

Henry Shoobridge

Tasmania's Pioneer of Organic Farming

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Abstract

Henry Shoobridge (1874-1963) was the pioneer of organic farming in Tasmania. He was the founder and the president of the island's earliest organic advocacy group, the Living Soil Association of Tasmania (1946-1960). The Shoobridge family had emigrated from Kent, England in 1822 bringing with them the hops cuttings with which they established hops as a successful primary industry in Tasmania. Henry Shoobridge was schooled at The Friend's School, the Quaker school in Hobart. The Shoobridges pioneered the farming of hops in Tasmania, and Henry followed his forebears in this work. At the age of 71 years, Henry Shoobridge founded the Living Soil Association of Tasmania (LSAT) at a public meeting in Hobart on 30 August 1946. The LSAT affiliated with the Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society (AOFGS) which was founded in Sydney in October 1944, and with the UK's Soil Association which was founded in England in May 1946.

Hops to Van Diemen's Land

Henry's great grandfather William Shoobridge (1781-1836) migrated from Kent, England to Van Diemen's Land in 1822. William had been tempted by the offer of: "as much land as can conveniently be cultivated" (Shoobridge, 2002, p.1). William embarked with his pregnant wife and eight children. On the voyage from England to Van Diemen's Land (now Tasmania, Australia), William's wife and three children died,

apparently from scurvy. From Kent, William carried "A poke (a large bag) of hops sets". These cuttings survived the voyage and he promptly planted them on arrival in Hobart, and thus established the hop industry in Tasmania (Shoobridge, 2002, p.1).

Michael Shoobridge reports a family saying dating from the 1920s:

"Of all the hops grown in Australia, 90% are grown in Tasmania, 90% come from the Derwent Valley, and 90% of these are grown by Shoobridges" (Shoobridge, 2002, p.2).

A 1948 ABC radio broadcast on Hobart radio station 7ZL informed Tasmanians that:

"Hops, more probably than any other primary product, is a specialised crop. The plant will only grow in sheltered pockets of highly fertile soil. Such an area is the Derwent Valley, and there on the estate owned by Henry W. Shoobridge and his sons, we watched the picking of some of the world's finest hops" (ABC, 1948, p.2).

Henry Shoobridge featured as the subject of a film, a Tasmanian Education Department Production: 'Henry Shoobridge, Hop-Grower' directed by Michael Otton (Otton, 1952). Henry Shoobridge's hop farm at Bushy Park in the Derwent Valley is about an hour's drive from Hobart, it remains in hop production, although it is no longer owned by the family.

Henry Shoobridge

Henry Wanostrocht Shoobridge (1874-1963) was born 31 August 1874 in New Norfolk, Tasmania. The family moved to Bushy Park (by road about 68 kilometres north west of Hobart) in 1878. Henry was home-schooled first by his grandmother, and then by a “succession of Governesses” until his father built a local school (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.1).

Henry wrote in his unpublished biography of happy childhood memories, that:

“Hop picking, the season from which all farm time was reckoned, was always looked forward to with joy by all the children. We always thought it a hardship that we had school in the mornings, and were allowed to go picking only in the afternoons” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.4).

Henry described himself, as a child, as “the first wicked member of the family” and as “always laughing” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.1).

Henry reported his experience of one serious illness and the family’s reliance on alternative medicine:

“When I was 11 years old, I had a severe attack of Typhoid fever. Mother nursed me at home, under instructions from Dr. Benjafield, the Homeopathic doctor in Hobart. I was in bed for over a month, and had frequent ‘cold packs’ and special diet, and recovered rapidly” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.5).

Religion was an integral part of farm and family life:

“We always went to Church once, and generally twice every Sunday, and always to Sunday school. In the early days services were held in the hop kilns.



Above: Henry Shoobridge in a still from the film: ‘Henry Shoobridge, Hop-Grower’, a Tasmanian Education Department Production (Otton, 1952).

Even in hop-picking, when most of the floor was covered in hops, a space would be cleared, and the forms and organ brought in; all the men were expected to go to church, and the children to Sunday School” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.3).

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) established the Friends’ School in Hobart in 1887 with the financial support of the Society in London. At the age of 12 years, Henry joined the school in its inaugural year; he appears in the school Register as enrollee number 10, and as a “Non Member” (i.e. not a Quaker) (Friends’ School, 1887).

Henry was one of the first student boarders at the school. In that first year there were six boarders, two girls and four boys (Friends High School, 1881). Three of the six were children of the headmaster Samuel Clemes, Isabel, Margaret and William; there were additionally the two Shoobridge boys, Henry and his brother Vincent, plus Charles Taylor.

The Friends’ school was co-educational from the outset, and it placed an emphasis on science and natural history. Henry reported that:

“School days were very happy, for as well as class room work, there was football, cricket, alleys amongst other games before and after school. On Saturdays there were excursions in the bush and up Mount Wellington, Mounts Direction and Rumney and the beaches at Bellerive, Frederick Henry Bay, and on one occasion to Seven Mile Beach” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.6).

As a student Henry was the secretary of the Boarders’ Literary Society (Shoobridge, 1891). He served on the committee of the school magazine ‘School Echoes’ (Clemes, 1891). In the school’s Natural History and Essay Society he served as a curator of ‘Astronomy and Meteorology’ and ‘Botany’ (Clemes, 1891). Later he was President of

the Friends’ School Old Scholars Association (1905-1910) (Friends’ School, 1961).

Henry completed his schooling at Friends’:

“I passed the Leaving Certificate in 1891 before leaving school, but as I failed to pass in Latin, it did not qualify for matriculation. On leaving school I came to work on the farm at Bushy Park” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.8).

From the Friends’ School Henry took up farm management roles at Bushy Park. An early responsibility for Henry after his return was the newly established dairy: “I was in charge of the dairy for some years. Our cheese ... was equal to the best Tasmanian and sold freely” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.9). As well as hops and dairy there were orchards and root crops. Other than drying hops, the hop kilns served multiple purposes, including drying chicory, storing apples, and church services.

Henry had a life-long active engagement in community service roles. He wrote that: “I always took an interest in social work” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.12). He was secretary of the Bushy Park Club and Library for 39 years (Shoobridge, 1947b). He served as chairman of the Hop Producers Association, and secretary of the local Board of Agriculture (Shoobridge, 1947b). He was a long time member of the Tasmanian Fruit Growers Association, “and helped in establishing the English fruit export industry. We used to ship between 20 and 30,000 cases every year” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.10).

Religion was always an important part of life for Henry:

“In 1897 I was received as a fully accredited Local Preacher of the Methodist Church. I used to hold services frequently at New Norfolk, Glenora, Mount Lloyd, Molesworth, Tyenna, Maydena, Uxbridge and Moogara. At this latter place I also

started a Sunday School” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.11).

Henry acknowledged the practical and enduring religious influence of his mother:

“By her practical, loving Christianity she gave us all a solid foundation for our lives, on the principles that will never fail us. She taught me to rely on the inspiration of the Word of God as a guide in all the difficult places, as well as in times of gladness. She set an example of quite efficient service, to all with whom she came in contact” (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.17).

The Shoobridge family had a long association with the Quakers. The emigrant William Shoobridge (1782-1836) attended Quaker meetings. According to William Oates:

“The ‘convinced’ were drawn mainly from the Wesleyans of Hobart. There were some Wesleyans, like William Shoobridge and his wife, who were greatly influenced by Backhouse and Walker, and were said by Walker to be entirely convinced by the soundness of Friends’ principles, but who did not break with the Wesleyans, even though they were regular attenders at Meetings of Worship with Friends. William Shoobridge was a frequent contributor to ministry in these Meetings” (Oates, 1982, p.191).

In 1836 William Shoobridge contributed half an acre of land as a Quaker cemetery - it is now a public park and children’s playground and known as Friends’ Park, located in Mellifont Street, West Hobart (Hewitt, 1981).

Henry maintained his association with the Friends’ School throughout his life. It was reported that he attended “most of the functions which marked the [75th] Anniversary”; the Old Scholars’ Association recorded: “His evident delight and interest in

these activities reflected a love and concern for the school which never flagged throughout his long life” (Annells, 1963, p.151). The Friend’s School in Hobart is now the largest Quaker school in the world (Bennett, 2008) with students from pre-school through to year 12.

The Living Soil Association of Tasmania

The Living Soil Association of Tasmania (1946-1960) was founded at a public meeting in Hobart on 30 August 1946 (Bayles, 1946). Henry Shoobridge was the prime mover behind the founding of the association and he was its president (Paull, 2009). For its name, the LSAT drew on Eve Balfour’s book ‘The Living Soil’ (1943), and her Soil Association which had recently been formed in England.

Three months after the UK Soil Association was incorporated, a single-page flyer announced a “Move to Form Soil Study Association in Tasmania”. It declared:

“With the object of studying and making known the results of research into organic manuring to carry out Nature’s law of returning all vegetables and animal wastes to the soil, a move has been made to form a living Soil Association of Tasmania” (Anon, 1946).

The flyer was printed in Hobart by Mercury Press, and it invited readers to “a meeting to inaugurate the association”. The meeting was scheduled for “Aug. 30 when it is hoped there will be a good attendance of town and country people to put the movement on a strong footing” (Anon, 1946).

From the outset an expressed intention was to engage with “The Soil Association formed in England recently ... If formed, the Tasmanian society will affiliate and co-operate with the English organisation” (Anon, 1946).

The interaction with the UK Soil Association and the AOFGS was a two way interchange of ideas. Shoobridge contributed to the

first edition of *Mother Earth*, the journal of the Soil Association (1946), and to the first volume of the *Organic Farming Digest*, the journal of the AOFGS (1947e; 1947f; 1949).

Henry recognized the pioneering role of LSAT:

“ ... we are Pioneers exploring new territory ... It is a big job and will take all our united efforts” (Shoobridge, 1947a, p.1,3).

Henry and the LSAT placed an emphasis on inclusion:

“ ... we must gain the co-operation of all our scientists. It is work which concerns us all and can only be accomplished if we all work together ... It is imperative that every section of the community should be working with us” (Shoobridge, 1947d, p.1).

The LSAT actively pursued the co-operation of local groups, and eleven such groups were formally represented on the inaugural Council of the LSAT:

Hobart City Council;
Education Department of Tasmania;
Tasmanian Farmers Federation;
Royal Agricultural Society of Tasmania;
Horticultural Society of Tasmania;
Tasmanian Farmers Stockowners & Orchardists Association;
State Fruit Board;
Stone and Berry Fruits Board;
Upper Derwent Farm Home and Garden Society;
Country Women's Association; and the
Tasmanian Council for Mother and Child.

From the outset the LSAT adopted the AOFGS's journal, the *Organic Farming Digest*, as its primary publication. Membership of the LSAT included a subscription to the *Organic Farming Digest*. The members of the LSAT were geographically widely distributed across

the island. Meetings peaked at nine in the years 1947 and 1950. Film nights were held at the Hydro-Electric Theatre, in Hobart. Membership of the LSAT peaked at 274 members in 1952 (Paull, 2009).

The “President's Report for Ten Months Ended 31st July 1947” was upbeat and exuded optimism. President Shoobridge reported that: “We realised that we were following a few pioneers into new territory” (Shoobridge, 1947d, p.1). Shoobridge declared that: “We realised that it would be unwise to stir up the antagonism between organic and inorganic manures” (Shoobridge, 1947d, p.1).

Shoobridge reiterated his non-confrontational approach in a letter to Eve Balfour:

“ ... we are endeavouring to take a positive rather than a negative approach. That is, we are not stressing that it is just the question of organic or inorganic fertilisers; but emphasising the fact that whichever we consider necessary to stimulate the growth of our crops, it is absolutely necessary that the humus content of our soil be maintained at a maximum. To do this every effort must be made to return all possible residues both from plants and animals” (Shoobridge, 1947c, p.1).

The AOFGS was wound up in 1955. The consequent loss of the AOFGS's *Digest* as the LSAT's official organ would have been a serious blow to the LSAT. Over several years there had been talk of the LSAT publishing its own journal but other than four Newsletters this goal was never realized (Paull, 2009).

During Eve Balfour's trip to Australia in 1959 the pair met “personally at long last” (Balfour, 1959, p.702). Balfour describes Shoobridge as “President of the Living Soil Association of Tasmania, and our oldest Tasmanian member” (p.702). In her account, Balfour published a photo of Shoobridge in his hop fields at Bushy Park. Shoobridge was

84 years old at the time.

Concluding Remarks

The Living Soil Association of Tasmania pioneered the concepts of organic food and farming in Australia's smallest state, for the decade immediately after WWII. The LSAT was one of the world's first organisations to promote organic farming. It was part of Australia's first wave of organics advocacy groups and kindred societies which included the Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society (founded 1944), and the Victorian Compost Society (founded 1945).

Henry Shoobridge was promoting his own 'green' vision for Tasmania, and the world, decades before Bob Brown, the Greens, Peter Cundall, and the United Tasmania Group. He was the founder of one of Tasmania's earliest 'green' advocacy groups. Henry Shoobridge was a successful farmer, a dedicated Methodist preacher, and the visionary behind the establishment of Tasmania's first organic

farming advocacy group, the Living Soil Association of Tasmania.

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Below: The Text Kiln - A Shoobridge-family hop kiln at Bushy Park, Tasmania.



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Above: Biblical inscription on a Shoobridge-family hop kiln (the Text Kiln). Photos by John Paull.