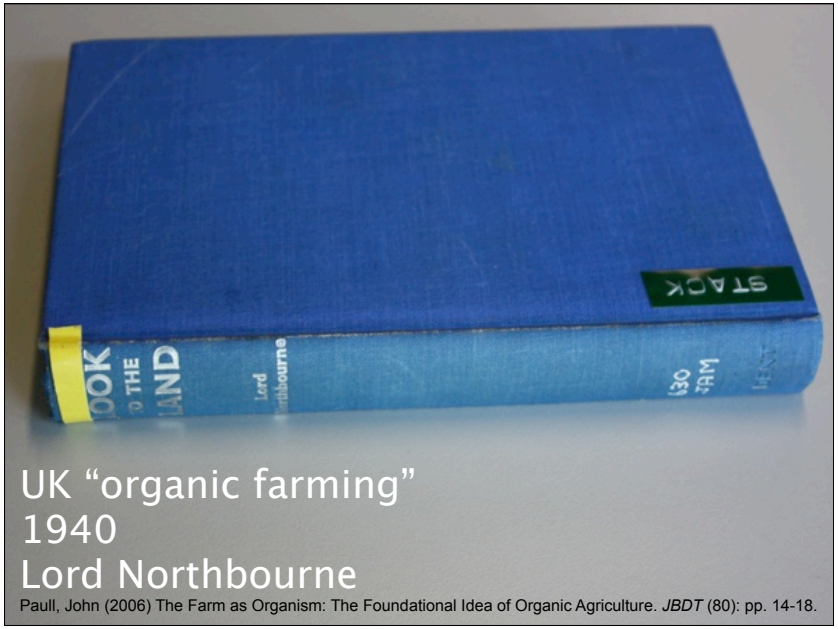
- " ... organic farming, the American publisher J. I. Rodale is responsible for coining ... the defining term in 1942, in his magazine Organic Farming and Gardening"

Silver, L.M., Challenging Nature, 2006, p.230

USA 1942

7

There is an organic myth that the term "organic farming" was coined by an American publisher Jerome Rodale.
Now Rodale made up various things, including the name Rodale,
but he didn't make up the term "organic farming" in 1942 as claimed by Silver,
or in any other year for that matter.



UK "organic farming"
1940
Lord Northbourne

Paull, John (2006) The Farm as Organism: The Foundational Idea of Organic Agriculture. *JBDT* (80): pp. 14-18.

8

My research is that the first occurrence of the term "organic farming"
is in this book "Look to the Land".
It was written in 1939,
and published in 1940,
in London.
The author is Lord Northbourne.
He has received little recognition for his achievement.

Oxford University 1920s

9

Oxford University used to have a school of agriculture,
& it was here that
Lord Northbourne studied & later taught agriculture.

Lord Northbourne
Photo: J. Paull of an original photograph in Wye College Archives

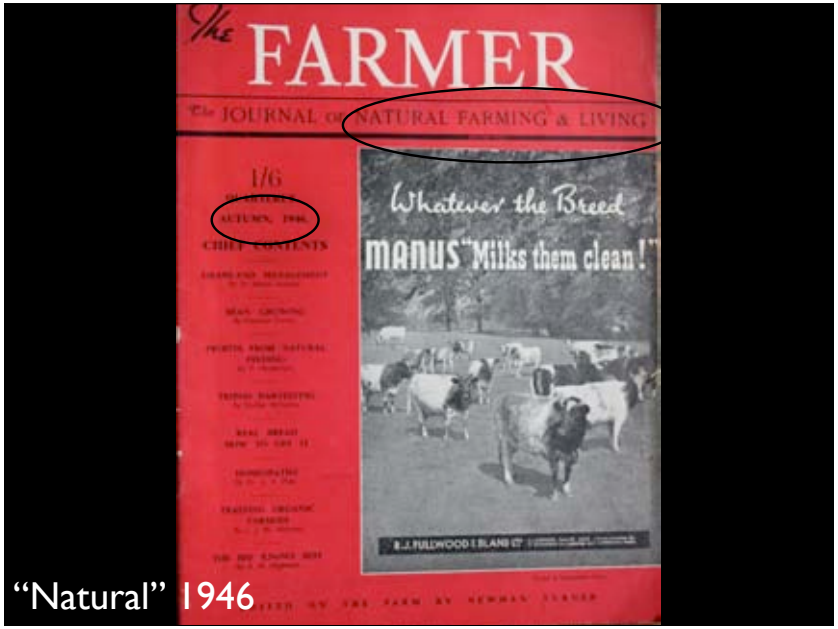
10

This is a photo of Lord Northbourne.
That's him on the far left.
This was 2 decades after publishing Look to the Land.

UK: Soil Association 1946

11

It was from that point in 1940 that the organic idea has diffused through time & space.
Before we get to the FIRST “organic farming” association, let me touch on some context:
The UK’s leading Organic Association is the Soil Association, it was founded in Nov 1946.
2 points:
1. it didn’t choose organic in the name &
2. this was 6 1/2 years after Look to the Land was published.
(Eve Balfour & Albert Howard)



“Natural” 1946

12

Another early player in the UK was Newman Turner.
He was the editor of The Farmer.
You see here that in 1946 he hadn’t yet adopted the organic terminology.

"Organic" 1947

13

Then in 1947 Newman Turner adopted "Organic" into the masthead of the Farmer as you see here.

UK: Henry Doubleday 1958

14

UK's leading organic charity is the Henry Doubleday Research Association (HDRA), and
this year is the 50th anniversary - (Lawrence Hill, 1958)
Once again "organic" wasn't originally in the name & it was 18 years after Look to the Land..
Henry Doubleday only very recently adopted the name Garden Organic.

There is a New Zealand claim that NZ started the first organic farming association.
That claim is based on this chronology:
... maybe the world's first Humic Compost Club was founded in 1941 ...
For its 1st 30 years it was a compost society.
So I think the claim for organic primacy for NZ is equivocal at best,
& is rather an interesting case of of anachro-morphism, ie
reframing some past activity into some present-day terminology.
Now let's get back across the Tasman.

15

For Australia:
There are multiple accounts of the development of Organic agriculture in Australia.
These accounts place the beginning of organics in Australia in the 1980s.
Now I'm going to put to you some evidence that these accounts are mistaken by 4 decades.

16

Aus: Organic Farming Digest 1946

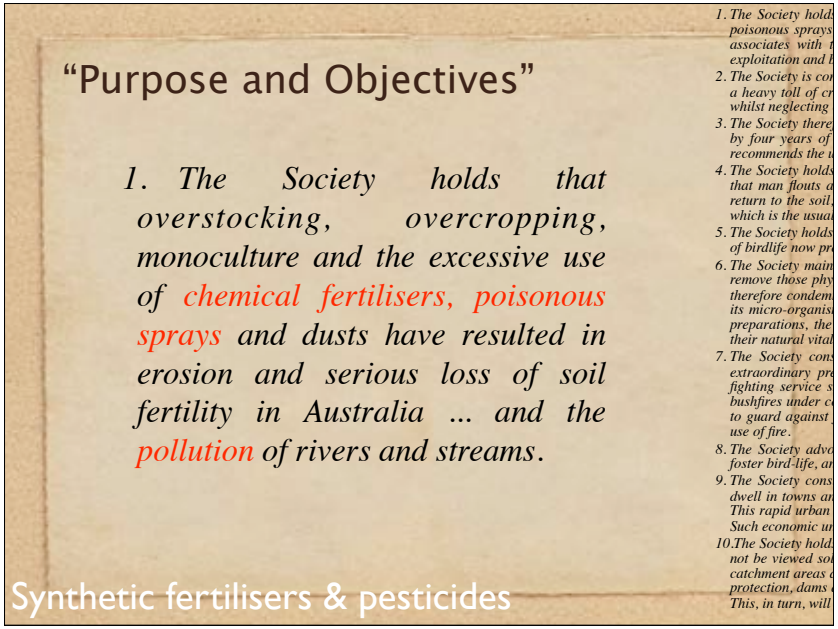
17

Here is an Australian publication from 1946.
The Organic Farming Digest was 1st published in Australia in April 1946.
To put that in context,
The Soil Association in the UK wasn't founded until 7 months later.

Aus 1944

18

It gets more interesting.
The Organic Farming Digest is a journal of
The Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society which
was founded in October 1944
(by way of reference that is > 2 years before the UK Soil Association was founded).



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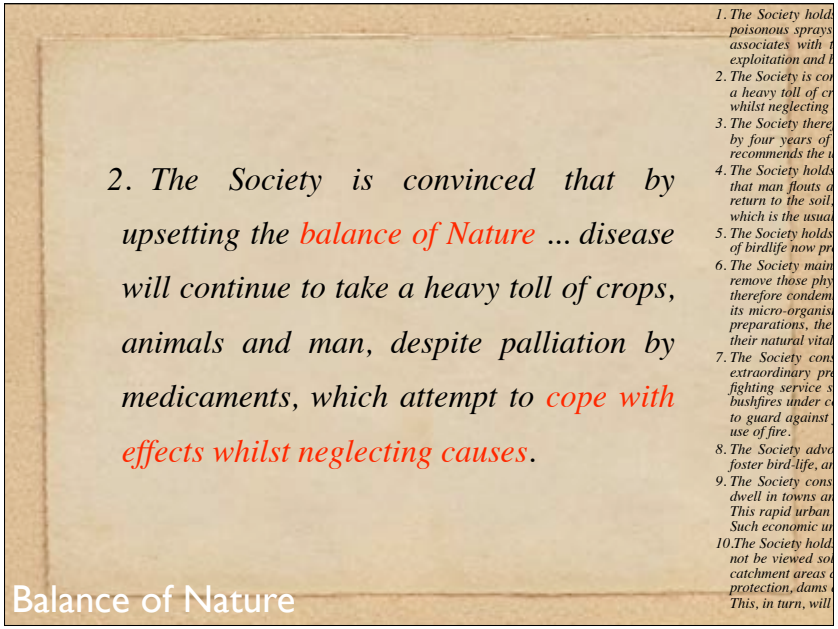
The Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society produced a 10 point statement of Purposes & Objectives.
The present claim is that this is the world's first "organic" farming association & here is the world's 1st institutional statement of organic farming purposes & principles.



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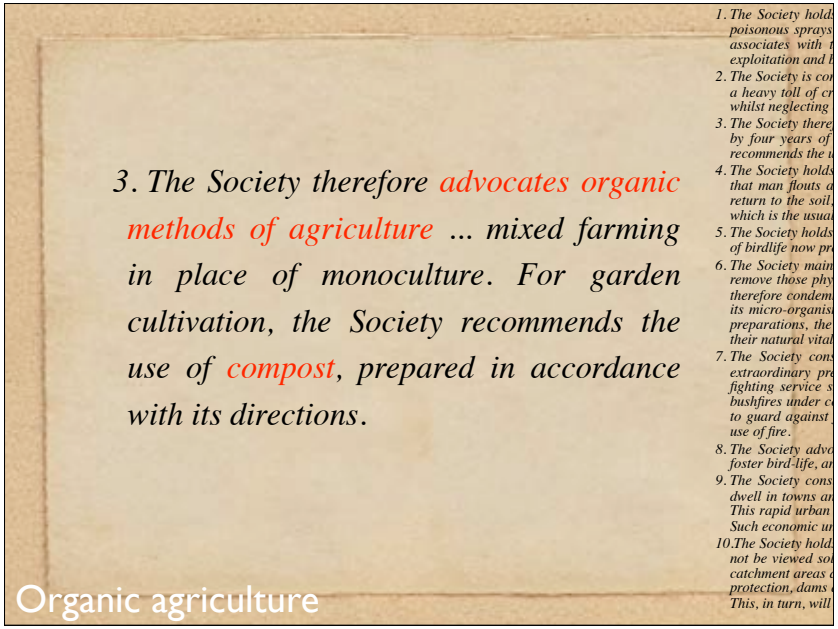
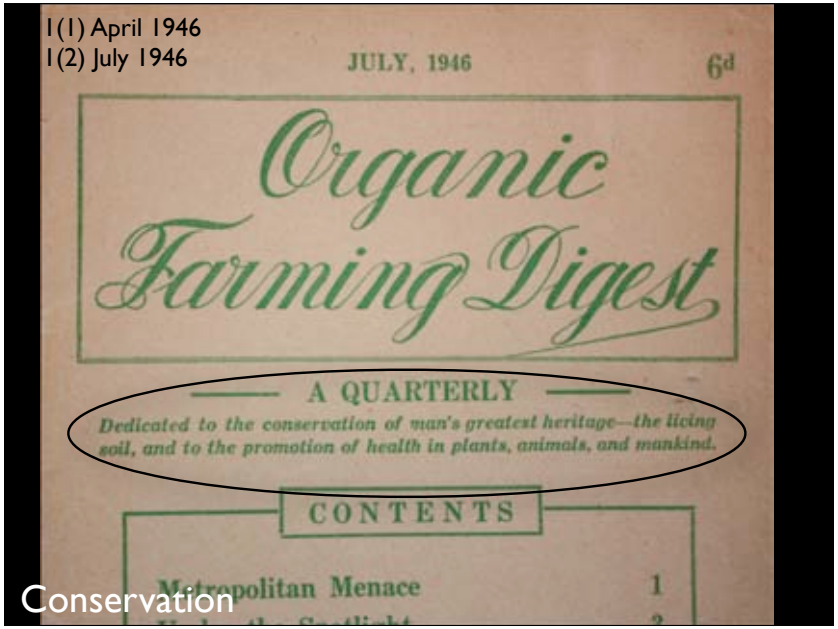
The Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society warned about upsetting the balance of nature & asserted that dealing with effects rather than causes was the wrong approach.



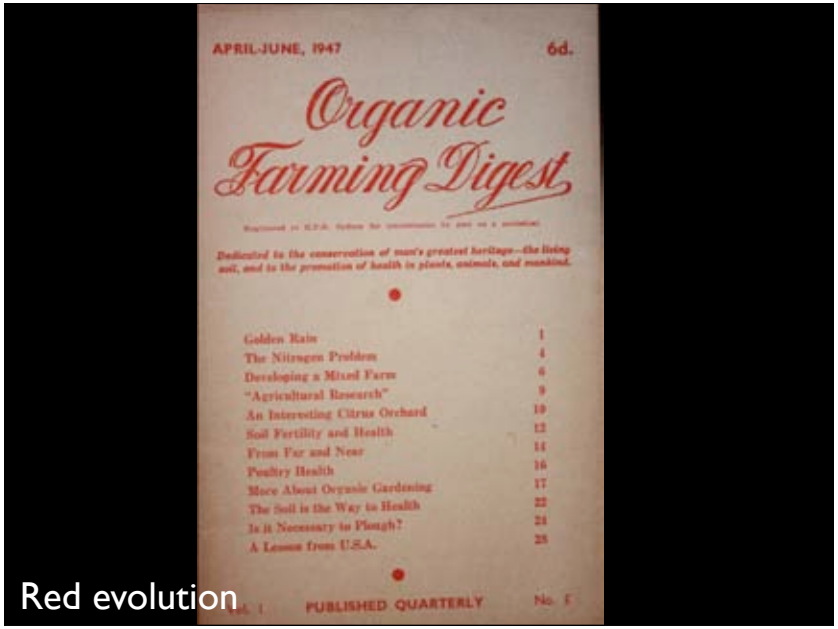
The Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society
very specifically advocated organic methods of agriculture
& that is reflected in their choice of name &
in their statement of principles.

21



The masthead of the Organic Farming Digest
identified that it was dedicated to conservation,
to soil as our greatest heritage,
to soil as a living entity,
and to the promotion of health, of plants, animals & humans.

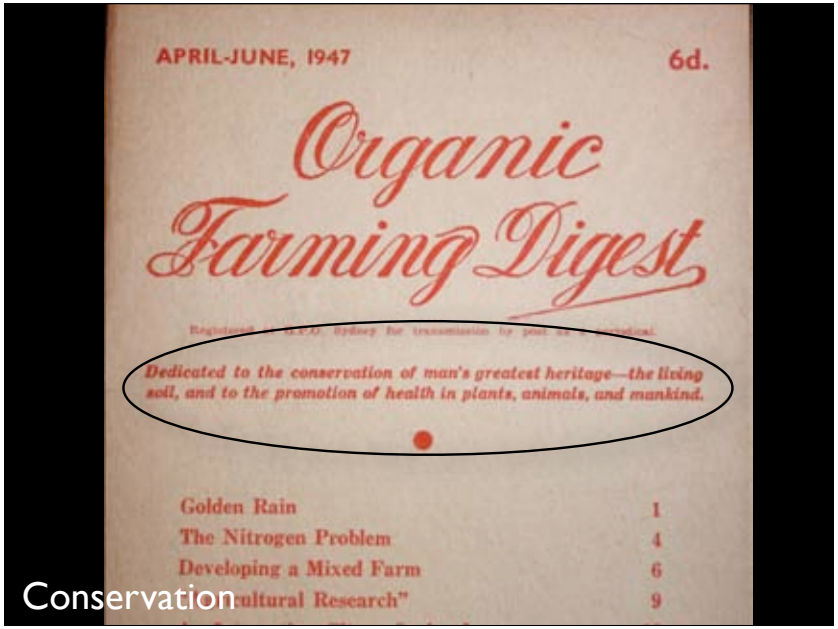
22



Red evolution

23

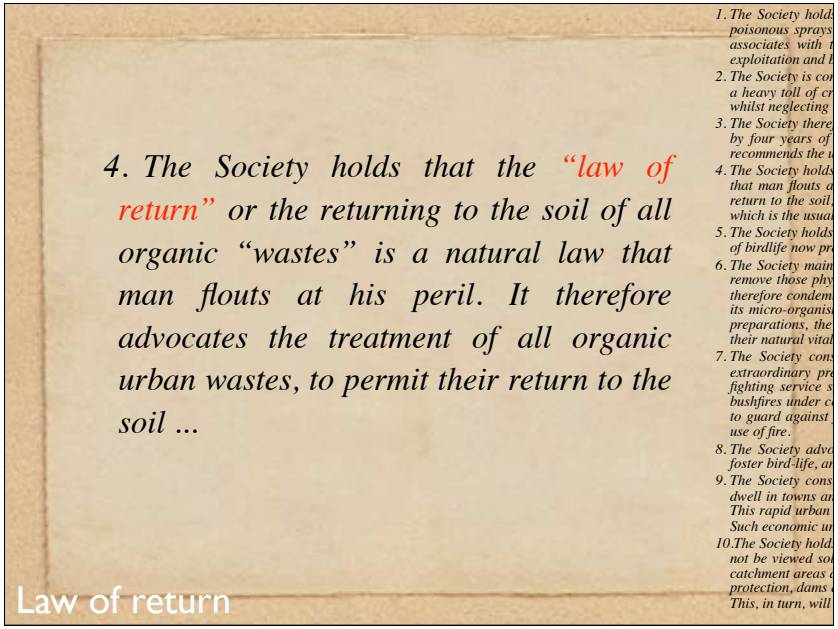
Changing the cover from green to red
was the first of a series of changes
that the Australian Gardening & Farming Society made as they
tinkered with their journal.



Conservation

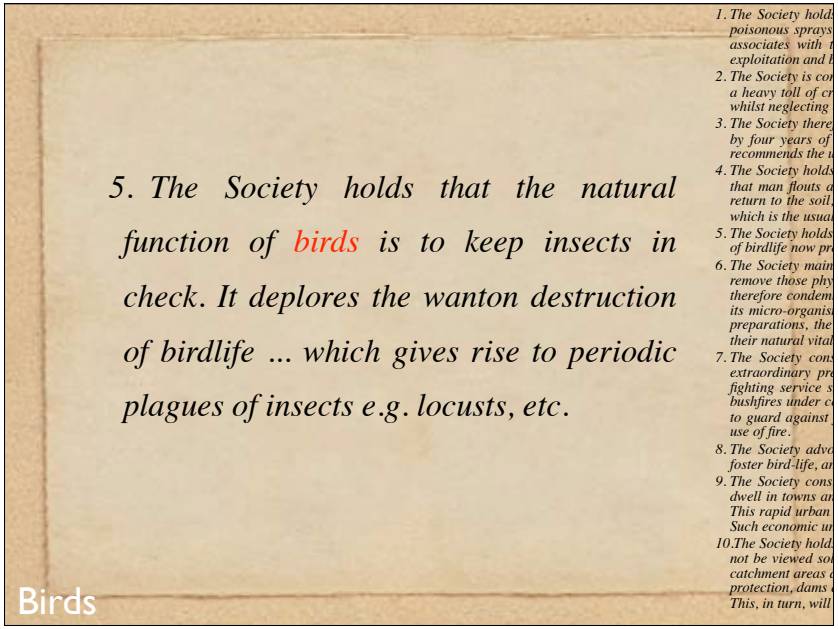
24

The core message of the journal however never changed.



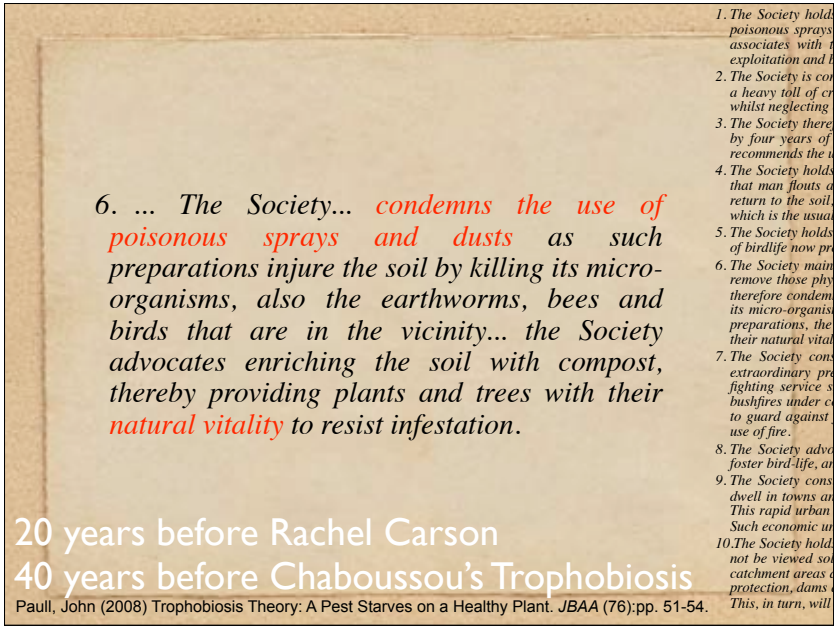
The Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society
advocated the law of return,
& that the soil was not something to be mined.

25



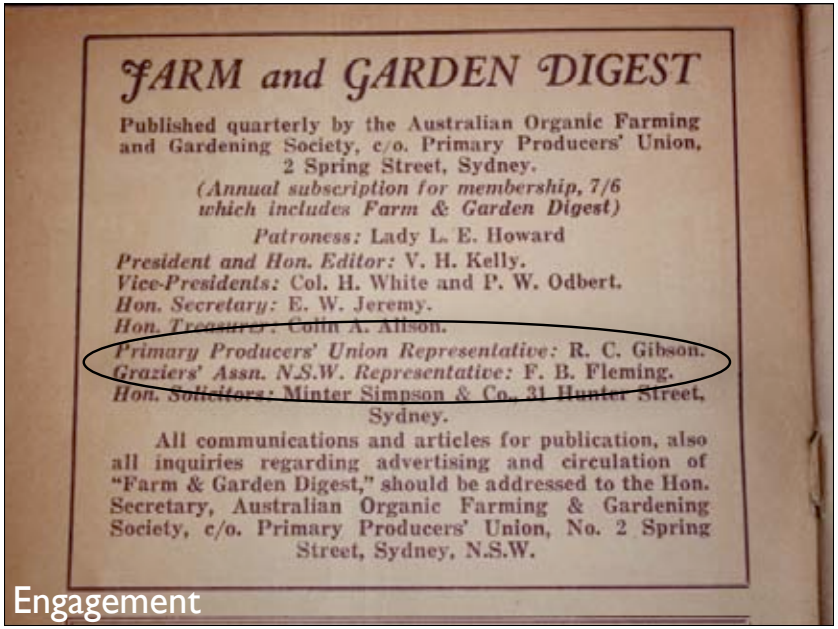
The Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society
also advocated the valuing & protecting of birds;
this is still a cause of conflict between farmers and conservationists.

26



27

The Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society
condemned the use of poisons,
pointing out that they damage the soil, micro-organisms, bees & birds.
This was 20 years before Rachel Carson &
40 years before Francis Chaboussou's Trophobiosis Theory (1985).
Healthy Crops: A New Agricultural Revolution, French National Institute of Agricultural Research (INRA).



28

As you see here the Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society
was engaged with mainstream agriculture including
the Primary Producers Union &
The Graziers Association.

Society, c/o. Primary Producers' Union, No. 2 Spring Street, Sydney, N.S.W.

TO OUR MEMBERS . . .

IMPORTANT—ANNUAL MEETING

The Annual Meeting of the Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society will be held in the Board Room of the Primary Producers' Union, 2 Spring Street, Sydney, at 7.30 p.m. on Wednesday, 7th May, 1952.

Please make an effort to be present. Country members especially welcomed.

TO INVESTORS

AGM

29

Annual General Meetings of the Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society were held in the Board Room of
the Primary Producers Union.

Title evolution

30

In an effort to broaden the appeal of the journal
The Organic Farming Digest was rebadged as the “Farm & Garden Digest”,
The colour of the cover was changed to brown &
a rural graphic was added
& the price doubled.

Conservation

31

With the change of name,
the dedication remained unchanged,

FGD incorporating OFD

32

and the Organic Farming Digest
retained a place as an element on the cover.

Who's Who...

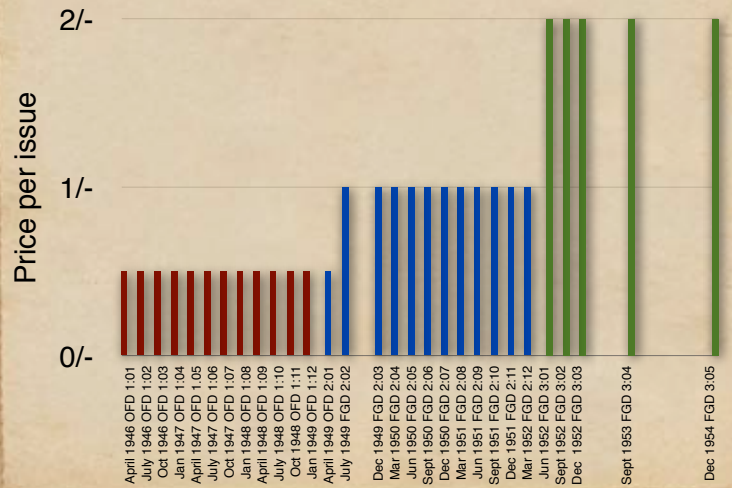
Office	1946 (1:1)	1952 (3:2)
Patron	Sir Albert Howard	Lady L E Howard
President	K H Cox	G M Kilby
Treasurer	H W Atkinson	Colin A Alison
Editor	V H Kelly	*nil;* (C. Chapman, 3:3)
Secretary	E W Jeremy	E W Jeremy
Solicitor	Minter Simpson & Co.	Minter Simpson & Co.
Vice Presidents	*nil*	Col H White & P W Odbert
Primary Producers Union Representative	*nil*	R C Gibson
Graziers Association NSW Representative	*nil*	F B Fleming

Office bearers

33

The patron at the beginning was Albert Howard (in the UK)
and after he died Lady Louise Howard.
Office bearers changed over the years
except for the Secretary, E W Jeremy.

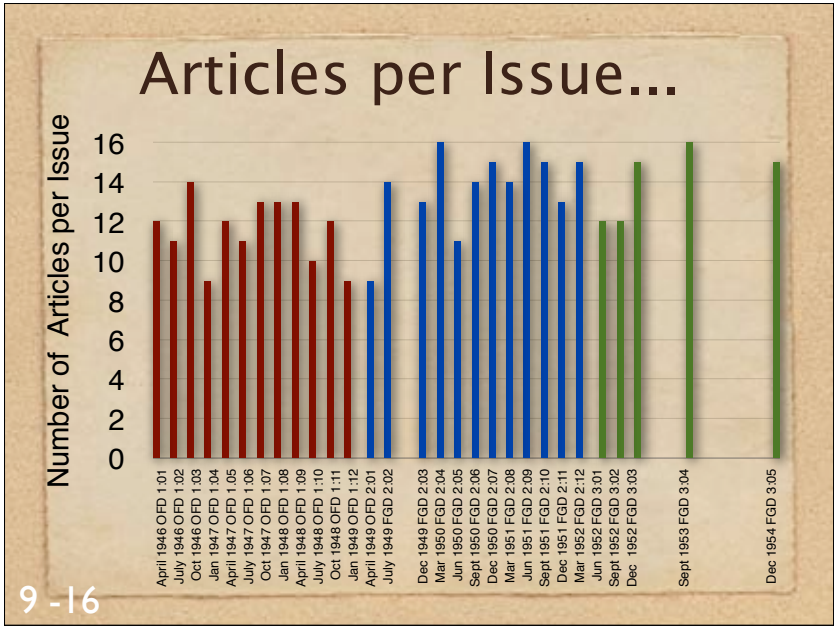
Dates & Prices History...



29 issues; 3 vols, 6d, 1/-, 2/-

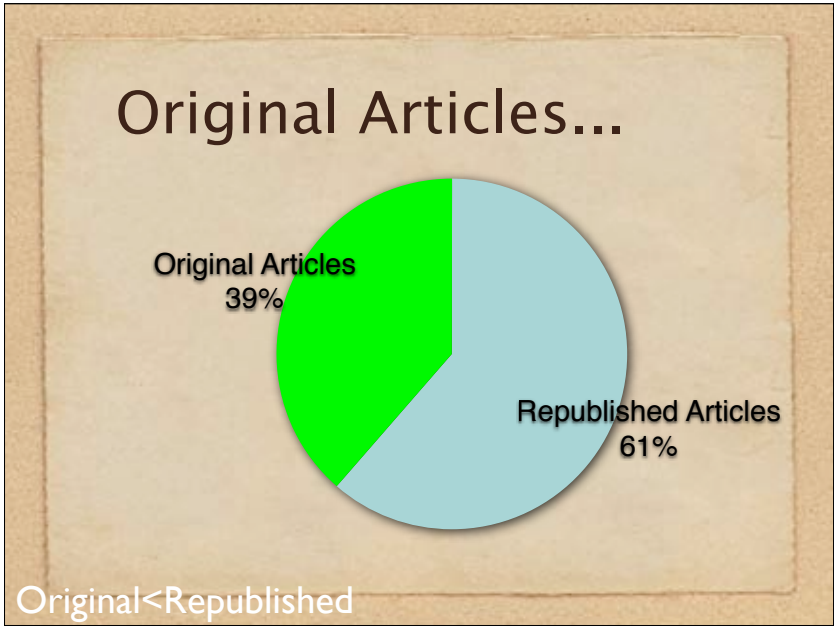
34

The journal was published quarterly & on schedule for the first 7 years.
Then only 1 issue appeared in 1953
& the final issue appeared in Dec 1954.
Over that time the price doubled from 6 pence to 1/-,
and again from 1/- to 2/-.



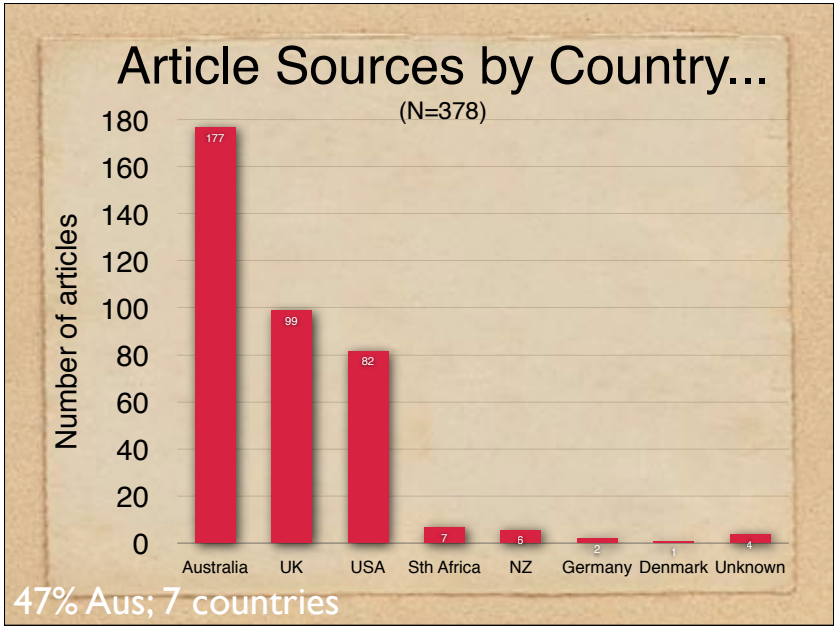
35

The number of articles per issue varied from 9 to 16 articles.
There were 12 issues in volume 1 (shown in brown on the graph),
12 issues in volume 2 (shown in blue here),
and there were 5 issues in Volume 3 (shown here in green).



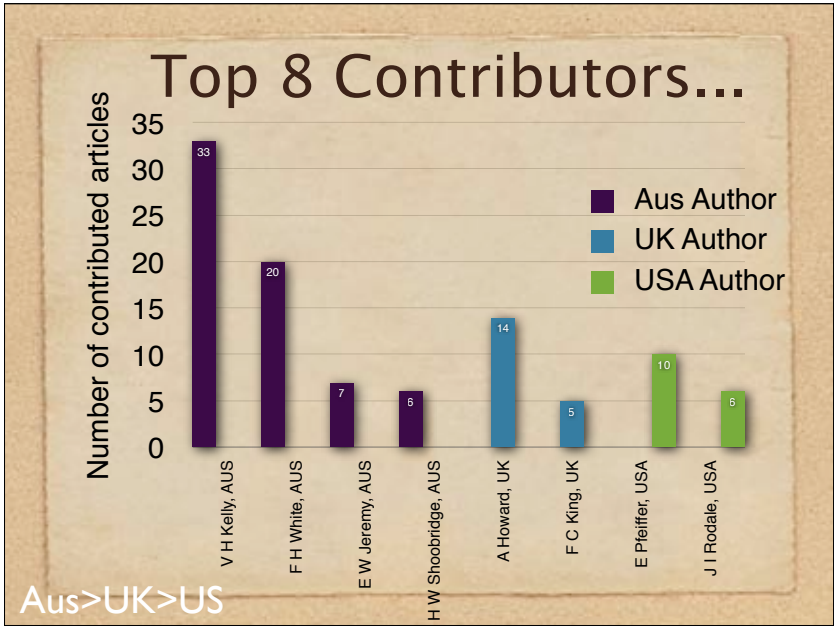
36

39% of articles were original to the journal,
61% were republished from elsewhere.



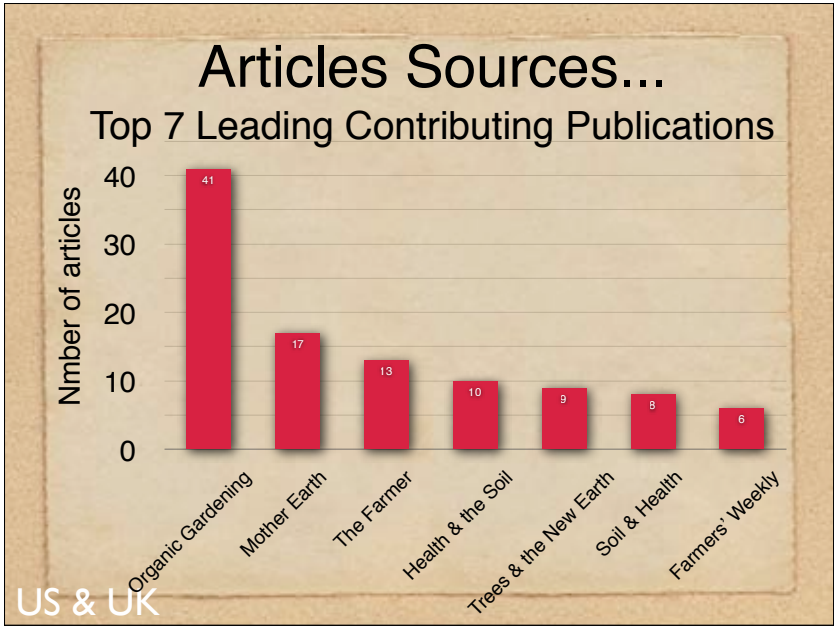
Contributors came from 7 countries,
with nearly 1/2 the contributions coming from Australia, with the
UK in 2nd place &
USA in 3rd place.

37



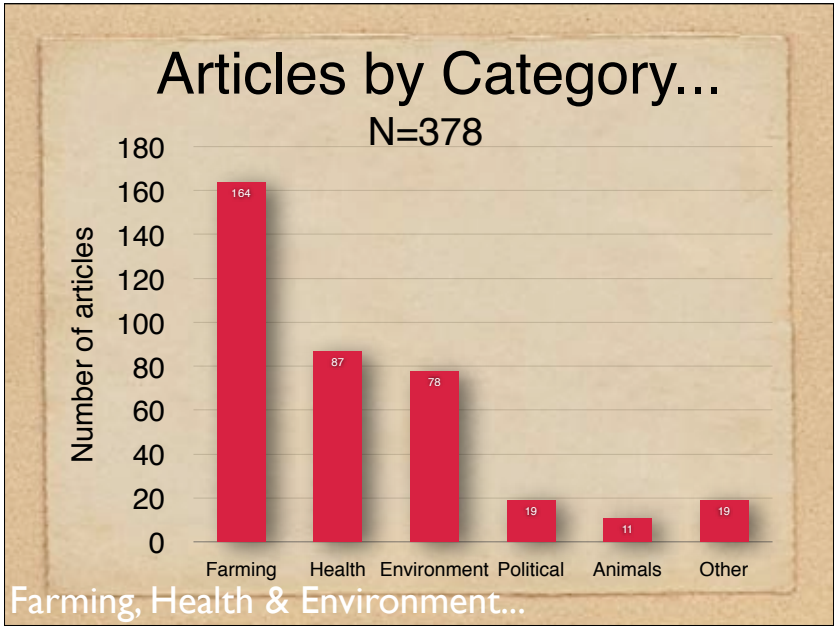
The top 2 contributors were Australian, V H Kelly & Colonel FH White.
The leading UK contributor was Albert Howard &
the leading US contributor was Ehrenfried Pfeiffer.
Pfeiffer was the major proponent, in the English speaking world,
of Biodynamic Agriculture of the time.

38



Reprinted articles in the journal were sourced broadly, mostly from like-minded periodicals in the UK & the US.

39



A great many articles were about practical farming issues, Health & Environment were both prominent article topics.

40

Farm & Garden
DIGEST

VOL. 3. No. 5 DECEMBER 1954 QUARTER

FAREWELL

This is the final issue of "Farm & Garden Digest".

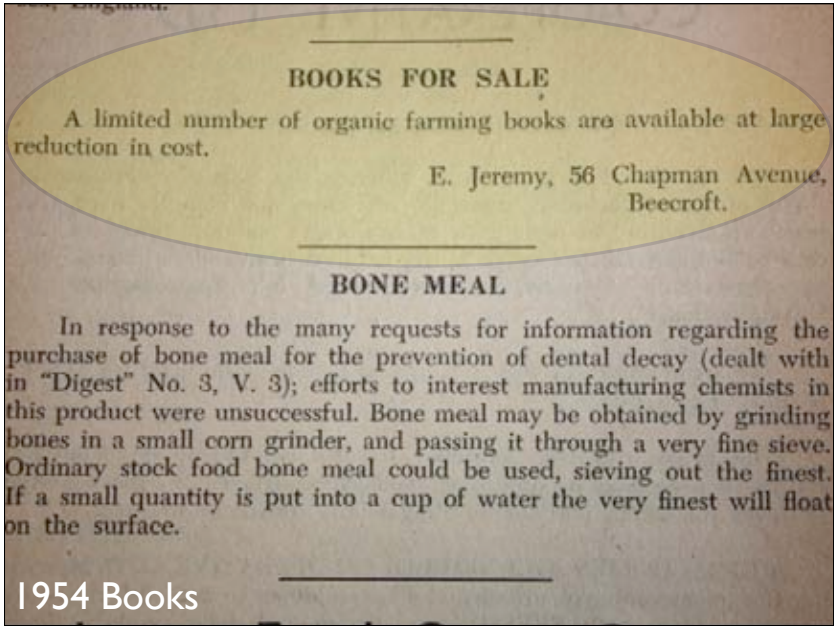
Insufficient financial support has been forthcoming to continue its publication which requires £800 per annum.

Although the termination of this magazine will be regretted by [illegible] there is solace in the fact that it has performed a service in publicising organic farming principles in Australia. The many letters

1954 Farewell

41

The last issue of the Australian Gardening & Farming Society's journal was December 1954.
The reason cited was lack of money.
The Society had at this stage publicised organic farming in Australia for a decade.



[illegible], England.

BOOKS FOR SALE

A limited number of organic farming books are available at large reduction in cost.

E. Jeremy, 56 Chapman Avenue, Beecroft.

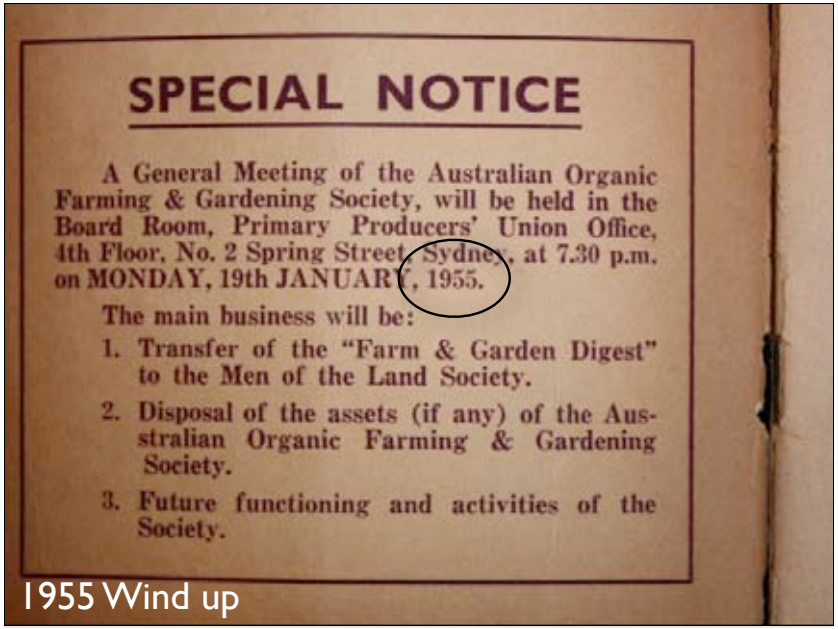
BONE MEAL

In response to the many requests for information regarding the purchase of bone meal for the prevention of dental decay (dealt with in "Digest" No. 3, V. 3); efforts to interest manufacturing chemists in this product were unsuccessful. Bone meal may be obtained by grinding bones in a small corn grinder, and passing it through a very fine sieve. Ordinary stock food bone meal could be used, sieving out the finest. If a small quantity is put into a cup of water the very finest will float on the surface.

1954 Books

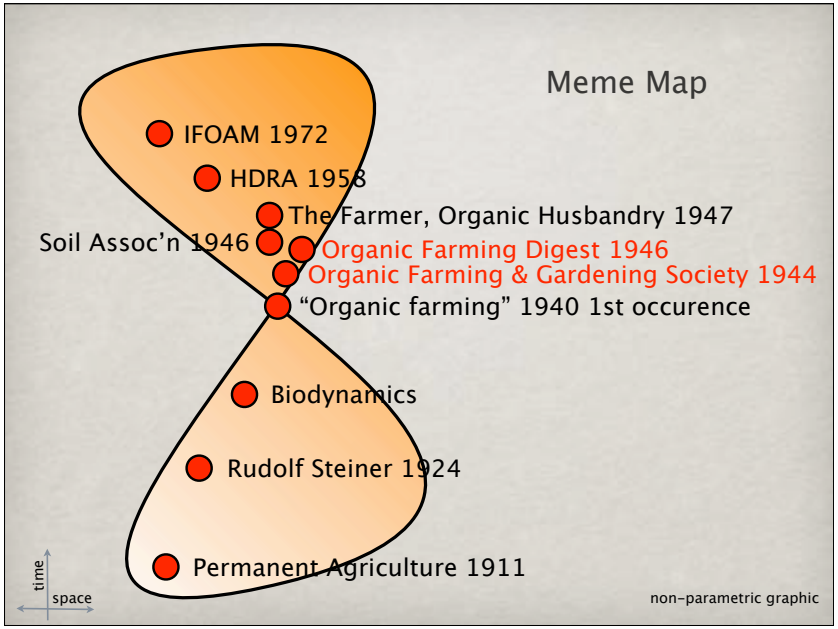
42

The secretary of the Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society advertised organic books for sale,
"at large reduction in cost",
but unfortunately no list of titles or prices appeared in that final edition.



The wind up meeting for the Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society was advertised for the 19th January 1955 -
including the disposal of assets (if any).

43



A Meme Map presents a visual representation of meme events.
Here I have plotted some key organic events, including - in red -
the Organic Farming & Gardening Society & the Organic Farming Digest.
I believe some primacy claims can be made for the Australian society & its journal.

44

The Australian Farming and Gardening Society
(1944 – 1955)

- 1st "organic farming" society in the world
- 1st institutional statement of "organic" principles
- 1st "organic" periodical by an association

Primacy claims

45

The Australian Organic Farming & Gardening Society
1944-1955 has left us this legacy:
it seems it was the 1st "organic farming" society in the world,
it generated the 1st institutional statement of "organic" principles &
it published the 1st "organic" periodical by an association.

46

Thank you.
I'm sure you have some questions.

****

see also:
http://orgprints.org/15089/

Abstract: Readers of narratives of the history of organic farming in Australia will be familiar with such accounts beginning in the "1980s". In questing after the earliest organic farming society, and more particularly in pursuing the spread of the "organic" meme from its 1940 birth in Britain, it was therefore a great surprise to uncover the Australian Organic Faming and Gardening Society (AOFGS) founded in October 1944. This appears to be the world's first "organic farming" association. It also resets the organic clock for Australia back by four decades. Here was an association, pre-dating the UK Soil Association by two years, formed half a world away from the birthplace of "organic", in a country at war, under food rationing, and with its workforce under Manpower regulations. Yet organic farming principles were clearly articulated by this Australian Society, perhaps as clearly articulated as they have ever been, and particularised for Australia. The Society was constrained from publishing a journal due to wartime constraints on paper. The first appearance of the Organic Farming Digest (OFD) was in April 1946. Thereafter, for nearly a decade, the Australian Organic Faming and Gardening Society (AOFGS) regularly published a journal, with the last issue appearing in 1954. This paper explores the Society; its principles; its journals; its people; its interactions with key organic figures of the time including Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Eve Balfour, Albert Howard, and Jerome Rodale; its Australian contributors from five states, including Colonel Harold White and Professor Sir Stanton Hicks; its progress and ultimately its demise in 1955; and touch on how this history became lost.

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