



## Review Article

# A New Incarnation — The Role Of The Organic Growers Association In Changing The Production And Marketing Of Organic Produce

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### Abstract

Although there is a widespread assumption that organic farming developed in response to the intensification of agriculture in the second half of the twentieth century, a number of scholars have sought to show that the origins of the movement date to the 1920s and 1930s. They argue that there is continuity in the development of the organic movement and that the ideals and values of the early organicists are the origin of current organic farming discourse. A detailed history of the organic movement indicates however, that a number of social movements converged to contribute to its development. Particular cultural and socio-demographic changes in the last three decades of the twentieth century produced a new ex-urban organic movement with a new organic discourse. The Organic Growers Association (OGA) played a key role in the revitalisation of the Soil Association and organic agriculture generally in the 1980s and 1990s. Drawing on the personal experiences of the authors, plus analysis of contemporary records, this paper presents an analysis of the OGA and evaluates its legacy. This includes a consideration of recent moves to introduce fair trade principles to the production and marketing of organic produce.

### Keywords

organic farming  
farmers' associations  
social systems  
social impact  
food marketing  
ethical marketing

## 1. Introduction

The debate over the organic movement's origins and development comprises historical accounts, discourse analysis, organisation theory and policy discussion. There is a tendency in many of these approaches to assume a linear continuity in the development of the UK organic farming movement, and, in many cases, a temptation to emphasise the movement's early associations with nationalism, eugenics and fascist tendencies. In this paper we draw on interviews with founder members of the Organic Growers Association (OGA) and we argue that an analysis of the role of the OGA (hitherto neglected in this debate) demonstrates an important change in social recruitment to the organic movement in the 1970s and 1980s associated with wider demographic and cultural changes. Furthermore, we suggest this change has had a lasting effect on devel-

opments in the production and marketing of organic produce and on the discourse of organic farming.

Both authors were members of the OGA throughout its ten-year existence from 1981 to 1991 and both served at different times on the OGA committee and on the editorial committee of its journal, *New Farmer and Grower*. In preparing this paper we contacted 14 founder members of the OGA and conducted a questionnaire survey by email in June and July 2003. We had 10 responses, including 9 fully completed questionnaires.

## 2. The origins of UK organic farming

In the historical approach associated particularly with the work of Conford and Moore-Colyer, the origins of organic farming are to be found in pre-war

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movements in which key individuals developed and articulated a ruralist philosophy which continues to influence the ideological core of contemporary organic farming. In the 1930s' discourse concerns over the decline of farming and rural life are seen as part of a general pre-war preoccupation with socio-economic and political changes especially among fractions of a rural elite. These concerns included problems of soil erosion, declining soil fertility and the dangers of artificial fertilisers and mechanised farming; the failing capacity of the country to feed the population, the poor nutritional quality of food and its affect on health; and the general decay of rural life [1]. Some of the leading figures are identified as Rolf Gardiner, H J Massingham, Viscount Lymington, Lady Eve Balfour, Sir Robert McCarrison, Sir George Stapledon, and Sir Albert Howard. The practical results of the movement were the setting up of the Kinship in Husbandry Group in 1941 and the Soil Association in 1946.

Moore-Colyer has elaborated this theme in a series of biographies of Gardiner (2001, 2003), Massingham (2001), Stapledon (1999) and Jorian Jenks (forthcoming 2003). In his recent discussion of the activities of Gardiner in connection with pre-war youth movements, Moore-Colyer notes that, "*Rolf Gardiner envisaged... a regenerated British countryside wherein mixed, organic farming flourished alongside a vibrant craft culture under the watchful eye of a well-trained and inspirational elite leadership*" (Ref. [2], p. 323). In his essay on the Kinship in Husbandry Movement (as elsewhere), Moore-Colyer suggests that the philosophies of Gardiner and his colleagues may have had a lasting legacy on the contemporary organic movement, to an extent yet to be ascertained — "*The political and cultural philosophies of Lymington, Gardiner and, to a lesser extent, R. G. Stapledon, raise interesting, if at present unanswerable, questions as to their role in more recent developments in the British rural economy: the organic movement, holism and rural regeneration.*" [3]

Whereas Moore-Colyer presents a series of linked biographies, Conford [4] focuses directly on the origins of the organic movement and aims to demonstrate that although organic farming is widely perceived to be a recent development, it has deep philosophical roots that can be traced to the 1920s. He also argues that the organic movement developed within an Anglican context, and that it has a central concept of a 'natural order', which derives from Christian theology. Conford proposes that there is continuity in the development of the organic movement and that the ideals and values of the early organicists are the origin of current organic farming philosophy. In *The Origins of the Organic Movement* [4] he argues that the organic school that developed as part of the wider environmental movement of the 1960s and 1970s was no new departure. He acknowledges that the appearance of Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* was a landmark in the history of the organic movement, but his objective is to show that it was very far from being its inspiration and seeks to link the ideas of the early organicists directly to the new

environmentalists, arguing that, "*...it seems inherently improbable that a well-organized group of energetic, dedicated and fluently articulate propagandists should fade away and have no impact on people concerned with the same issues less than two decades later.*" [4]

Like Conford and Moore-Colyer, Reed [5] notes the role right wing nationalists such as Gardiner *et al* played in the formation of the Soil Association. He contends that the present programme and policies of the organic movement stems from, "*a compost of the past, where the origins of some of the materials have been elided*". Reed argues that without examining the discursive legacy of this group, the actions of the current movement cannot be fully explicated. Whereas Conford and Moore-Colyer indicate the continuity of central organicist ideas from the 1920s and 1930s to the present, Reed, employing discourse analysis, argues that only through a 'forgetting' of some elements of the past has it been possible for the Soil Association to construct a contemporary discourse that embraces environmental and GMO issues. In this analysis, Reed argues that there was a purr or re-arrangement in the internal discourse of the Soil Association which took place while E F Schumacher was president of the Association in the 1960s and 1970s. Schumacher, according to Reed, embarked on a remake of the Association's discourse, grounding organic production in moral rather than scientific terms, "*The re-made organic movement... found ethical standards that bound them to new ethical ways of relating to plants, people and the planet.*" [5]

One problem with historical accounts is that although they acknowledge social and political contexts, they tend to concentrate on individual biographies and the activities of pressure groups in the development of a discourse, whereas organic farming is equally (indeed, *quine sin non*) a material system of agricultural and economic practices. This includes the development of specific systems of crop and livestock production and a marketing infrastructure for the sale and distribution of its products. The continuity of this material history from the 1920s to today and its relationship to the early organic pioneers is more problematic than an account of the history of organic ideas might suggest. Similarly, discourse analysis though identifying the challenge to and transformation of the organic discursive field that occurred in the 1960s and 1970s, tends to confine itself to the contestations and reconstructions that (re)create the organic farming discourse. As we seek to show in our discussion of the Organic Growers Association however, the growth and development of organic farming as a means of production is related to structural changes in late twentieth society. It was through the agency of the OGA that growers new to organic farming effected changes in the production and marketing of organic food. By developing new ideas and practices the OGA also played a key role in the revitalisation of the Soil Association and organic agriculture generally. Idealist historical accounts and discourse analyses have,

we suggest, paid insufficient attention to these changes in structure and agency.

### 3. The role of the Organic Growers Association in changing the production and marketing of organic produce

#### 3.1. The New Agricultural Revolution

Earlier contributors such as Scofield [6] and Merrill [7] as well as Moore-Colyer, Conford and Reed have established that organic farming ideas have a long history. A deconstruction of the movement rather than an attempt to demonstrate its linear development suggests however that late twentieth century socio-demographics produced a new movement with distinctly different social characteristics [9]. Indeed, prior to the new incarnation of organic farming in the 1970s and 1980s, the post war agricultural revolution had almost swept away the old organic farming movement. Pesticides were developed and introduced to agriculture during the Second World War<sup>1</sup>, and after the war a UK government subsidy encouraged the rise in agricultural use of artificial fertilisers which rose to a peak in the mid 1980s. Looking back to the late 1940s and 1950s a former Soil Association member and founder of Organic Farmers and Growers Ltd, wrote,

*“One cannot at all blame the conventional farmer of that time: after having had all sorts of weed and growth problems he was suddenly presented with magical products that killed weeds and kept the crop nice and clean. Such weeds as poppies and charlock ceased to be a nuisance almost overnight. As far as growing heavier crops was concerned, a few bags of the correct fertilizer were all that was needed, instead of handling (often literally, by handfork) tons of manure.”* [10]

In Britain, State aid helped to stabilise the agricultural industry and create conditions for technical progress and increased mechanisation. New artificial fertilisers, fungicides and insecticides along with new seed varieties and machinery helped boost yields to unprecedented levels. In the UK, average annual applications of nitrogen, phosphate and potash (NPK) fertilisers for winter wheat for example, grew from 51 kg/ha in 1944 to 225 kg/ha in 1994 but subsequently fell in response to efforts to reduce environmental effects [11]. Acreages of wheat doubled and barley tripled. A system based primarily on the mixed family farm was replaced by an industrialised agriculture fuelled by cereal production. Guy Robinson has described the example of Sun Valley Poultry, a Herefordshire company formed in the early 1960s to supply the expanding poultry meat market. By the mid 1970s, the company was supplying more than 100,000 chickens and turkeys a week to their main customer, Marks and Spencer,

alone. By the mid 1980s, as Sun Valley set up their own hatchery, feed mill and poultry growing units 100 local farms were participating in the co-operative supplying over 12,000 tonnes of cereals towards the feed requirements of 25 million chickens and 1.5 million turkeys [12].

This revolution in the mode of agricultural production was accompanied by social and environmental changes. Negative impacts on landscapes and ecosystems included degradation of water quality and soil stability, while social impacts included the breakdown of traditional agricultural communities [13,14]. The ecological damage of new farming methods was highlighted by Rachel Carson [15] who drew attention to the effects of pesticides on wildlife while Paul Ehrlich [16] dramatised the ‘population, resources, environment crisis’ and claimed that the human race was not only running out of food but destroying the life-support systems of the Spaceship Earth. This wide concern for the environment led to the founding of Friends of the Earth in 1969 (USA) and 1970 (United Kingdom) [17]. In 1987, The Brundtland report [18], recommended an international approach to sustainable development that should integrate economics and ecology. These issues were important precursors to the wider debate on the state of the global environment at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992.

Alongside this environmentalist reaction to the effects of the new agricultural revolution in rural areas, another movement was occurring in urban areas which took the cultural and demographic form which became known as counter-urbanism.

#### 3.2. Counter-urbanism and the new organic farming

During the nineteenth and much of the twentieth century most geographical mobility was associated with urbanisation. As the twentieth century progressed however, remote areas became increasingly rural as employment in agriculture fell; bus and train routes were cut, village shops closed and young people drifted away in an ever-increasing spiral of decline. In the 1970s however, first in America, but then also in Europe and Australia, geographers noticed signs of a paradox: against all forecasts and despite the structural problems, indications of a reversal in the long trend to depopulation of rural areas were appearing [19–21]. As the reversal came mainly from a movement of population from city to country, it was described as a ‘population turnaround’: a counter-urban movement with ‘ex-urbanites’ making a clean break with the city, migrating beyond the commuter belt to live and work in the countryside [12]. In rural Wales for example, which by almost any criteria is one of the most rural and peripheral regions of Britain, and one where, until the 1970s, population decline was thought irreversible, there were population gains in every rural district [22]. As a new ‘Green’ environmental counter-culture emerged the attractions of country living were, for some new migrants, outweighing the negative aspects of rural decline.

<sup>1</sup> On the relationship between increased wartime production of high explosives and the development of nitrogenous fertilisers see Conford [4] p.40 and on the development of post war markets by the munitions industry see Merrill [7] p.195.



The 1970s represent a particular moment in a period of structural change. For many economic historians the '70s marks the end of the post-war UK 'golden age of capitalism' which had seen growth averaging 2.5 percent per year and the economy operating at times close to full (male) employment [23]. With jobs, the health, education and welfare systems all apparently secure, changes in the balance of power in employment had lifted wages to unprecedented levels. Affluence and security created a culture of confidence in which many who decided to migrate from the city knew that the relatively easy availability of unemployment and social security benefits would provide a financial cushion if they arrived in the countryside without employment.

Counter-urbanisation and the new environmental movement thus fused in the phenomenon of ex-urban migrants setting up organic farming and gardening enterprises in rural areas. Its inspiration came from disparate sources. In America, for example, although the hippie movement was primarily urban, it embraced values of native American tribal culture, and in the late 1960s communities of Diggers were moving from San Francisco to set up communes in the Big Sur. Also on the west coast at the Santa Cruz campus of the University of California, the founders of the student Garden Project and the Whole Earth Restaurant were committed to organic horticulture, better nutrition and food preparation. They saw themselves as part of a new movement that grew out of the controversies over chemical sprays, technological foods and 'instant foods', a movement that represented "a rebirth of wholesome American farm cooking rather than an indulgence in health food faddism" [24]. Both in the USA and in Europe, diet and health became, for some at least, part of the Cultural Revolution. Symptomatically, Cranks, one of the first and most successful restaurants consciously to link diet and health and explicitly to use wholefoods and organically grown vegetables, opened in London's Carnaby Street in 1961 [25].

The increasing interest in 'naturally' or 'compost grown' vegetables was stimulated by the work of Lawrence D Hills who founded The Henry Doubleday Research Association (HDRA) in 1954, naming it after the Essex Quaker, Henry Doubleday (1813 - 1902) who introduced comfrey to Britain in the 1870s [26]. Through the early work of the HDRA and the success of his books, notably, *Grow Your Own Fruit and Vegetables* [27], Hills inspired many of the new vegetable grower entrants to the organic movement. *Grow Your Own Fruit and Vegetables* is notable as a gardening text not only for its enthusiastic instructions on methods of composting, cultivations and weed, pest and disease control, but also its stress upon the flavour and nutritional value of produce grown without artificial fertilisers and pesticides. In this work Hills also identified fruit and vegetable varieties that can be grown in the garden and allotment but are unsuitable for large-scale production and therefore increasingly unavailable commercially, a theme he later developed in respect of potato varieties [26]. These early concerns led to the HDRA's

subsequent work on the conservation of genetic resources, and the preservation of vegetable varieties in the Heritage Seed Library at Ryton Organic Gardens [28]. Also a member of the Soil Association, Hills was influential in the development of the first Soil Association standards in the late 1960s [29].

Most of the early research on ex-urban population shifts was undertaken at the regional or sub-regional level [30]. Only where studies have been undertaken at the local level has it been possible to see the socio-economic details of counter-urbanisation and to investigate the motives of the migrants involved. In Wales for example, the effect of migration upon Welsh society and culture has been a sensitive socio-political issue for several decades [31]. Day [22] identified ex-urban newcomers as one key segment of the incoming population.

*"These are the people who have sought out rural areas as a conscious alternative to modern urban existence. They value the countryside for its 'environmental' features, which means essentially the physical setting – openness, space, greenness, associated in turn with safety, freedom, peace and quiet... among such people, it is common to find quite high educational qualifications, and a background in non-manual, even professional and managerial occupation, which they may now denigrate as part of an urban rat race... they may represent quite profound cultural forces which underlie patterns of 'counter-urbanization', and which will continue to influence behaviour for many years ahead."* [22]

Day concludes his discussion with the observation that the examination of broad statistics "is no substitute for a closer study of the way these processes work themselves out 'on the ground'. Sadly nothing has been done to generate the kind of 'case study' material (of incomers settling in rural Wales) that would flesh out the general arguments." [22]

This remains substantially true and there are few studies examining the activities of ex-urbanites and the new organic growers of the 1970s and 80s. There have, however, been a number of studies of part-time farming and, in Wales, Aitchison and Aubrey identified one cluster of new entrants from the non-farm sector as a group who, "show a more practical commercial interest in agriculture, so much so that many identify themselves as aspiring full-time farmers." [32]. Furthermore, there are also a number of contemporary accounts, that, taken together, provide some evidence of the counter-urban / organic farming relationship in rural Wales [33–37]. To this can be added many magazine profiles of the new generation of organic farmers and especially growers that were published in *New Farmer and Grower*<sup>1</sup>, *Living Earth*<sup>2</sup>, *Grower*, and screened in the TV series *All*

<sup>1</sup> See in particular, the reports of farm walks and visits written by Charles Wachter, first Secretary of the Organic Growers Association, for example, *South West Review* [40].

<sup>2</sup> See for example, profiles of Peter Segger first chairman of OGA by John Humphrys in *Living Earth* [41] and Chris Mair in *New Farmer and Grower* [42].

*Muck and Magic* [38]. Taken together the evidence is of a new organic group with distinct class and cultural differences from the early organicists. As the new group had largely come of age in the cultural maelstrom of the 1960s, the portmanteau term 'sixties people' is a valid typification. Where the ex-urbanites were smallholders or organic vegetable growers they found inspiration in the popular writings of Lawrence D Hills and John Seymour. Their politically radical and socially permissive values were forged in the Cultural Revolution of the 1960s, in marked contrast to the elitist 1930s' conservatism of Viscount Lymington, Rolf Gardiner, H. J. Massingham and co. While it may be true that, to some extent, the origins of the philosophy of organic farming can be traced to the Kinship in Husbandry movement *etc*, it is open to question whether this largely upper class group with its penchant for nationalism and eugenics would have had any relevance to modern food production had it not been for the stimulus given to it by the counter-urban movement and the new environmentalism.

Although the new organic farming and growing took place in geographically rural areas, socially it was essentially an (ex) urban phenomenon. The subsequent global growth in the market for organic produce has also been primarily urban, and the convergence of interests between organic producers and urban consumers has reflected shared cosmopolitan values. Some of these cosmopolitan values and their mode of expression include concern for animal rights/vegetarianism<sup>1</sup>, concern over the loss of wildlife and habitats/environmentalism, and concern over the exploitation of Third World food producers/Fair Trade.

This convergence of values between organic producers - particularly organic growers - and metropolitans is in contrast to the alienation of the traditional rural community from the urban majority. This estrangement is reflected on one hand by events such as the Countryside Alliance marches and the fox hunting issue, and on the other by the demonstrations against live export of animals in the 1990s which continued until the effective end of live exports brought about by BSE and the Foot and Mouth epidemic. Such estrangement and antagonism may account in part for the lack of response by the majority of the rural farming community to the urban demand for organic produce.

### 3.3. The role of the Organic Growers Association

It was the response to intensive chemical methods and the new environmentalism that revitalised debates about food and farming in the 1970s and 1980s. Ex-urbanite organic growers played a crucial role. The growers who set up the Organic Growers Association (OGA) in 1981 produced a series of initiatives, which eventually reinvigorated the Soil Association, an organisation they felt at the time

<sup>1</sup> For a relevant discussion of animal rights and the philosophy of vegetarianism see for example, Peter Singer *Writings on an Ethical Life* [43].

unable fully to meet the needs of new organic producers.<sup>2</sup> It also provoked a further splinter organisation, British Organic Farmers (BOF) to establish separately from the Soil Association in 1982.

The founder members of the OGA group were, by and large, new to any kind of farming and, in most cases, also new to the countryside. As Lampkin noted in 1990,

*"...many of the people who started farming organically in the 1960s and '70s were newcomers to farming and faced many of the problems which any newcomer would face, let alone those trying to produce organically. But those early pioneers now have a wealth of experience and many are as hardheaded as any commercial farmer trying to make a go of things."* [39]

When, in 2003, we asked founder members of the OGA to recall whether they had been involved in horticulture before becoming an organic grower in the 1970/80s, two of the ten who responded replied that they had prior horticultural experience. The other eight had a variety of jobs and backgrounds and all had decided to look for farms to buy or rent after becoming interested in organic growing. Seven out of the ten had been members of the HDRA, six had also joined the Soil Association and one had been involved with the Biodynamic Gardening Association. When we asked about the reasons for becoming an organic grower, the work of Rachel Carson (*Silent Spring*), John Seymour (*Fat of the Land*), Lawrence Hills (*Grow your Own Fruit and Vegetables*), Craig Samms (*Seeds of Change*), Robert Hourrier (*Getting Back Together*) and Charles Reich (*Greening of America*) were all cited as influences, especially Rachel Carson. "Awareness of what you eat," "Environmental pressure of conventional farming methods" and "Unacceptable livestock management" were among the other reasons listed.

One newcomer to farming and growing decided to study horticulture at a nearby college. His "*...interest in organic production was reinforced by the discovery of the massive applications of pesticides to crops by conventional growers when I started the NCH at Pershore.*" Another respondent who left school at sixteen to become a carpenter eventually moved to the countryside and worked on a 500-acre dairy farm.

"During this time, early seventies" he recalls, "*I started to explore organic farming. I had read 'Silent Spring' and this was a major influence on me. As I have since discovered a lot of organic people in the UK had also read this book at around the same time and saw it as a major influence. I had always known there was something wrong with the system of agriculture here, I could see it in the soil and the health of the ani-*

<sup>2</sup> This process was not completely harmonious. According to the first editor of *New Farmer and Grower*, "At a time when many felt the Soil Association had lost its way... 'young bloods' joined and provoked ...'a rather bloody revolution'". [42]

*mals. Eventually I had to get out of conventional agriculture and get something going on my own*".

It is clear also from articles in the OGA Newsletter that the group appreciated that they were new to farming and growing but determined to introduce new initiatives. As the first chairman of OGA wrote in 1981,

"No sociological or technological change develops from within the existing patterns but in spite of them, which is precisely why we have so few large scale, demonstrably successful and long-standing organic horticultural units. Indeed, we must be proud the majority of us are relative newcomers, confident that we shall refine our techniques and determined that we shall succeed!" (Ref. [44], p.1)

This determination was to be maintained even if it might upset more traditional organicists within the Soil Association. As the OGA chairman continued in the following year,

"..it should be clearly stated that there is absolutely no contradiction whatsoever between developing the practical and efficient aspects of organic growing and marketing and the underlying philosophy and values which initiated the movement in the first place." (Ref. [45], p 2.)

We asked our respondents whether, given that the Soil Association already existed, why it had been necessary to set up OGA. The strong theme in their answers was that the Soil Association at that time was a farmer orientated charity that was not addressing the technical issues faced by producers in general and growers in particular. The attitudes to the Soil Association (SA) were mixed. Some of our respondents argued that they saw OGA "as a short term concept," one which "developed a new direction and focus for the SA"; others felt that there was a need for a new more radical organisation because the Soil Association was out of touch and unrepresentative of the new generation of organic growers. As one respondent put it, "The SA were stuck in a time warp, had almost no credibility in agricultural circles and comprised predominantly of aging landed gentry with ample reserves of capital."<sup>1</sup>

In a similar vein another former grower replied, "The Soil Association had been managed by an earlier generation who had become accustomed to being in a fringe organisation with little influence and certainly little interest in developing the market for organic products. The OGA brought together a new generation of organic growers and farmers with the enthusiasm and drive to make a commercial success of organic production." This respondent also linked the ex-urban character of the new growers directly to their effect on the organic movement. He articulated

<sup>1</sup> Other organic producers have seen Lady Eve Balfour and her associates in the Soil Association as upper class eccentrics harmlessly acceptable to the British establishment whose aberrant agricultural views so lacked a comprehensive philosophy they condemned organic farming to a marginal role for decades [46].

the key theme of this paper: "Those individuals who established the OGA were part of an urban/social movement back to the land and, in addition to their newly found skills of organic production were able [to] bring their other skills in areas such as marketing, media, publishing, and charity funding to the sector in general and the SA in particular."

When we asked the OGA founder members for their recollections of the SA reaction to the setting up of the OGA, most felt that the reaction was defensive. For some this was a reflection on the situation in the Soil Association at the time, where the staff "had no real focus, were overworked, underpaid and did not understand nor could cater for the emerging pioneers of the organic growing community that had commercial interests at heart". Others recalled the OGA being seen as a threat. As one remarked, "My impression was that they saw the OGA as a threat to their very existence. I was not aware of the politics at that time but there was a distinct feeling that SA wanted OGA to take a submissive role in the Organic Movement." Another said that, "the Council at that time were not in any way inclined to look favourably upon these 'young people' who were being so demanding" and she clearly remembered "the agriculture advisor of the SA trying to persuade us to work with them rather than, as they perceived it, against them". The first chairman of the OGA drew a distinction, however between the SA Council who were supportive and the executive staff who were less positive. As he recalled, "The Council was totally positive: the Executive less so but that was precisely the point. Eve Balfour was enthusiastic and agreed to a loan of a few hundred pounds for the first conference at Cirencester. This was immediately re-paid from profits of the conference." In the SA's Quarterly Review, the reaction to the setting up of the OGA in 1981, reflected these strains.

"The organisation came into existence because the needs of that time dictated this particular form of expression as a response; we may be bold enough to think that its survival for 35 years is evidence of the continuing need for its existence. Indeed we might even be forgiven for believing that our existence as a body is inevitable whilst reductionism and divisiveness seem to prevail so largely around us. It is in that belief that the SA must go forward, being mindful at the same time that it has no special protection from the forces of disruption and chaos, and that these energies, so clearly active outside the organisation, might equally manifest themselves within."

### 3.4. The work of the OGA

The OGA was established after the first of what became a series of successful Organic Conferences at the Royal Agriculture College, Cirencester<sup>2</sup>. The group also started a series of farm walks and practical workshops, which facilitated the transfer of

<sup>2</sup> 'Just under 200' people came to the first OGA conference in January 1981. 150 came to the second conference in 1983. Twenty years later, approximately 600 delegates attended the millennium conference - maximum capacity for RAC, Cirencester.



**Table 1.** Main achievements and legacy of the Organic Growers Association.

	Main OGA achievements	OGA legacy
Social	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• sense of identity among growers</li> <li>• body of growers working together sharing best practice</li> <li>• self-funding for R &amp; D etc</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• the modern Soil Association</li> <li>• the impulse for growers to look after themselves because the farmers never will</li> </ul>
Technical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• development of commercial organic production</li> <li>• solving key technical problems</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• novel approaches to organic problems that have spun off into conventional farming systems</li> <li>• SA Producer Services/technology transfer</li> <li>• current level of organic production</li> </ul>
Marketing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• creating a premium market for organic produce</li> <li>• professionalism by raising standards of production and introducing dedicated packaging</li> <li>• improving the image of organic produce</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• organic marketing in all its forms</li> <li>• SASS (Organic packaging)</li> <li>• vegetable box schemes</li> <li>• national infrastructure for the development of the organic market</li> </ul>
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• changing organic standards</li> <li>• realistic time frames for implementing new standards</li> <li>• influencing first UK standards (UKROFS)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• modern organic horticultural standards</li> <li>• current system of SA standards committees</li> </ul>
Publications	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>New Farmer and Grower Organic Products Directory</i> (first of its kind in 1982)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <i>New Farmer and Grower / Organic Farming</i></li> </ul>
Events	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cirencester Conference</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• annual conferences</li> <li>• farm walks programme</li> </ul>
Wider issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• thinking outside the box</li> <li>• encouraging a better way of farming but also generating some changes in the world as a result</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• fresh produce is the largest part of the organic market – the key entry point for consumers</li> </ul>

experience and ideas. This initiative subsequently developed into a network of organic demonstration farms and a calendar of producer events and technical seminars. The OGA also set up a subsidiary company to supply dedicated packaging for organic products to assist in the branding of organic produce in the marketplace. Also in the early 1980s, the OGA launched a newsletter which later became a regular magazine for organic producers (*New Farmer and Grower*, now *Organic Farming*) which rather eclipsed the Soil Association's own publication *Living Earth* (formerly *Mother Earth*).

Members of the OGA established a series of marketing co-operatives in the 1980s and 1990s, in Cornwall, Devon, East Anglia, Herefordshire and Wales. Though many of these were comparatively short-lived they contributed to the creation of a marketing structure for organic fresh produce. From small beginnings in the 1980s, when organic carrots from West Wales were first marketed through supermarkets, a significant trade with multiple retailers was established. One day in 1990, for example, The MD of Organic Farm Foods – set up in 1987 - watched 'with pride and some disbelief' as ten articulated lorries from Hungary, France, Spain, Holland, Hereford and Somerset brought certified organic produce to the company's packhouse in Lampeter [42]. Organic growers also pioneered direct marketing and several set up successful 'box schemes', drawing on experience from Japan where they originated and typically developing the concept and sharing their experience with new entrants to growing and marketing. In 2003, fruit and vegetables still dominate UK organic retail sales, accounting for some 40 per cent of the annual £1 billion organic market.

We asked OGA founders to suggest the organisation's main achievements and its legacy. The responses were numerous and we have grouped them into seven categories – social, technical, marketing, standards, publications, events and wider issues.

The first Treasurer of OGA, who later ran the successful Hereford-based Organic Marketing Company, was clear the legacy of OGA is very far-reaching. "The legacy is the infrastructure in so many organic and non-organic bodies that now treat organic production as a commercially viable aspect of the Nations' agricultural and horticultural sector. It is also in the fact that "conventional" agriculture is generally much less dependent on chemical input than it was - this would not have been achieved without the groundswell of public, political and press pressure that grew out of the issues that OGA (and others) raised."

### 3.5. The re-absorption of the OGA

The arrival of national and EU legislation in the late 1980s and early 1990s defined organic production and processing systems and required the annual inspection and certification of all organic producers and processors. Unusually, responsibility for implementing the statutory regulations lay with non-governmental organisations: the sector bodies, the largest of which, in the UK, was the Soil Association. This gave the work of its certification and inspection arm, Soil Association Organic Marketing Company (SAMCO - now, Soil Association Certification - SACert) a new importance and significantly raised the profile of the Soil Association generally. In this situation, in the early 1990s, leading members of

OGA and BOF decided that the best strategy to advance the organic movement lay in a merger with the Soil Association. Although some members of OGA/BOF opposed the merger, the majority voted in favour of the move, which was felt likely to remove any confusion in the public mind caused by the existence of several groups with different names. In 2001, Helen Browning, Chair of the Soil Association, looking back on 11 years work with its Council reflected that helping to amalgamate OGA, BOF and the Soil Association was one of the things she was most proud of: *“Re-integration brought together producers, policy, campaigns, inspection and certification under one roof. It allowed us all to move forward”* [47].

OGA/BOF continued as the Producer Services Division of the Soil Association, though in many ways it has been discretely airbrushed out of the historical picture. In 1981, the first Cirencester Conference, for example, was originally staged by the OGA and until the merger the conferences were publicised as British Organic Farmers / Organic Growers Association events. Subsequently there has been a subtle change, so that in 2001 the conference was described as the *Soil Association 12th National Conference*. Similarly, OGA/BOF's *New Farmer and Grower* was renamed *Organic Farming* and now continues as a Soil Association publication.

We asked founder members of the OGA if they felt their organisation and its activities had had an impact on the Soil Association and organic agriculture generally. The main consensus was that the OGA established a new infrastructure for growers that was a catalyst for wider change among organic farmers and for commercial development. As one respondent asked, *“Without OGA being the catalyst for BOF would organic farmers ever have got themselves together?”* Another summarised the role of OGA in the following way: *“The main role as I see it was to bring organic production into the real world and kick-start the whole organic marketing thing. But it also removed the old image of organic farming and allowed the ‘new wave’ to set the agenda for the future.”*

Two respondents also pointed to the development of international contacts and one noted that the OGA had indirectly helped to develop organic production in Holland as a result of two OGA visits in the 1980s.

Although the introduction of UK and EC regulations for organic farming were partly responsible for the demise of OGA as a separate entity, they also provoked a reaction among growers which led to the development of the standards committees in the Soil Association. In 1993, the adoption of EC Regulation 2092/91 defined crop production and set standards for the organic management of land. These standards had to be accepted by all certification bodies in the EU, and by national certification schemes. OGA had by this time been subsumed back into the SA, but some UK growers noted a technical issue relating to the regulation requiring all transplants to be

raised in organic composts, which, since no organic composts were commercially available at the time, seriously threatened their livelihoods. The growers felt a lack of support from the SA, particularly as the Horticultural Standards Committee, the only standards committee, had ceased to meet. An informal and *ad hoc* group of ex OGA growers met at HDRA and took it upon themselves to pursue the issue and to continue meeting to ensure grower views were represented and standards protected. As one of the respondents reported,

*“This group has met ever since, on the way being formalised into the Horticulture Standards Committee, and providing a frame of reference for all the other subsequent standards committees.<sup>1</sup> The points of interest are, to my mind, that even after all this time; it would only take a few phone calls to recreate a body such as OGA. The group exhibits a strong body of ethics, a community of interests, a body of specialised technical knowledge, a pioneering tradition within the Soil Association (and) a web of personal friendships...that is particularly evident at Cirencester which has its roots in the OGA, and it is also evident by contrast with the newer, larger licensee motivated solely by commercialism.”*

This sense of belonging was also evident in replies to our question, “did OGA help your development as a grower?” Respondents mentioned sharing experiences, technical information and contacts, but always linked these to the value of the social network. One OGA founder member referred to “being at the forefront of organic production, working with like-minded souls that have continued to be friends some 30 years later...” Another mentioned that “through talks and visits to other organic holdings we slowly learned which varieties were suitable and through late night discussions methods of weed, pest and disease control”. A third recalled that,

*OGA “gave a sense of ‘belonging to a club’ and the facility to exchange info and ideas. It was good in bringing everybody together so that you felt that you were not the only person out there doing this and thinking organically...I just felt at home with the people, they were mostly alternatively minded and open to ideas. It was inspirational to meet up on farms and see what others were doing and the key players such as Peter (Segger – first chairman of OGA) and Charlie Wacher (first Secretary of OGA) were always encouraging to talk to. And it felt good to be able to give my ideas and techniques out to others. I think the sense of sharing was the real strength of OGA.”*

### 3.6. Fair Trade and organic farming

For many organic farmers and growers, the more recent expansion of the market and increased number of producers and processors has been associated with a loss of radicalism and ethical commitment in the organic movement. As the

<sup>1</sup> The Soil Association currently has 12 standards committees covering all sectors of agriculture and horticulture



organic market has developed in response to the demand for food uncontaminated by agro-chemical sprays, other issues such as 'food miles' and Fair Trade have become more prominent among activists. At the Annual Conference in 2003, the Soil Association announced a new Fair Trade initiative which will offer Fair Trade certification to organic producers both overseas and in the UK. We asked the OGA founder members for their thoughts on these moves to put Fair Trade at the centre of the organic movement. Those members who are now fully involved with the Soil Association were unequivocal in their support. One said, "About time too" and another reported that, "I am no longer a grower (just a beekeeper!) but now work for the SA and wrote the Fair Trade standards, so I am all for it!" Others had mixed feelings. Some felt that the cost of extra inspection and certification will be a burden on smaller growers and that organic produce should be fairly traded by definition. As one respondent said, "For economics to work for growers like ourselves all trade that we are involved in has to be fair to both consumers and producers. I am little concerned that the supermarkets will use it as a tool against smaller producers who will not register because we have been trading fairly for years but have no logo to promote." Another said that he could support the move only if all those involved were fully committed. He argued that "ownership of all aspects of the food chain is the only way that fair trade can truly be called fair trade, not the current sham that misleads the consumers in thinking the packers/procurers and retailers are also involved when selling fair trade products."

One view was that the Soil Association are "jumping on the Fair Trade bandwagon a bit late in the day." A respondent who contributed a great deal to the development of Soil Association Standards made a similar point: "I am no longer a grower but remember proposing that the fair trade standards go into the SA Standards when I was editing the new revision in 1992, only to be laughed out of court by the producers present." He also made the point that 'Fair Trade' and 'Organic' are two separate movements whose emphases have not always coincided.

*"The Fair Trade Foundation was set up to promote fair trade and not necessarily organic fair trade. They have always resisted pressures to require their licensees to be organic. The SA was set up to promote organic agriculture and should be pushing the FTF to encourage organic practices around the world rather than using resources to promote an idea that is not practical in the UK."*

Another respondent added that consumers might not be able to understand "the principles of Fair Trade in terms of UK produce versus that of imported produce - where living standards, working conditions, pay etc, are so inequitable."

Although many of the founder-members of OGA we questioned had some scepticism concerning the Fair

Trade initiative, their reservations were primarily pragmatic, as one respondent concluded with 'uncharacteristic pessimism': "I still believe we should pursue 'Fair Trade' standards, but I see too many areas where principles are sacrificed for commercial expediency to feel confident about real success here." Their comments reflect the combination of ethical commitment and practical realism that has characterised their contribution to changes in the production and marketing of food over the past twenty five years; a contribution that successfully contested and reconstructed the role of the Soil Association and contributed to the recreation of the discourse of organic farming.

#### 4. Summary

In contrast to a pre-war organic movement that opposed farm mechanisation, the new organic growers of the 1970s and 1980s embraced technological advances in mechanised weed control and developed intermediate technologies such as protected cropping systems. Subsequently they have embarked on new biological methods of composting and promoting soil and plant health. They put organic vegetable cropping in the UK onto a sound commercial base and created a new organic marketing ethos. In contrast to the early organicists, the founders of the OGA were, by and large, new to any kind of farming and, in many cases, new to the countryside. But they were determined to introduce new initiatives even if it meant upsetting traditionalists. Although OGA was re-absorbed into the Soil Association in the 1990s, the latter organisation had by then become more like its prodigal child than the parent organisation which spawned it.

In presenting our account of the OGA in the history of the UK organic movement, we have suggested that other histories are inadequate, but we have not directly addressed E H Carr's famous question, *what is history?* [48]. Our starting point has been our own experience and although we have sought the views of our contemporaries, it could be objected that our account is over-influenced by the extent of our involvement. Fair enough, but then one contemporary answer to Carr's question is that historical reality is no more than an inherently enigmatic, endlessly negotiable bundle of free floating perceptions (compared with Reference [49]). In our perception, structural changes were transforming both urban and rural society in the 1970s and 1980s and OGA was a means by which some of the individuals caught up in these changes constructed a new practice and discourse of organic farming. Without recognition of the role of the OGA, any attempt to link the history of the pre-war organic movement to the current situation is seriously deficient. Furthermore, no account of the development of organic production and marketing in the UK is complete without a consideration of the role of the OGA.

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