

THE LIVING SOIL ASSOCIATION: PIONEERING ORGANIC FARMING AND INNOVATING SOCIAL INCLUSION

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Abstract

The *Living Soil Association of Tasmania* (LSAT) (1946-1960) 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 preceded by New Zealand's *Humic Compost Society* (founded in 1941), the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* (1944), Australia's *Victorian Compost Society* (1945), and England's *Soil Association* (1946). The *Tasmanian Association* engaged, or was officially affiliated, with each of these four organisations. The LSAT actively courted and recruited a broad spectrum of organisations and government departments, particularly those with interests, or responsibilities, in agriculture, health, and education. The *Association* consistently sought a co-operative approach while avoiding a confrontational approach. An innovation of the LSAT was the provision for 'Junior members'; the LSAT constitution included separate and specific *Objects* for Junior Groups, one of which was for school children to eat organic food.

Keywords: Soil Association, Living Soil Association of Tasmania, LSAT, Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society, New Zealand Humic Compost Society, Victorian Compost Society, Organic Farming Digest, Farm and Garden Digest, Eve Balfour, Henry Shoobridge, Australia, Tasmania, history of organic farming, organic pioneers.

Introduction & Context

Tasmania is the island state of Australia. It is located approximately 250 km due south of the south-east corner of the Australian mainland; the capital is Hobart; the state has an area of 68,000 km², and a current population of approximately 500,000. It is comparable in size to Sri Lanka, and is slightly smaller than Ireland (UN, 2008).

In 1947 the founder and President of the then recently formed *Living Soil Association of Tasmania*, Henry Wanostrocht Shoobridge (1874-1963), declared that: "we are Pioneers exploring new territory ... It is a big job and will take all our united efforts"² (Shoobridge, 1947a, p.1,3). Shoobridge was a hop-grower at Bushy Park, Derwent Valley (Shoobridge, 1947h), which is 54 km, and a 60 minute drive, from the Hobart GPO (MapData Sciences, 2009).

Three months after the *Soil Association* was incorporated in the UK, a single-page flyer announced in the Antipodes a "Move to Form Soil Study Association in Tasmania". It

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² Within quotations, the capitalization, spelling and punctuation of the originals have been retained throughout.

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 name of this new Tasmanian association borrowed from the newly created English *Soil Association* and Eve Balfour’s book *The Living Soil* (Balfour, 1943).

As organic pioneers, both of these Soil Associations, the English and the Tasmanian, had been pre-empted by: the *Humic Compost Club* formed in Auckland New Zealand in May 1941; the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society*, formed in Sydney, Australia in October 1944 (Paull, 2008a); and the *Victorian Compost Society* formed in Melbourne, Australia in October 1945 (Hancocks, 1946) (Table 1).

Organisation	Country	Founding Date
Humic Compost Club	New Zealand	May 1941
Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society	Australia	4 October 1944
Victorian Compost Society	Australia	October 1945
Soil Association	England	3 May 1946
Living Soil Association of Tasmania	Australia	30 August 1946

Table 1: Early organic farming and kindred organisations. (The Humic Compost Club changed its name to Humic Compost Society and is now the Soil & Health Association of New Zealand).

Methods

This account of the *Living Soil Association of Tasmania* (LSAT) draws mostly on primary source material held at the Tasmanian Archives Office in Hobart, Tasmania, Australia. The material archived includes manuscript material, publications, reports, correspondence - both incoming and outgoing, minutes, and various other records of the LSAT. As far as I can determine this material has not previously been acknowledged or reported upon. Most previous accounts of organic farming and advocacy in Australia begin their accounts four decades later - in the 1980s (eg. Wynen, 2008), and the repetition of that particular narrative may have served to divert research from revealing Australia’s pioneering pro-organic farming associations. This paper goes some way to remediating the oversight. In researching this paper, site visits were made to various places in Tasmania bearing on the history of the LSAT, and additionally, the author had access to privately held documents.

The generally excellent reference compendium to Tasmanian history published by the University of Tasmania (Alexander, 2005) makes no reference, to either the LSAT, or to its founder Henry Shoobridge. The account of the Shoobridge family in Tasmania (Brammall, 1985) includes several pages about Henry Shoobridge, but fails to mention the LSAT, or Henry's founding of it, or his passionate interest, advocacy and successful practice of organic farming. Stevenson's (2009) account of the later, and very recently defunct, *Organic Farming and Gardening Society of Tasmania* (1972-2009), devotes just a few lines to the LSAT.

The account reported here is predominantly a centric-archival account. Since both the *Association* itself and its key figures are no longer with us, the opportunity for a real "insider account" has past.

The Beginning

That first flyer, distributed prior to the 30th August 1946 inaugural meeting of the LSAT in Hobart, already signalled that affiliations and social inclusion would be a hallmark of this new society. Credit for calling the meeting was attributed as follows: "credit for the initial step in Tasmania goes to the Upper Derwent Farm, Home and Garden Society which decided recently to ask the Tasmanian Farmers, Stock-owners, and Orchardists Association and the Hobart Horticultural Society to call a meeting to inaugurate the association in Tasmania" (Anon, 1946). The flyer made no mention of "organic farming" *per se*.

That initial meeting made it clear that health was a primary focus of this new *Association*. "We are all interested in the Life of the Soil because on this life, depends the food supply for everyone [sic] of us. Not only do we depend on the soil for our food, and our own health, but the health of our plants, vegetables and fruit and that of our animals, depends on the health of the Life of the Soil. It is because we have not considered this, that we have such a constant fight against disease in plants and animals, and that so many of us suffer from all manner of diseases". Visions were invoked of "boys and girls to be strong and robust, with good teeth, with constitutions able to resist all the common ills of life" and of "fit happy citizens for a land such as our lovely Island home" (Shoobridge, 1946, p.1). These sentiments were very similar to those previously articulated in New Zealand by Dr. Guy Chapman, the founder of the Humic Compost Club (Table 1) (1942).

The meeting attendees were advised that "We propose to form a Living Soil Association of Tasmania so that we can obtain and distribute information about the Life of the Soil. To promote obedience to the Law of return in every possible way, so that the humus content of our soil may be increased" (Shoobridge, 1946, p.2). The presentation notes from the meeting make no specific mention of "organic farming". There is a mention that "there is some doubt about the effect of different artificial manures on the Life of the Soil" (Shoobridge, 1946, p.2).

Two motions were put to the meeting. Firstly: "That we form 'The Living Soil Association of Tasmania'". Those wishing to be foundation members were invited to give their names to Mr. A.J. Honey, Secretary of the *Tasmanian Farmers, Stock-owners, and Orchardists Association*, or to Mr. W.T. Loney, Secretary of the *Royal Agricultural Society of Tasmania* (Shoobridge, 1946, p.3).

The second motion was perhaps more ambitious: "We ask the Government to establish 'Mother Earth Enquiry Centres' for long term tests on the effect of organic and inorganic manures on the life of the Soil as it influences health of man, animals, and plants" (Shoobridge, 1946, p.3).

The final point from the presentation notes of that first meeting was the suggestion that “the Living Soil Association affiliate with Soil Association, England” (Shoobridge, 1946, p. 3).

Just a few days later, letters, dated the 4th of September 1946, on typescript letterhead inscribed “The Living Soil Association of Tasmania”, and addressed to the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* and *The New Zealand Humic Compost Society Incorporated*, advised that “Much interest has been expressed by a great number of people in Tasmania in Organic Farming, and at a Public Meeting held in Hobart on 30th August last, it was resolved that we form our own society in Tasmania” (Bayles, 1946e; 1946g). These letters requested of these kindred societies, to “Air Mail me a copy of your Rules of Society and Constitution which would be of invaluable help in drafting our own”. The letterhead identified two office bearers: “President: H. W. Shoobridge” and “Secretary: R. J. Bayles”. The letters were signed by the latter (Bayles, 1946e; 1946g).

The New Zealand Humic Compost Society supplied a copy of their rules on the 23rd of September (Davy, 1946), and were advised from Tasmania on the 9th of October that “We have found these of invaluable assistance in drafting our own Rules and Constitution”, and were thanked for a copy of their *Compost Magazine* (Bayles, 1946f).

The Secretary of the LSAT wrote to Mr. A. V. Giblin, a foundation member and soon to be a Vice-President of LSAT, on 20 September that the “Provisional Committee” at a meeting the previous day decided to ask him “to draft the Rules and Constitution for the Association”, and in pursuit of that objective they were “enclosing herewith the Rules and Constitution of the New Zealand and New South Wales Societies, which will be of a guiding help to you in drafting our own rules” (Bayles, 1946b).

Social Inclusion

At an Association meeting of 19 September 1946 “it was decided that a Committee be formed for the above Association by Representatives from the various Departments, Associations and Societies in Tasmania who would, we feel certain, be interested, and therefore of invaluable help in the newly formed Association” (Bayles, 1946h).

At the “First General Meeting of Members”, held on 6th February 1947, the Council of the LSAT was formed. That Council comprised 17 members, of whom six were “Ordinary Members” and the remaining 11 comprised one delegate “from each approved Society or organisation” (LSAT, 1947c), (Table 2). The Department of Agriculture declined to provide a representative (LSAT, 1947c). The Department of Agriculture seem to have been somewhat sensitive to implied criticism; one letter stated: “you have made a suggestion which could be read that you regard this Department as criminally negligent on the subject. I do not know whether that was intended ... So far as this Department is concerned, I could not agree for a moment with such a suggestion” (Smith, 1947).

Of the 17 Council members, three were women; seven members were from Hobart with the remainder from various parts of Tasmania: Bushy Park; Campania; Cressy; Cygnet; Electrona; Evandale; Glenlusk; Premaydena; Richmond; and Sandfly (LSAT, 1947f). Subsequently, the first meeting of the Council of the LSAT appointed an Executive Committee of eight, of whom two were “ordinary members” and six were institutional delegates; two were women; added to the eight were additionally a Treasurer and a Secretary (LSAT, 1947e).

Lady Binney, the wife of the then governor of Tasmania, Sir Thomas Binney, was invited to be “Patron of the Association”. Henry Shoobridge reported to her that “We believe we have an important work to do, and hope to enlist the active co-operation of all who are interested in agriculture, and in the health and happiness of all our people” (Shoobridge, 1947f). Lady Binney served in that role until her husband’s term as Governor of Tasmania expired in May 1951 (Bennett, 1993), when she was replaced as Patron by Sir Ronald Cross (Bayles, 1953), the incoming Governor of Tasmania (Kent, 1993).

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

Table 2: Organisations with delegates on the inaugural Council of the Living Soil Association of Tasmania (LSAT, 1947f).

The Objects of the Association (Table. 3) reflect the social inclusion approach already implemented in selecting a broad-based Council. Of the seven Objects, three specifically set an agenda for the LSAT, of interaction with other organisations; mentioned specifically were the *Agriculture Department*; the *State Library*; and the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society*.

The seven Objects of the LSAT bear little or no similarity to the 14 objects of the then newly formed UK *Soil Association*, and they do not appear to have been informed by them. The objects of the UK association make no reference to “organic farming”, “organic agriculture”, or “organic gardening”. Half of the objects of the UK *Soil Association* focus on commercial issues: “To raise money”; “to purchase”; “To sell, let, mortgage”; “to undertake and execute any trusts”; “To borrow or raise money”; “to invest the moneys”; and to “guarantee money” (Douglas, 1946, pp.3-4). The LSAT *Objects* do not share this monetary focus.

The LSAT promptly embarked on a membership recruitment drive. The first meeting of their Council, on 18 February 1947, resolved: “That a receipt book be sent to each Foundation Member of the Association, together with covering letter asking Foundation Members to canvas and enroll new members for the Association” (Bayles, 1947a).

Objects of The Living Soil Association of Tasmania
<p>(a) <i>To bring together all those working for a fuller understanding of the vital relationships between soil, plant, animals and man.</i></p> <p>(b) <i>To initiate and generally to co-ordinate and assist research in this field, and to investigate methods, materials, and machines available in Tasmania or elsewhere for composting, and to test out the results on pastures, orchards, vegetables and flowers and all other crops, either alone or in conjunction with artificial manures.</i></p> <p>(c) <i>To initiate "Mother Earth Enquiry Centres" where possible through State and Area Schools, and the Agricultural Department's Research Farms, and private farms and gardens in different districts.</i></p> <p>(d) <i>To collect and distribute the knowledge gained so as to create a body of informed public opinion.</i></p> <p>(e) <i>To foster and encourage that all possible animal and vegetable residues from town and country be returned to the soil, either as prepared compost or by sheet composting, so that the cycle of nature may be maintained, and so ensure the health of plant, animal and man.</i></p> <p>(f) <i>To work in conjunction with the State Library to enable members to obtain books, periodicals and papers relating to the objects of the Association.</i></p> <p>(g) <i>To join with the Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society of New South Wales, or any other similar body in the publication of their official organ, giving local reports and papers from any part of the world relating to the objects of the Association.</i></p>

Table 3: The Objects of the Living Soil Association of Tasmania, as declared in the "Rules & Constitution" (LSAT, 1947g, p.1) and adopted on 6th February 1947 (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.2).

Of the 44 members that were sent receipt books (each of 25 receipts), 2 returned them without any collections, whereas Henry Shoobridge submitted a fully completed receipt book having enrolled 25 new recruits (LSAT, 1947a).

The annual membership fee was five shillings (5/-). By 31st July 1947 there were 97 members (LSAT, 1947b) (Fig.1); and (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.2) declared "Although the number is not great, they are from all parts of the State".

At an address to the Annual Meeting of the *Tasmanian Farmers, Stockowners and Orchardists Association*, Shoobridge told the audience that: "we are the custodians of our country's most valuable possession, the Living Soil. It was never meant to be treated as a mine ... The soil is a living entity, containing an ever replenished storehouse of material for growth. Its function is to supply a very small percentage of the bulk of all crops produced; because the greatest bulk, the water and the carbon comes from the rain and the air" (Shoobridge, 1947b, p.2).

Henry Shoobridge visited a *Victorian Compost Society* demonstration of compost making in Melbourne. An eight page report of this event was presented to the LSAT's "Executive

Committee” (Bayles & Shoobridge, 1947, p.1). The *Victorian Compost Society* had been formed in October 1945 (Hancocks, 1946).

Another member of the LSAT, Commander James Melrose of the Royal Navy, “who is also a Life Member of the Haughley Research Trust in England, gave an address to the Executive Committee on the establishment of the Trust which is run by Lady Eve Balfour” (Bayles & Shoobridge, 1947, p.2).

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, 1947i, p.1). Shoobridge declared that “We realised that it would be unwise to stir up the antagonism between organic and inorganic manures” (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.1). His message was equivocal: “The real problem is the method by which these chemicals are used” (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.1). Shoobridge revisited this theme in a letter to the Tasmanian Minister for Agriculture: “There is far too much emphasis given to the organic v. inorganic manure position. This is decidedly the wrong attitude to take up ... The main issue is the humus content of the soil ... whether we decide to use organic or inorganic manures, both depend on the humus in the soil” (Shoobridge, 1947d).

Shoobridge reiterated his theme of non-confrontation (appeasement?) 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. The best way to do this, wherever practicable, is by the Indore method of composting” (Shoobridge, 1947e, p.1).

There was 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, 1947i, p.1).

Junior Members

Henry Shoobridge reported that the LSAT was “working in close co-operation with the Education Department ... many of the Teachers are now using ‘Indore Compost’ in their School gardens. We suggest that these plots be called ‘Mother Earth Enquiry Plots’ and that Parents and Friend Associations encourage this work, and help the pupils to start plots in their own gardens” (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.2).

The original “Rules & Constitution” of the LSAT allowed for “Junior Members”, with a subscription cost of one shilling (1/-), and a further provision for “Junior Groups of ten or more Junior Members” for an annual subscription of five shillings (5/-) (LSAT, 1947g, p. 2).

Junior Members and Junior Groups were Tasmanian innovations. There is no mention of junior members, or children at all, in the foundational documents of contemporaneous like-minded organisations including: the New Zealand *Humic Compost Society* (Ashby & Davy, 1946); the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* (Cox, Jeremy, & Atkinson, 1944; Paull, 2008a); the *Victorian Compost Society* (Hancocks, 1947a); and England’s *Soil Association* (Douglas, 1946).

The *Victorian Compost Society* favorably noted the Tasmanian innovation of junior members: “I was very much intrigued with your Junior members scheme and think that is something we could usefully copy” (Hancocks, 1947b).

The Tasmanian Education Department provided a representative for the Council of the LSAT (Secretary for Education, 1946), however no statistics have been uncovered by the present author to indicate the uptake, or otherwise, of the junior membership innovation. The first annual listing of 97 LSAT members (LSAT, 1947b) distinguishes one life member (“LM”) Henry Shoobridge, it distinguishes two members of Parliament as members (Alex C. Atkins and E.W. Beattie), but no junior members are identified. While school children eating organic food is now increasingly advocated and implemented (Morgan & Sonnino, 2008; Paull, 2008b), the LSAT warrants recognition as an early institutional advocate of organic food in schools, probably the first such advocacy in Australia, and perhaps the earliest in the Anglophone world.

Objects of Junior Groups of The Living Soil Association of Tasmania
<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. <i>To learn about the life of the soil, earthworms, bacteria and fungi, which prepare the food for all plants.</i>2. <i>To return all possible animal and vegetable residues to the soil, because this is the only material from which the soil life can prepare the humus for the food of plants</i>3. <i>To learn how to prepare compost from animal and vegetable residues by the Indore method discovered by Sir Albert Howard.</i>4. <i>To ask Mother Earth whether the workers in the soil are strong and healthy; she will answer by way of the food value of the product</i>5. <i>To eat produce grown in this way, so that we ourselves may be strong and healthy.</i>

Table 4: “The Objects of Junior Groups” of the Living Soil Association of Tasmania, as declared in the “Rules & Constitution” (LSAT, 1947g, p.2) and adopted on 6th February 1947 (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.2).

Affiliations

Branches of the *Farmers Federation* in the north of Tasmania (at Scottsdale) and in the south (at Dover) invited the LSAT to hold meetings in their regions, with the result that “Members have been enrolled” and “local Committees have been formed”, and a start made with “Indore Compost” (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.2)

The first annual report of LSAT declared that “the Agricultural Department are giving us some measure of co-operation. They have agreed to start test plots for manuring with Indore Compost only” (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.3).

There was, at the outset, a close integration between the LSAT and the farmer association, the *Tasmanian Farmers, Stockowners and Orchardists Association* (TFSOA). The LSAT used TFSOA rooms for meetings; Mr. R.J. Bayles, an employee of

the TFSOA, acted as Secretary of the LSAT; and the Secretary of the TFSOA, Mr. A.J. Honey, acted as Treasurer of the LSAT (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.3).

President Shoobridge (1947i) concluded his report for that agenda-setting first year by reiterating that the key concerns of the LSAT were soil and health. He declared that: “Our urgent need now is for personal workers in every district, to work for the return of all residues to the soil so that we may build up an increasing fertility in our fields, and robust health, in animals and man. We must co-operate with the life of the Soil, and they will then see to the nutritious value of our food” (1947i, p.3).

Shoobridge (1949a, p.3) expressed his hope of forthcoming co-operation from the leading government agriculture research institutions: “I hope that in the near future we shall be able to receive more information about the part organic matter plays in the maintenance of soil fertility from both the Waite Institute and the C.S.I.R.O.” .

A member was urged to “keep in touch with this office regarding any experiments in organic farming you may be undertaking on your property” (Bayles, 1947c).

Within the course of the first 10 months of the LSAT, Shoobridge (1947i, p.3) reported that “We have affiliated with the Soil Association of England ... They have accepted our Association as an Honorary Associate agreeing to exchange publications with us” .

The aim was to affiliate with the four like-minded organisations: “We have applied for affiliation with the Soil Association (England), The New Zealand Humic Compost Society, The Victorian Compost Society, and the Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society (NSW). It is hoped that we will be therefore able to keep in close contact with these kindred bodies and exchange information etc.” (Bayles, 1947b, p.1).

Shoobridge actively recruited members from the outset. The Secretary of the LSAT wrote that “Our President, Mr. H.W. Shoobridge who is one of the Founders of the Soil Association in England is spending considerable time in personally interviewing interested persons” with the objective of recruiting members (Bayles, 1946a, p.1).

In another letter Bayles (1946d) wrote that “our President (Mr. H.W. Shoobridge of ‘Bushy Park’) is one of the Founders of The Soil Association in England and is keen in widening the interest of interested people in Tasmania”. No “Shoobridge” appears in the UK *Soil Association’s* foundational document, which names 13 individuals (9 subscribers and 12 members of Council, with 8 individuals appearing in both lists) (Douglas, 1946, p. 5,9). It remains undetermined if Henry Shoobridge was a foundation member of England’s *Soil Association*; however he was a member in 1947, and he was in personal correspondence with Lady Eve Balfour; in a letter he thanked her for her letters of the 18th and 22nd of June (Shoobridge, 1947e). The archives of the UK *Soil Association* prior to 1965 are reported to be lost (Reed, 2003).

Publications

The *Organic Farming Digest* published quarterly by the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* (Paull, 2008a) was adopted as the “Official Organ” of the LSAT (Shoobridge, 1947i, p.3). This option had been suggested by the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society*: “In your letter of the 5th September you suggested that we make your Digest our Official organ” (Bayles, 1946c). In their first despatch of journals, the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* supplied 200 copies of *Organic Farming Digest* Number 4, at 4/3 per dozen (i.e. 4¼ pence each) (AOFGS,

1947b). Further issues were forwarded to the *Living Soil Association* quarterly as they appeared. Shoobridge (1947i, p.3) reported that “We have distributed this to our members throughout the year” .

Despite this co-operation from the Australian mainland, it was nevertheless a continuing wish that the LSAT have its own journal. “I am hopeful that in the not too distant future our Association will be in a position to have its own official journal” (Shoobridge, 1949b, p.2).

While there is continuous chatter throughout the LSAT documents of a desire to have their own journal, such an outcome never materialized. “The Association continues to forward to members free of charge the publication ‘Organic Farming and Gardening Digest’ issued quarterly by the Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society ... This journal is greatly appreciated as it affords much valued and helpful information” (Shoobridge, 1949b, p.2).

The *Association* published a booklet *Compost - Why and How*, prepared by Henry Shoobridge and foundation member Mr. I.V. Thornicroft (c.1946). It was distributed to members, widely across Tasmania, as well as overseas: “I am forwarding under separate cover a copy of the first booklet published by this Association, *Compost - Why and How*” (Bayles, 1947d). The second booklet that the association published was targeted to meet the needs of home gardeners: “*Compost for the Small Garden*” (LSAT, 1950a).

The State Library of Tasmania co-operated in sourcing books for the *Association* and its members. “Mr Collier, the State Librarian has been very good in putting books on organic farming in the Library. He has obtained quite a lot of those which I have suggested to him, and has promised to get those which the Association proposed. We think that is the best way, to work through the Library organisation than to try and have our own library” (Shoobridge, 1947g).

The *Association* used the local press to get its message across, and forwarded press clippings beyond the island. A letter from Sydney responded: “it is gratifying to find so much publicity being given to the subject of organic farming in your press” (Jeremy, 1947).

A midlands farmer member complained of media censorship and the vagaries of harnessing the press: “I find that the local papers to whom I write sometimes (my last letter was with reference to D.D.T. in orchards) will not print adverse criticisms of their former articles or of firms and big business people on whom they (the papers) depend for advertisements etc. of their wares. Editors abstract a bit here and there and alter meanings - most annoying” (Melrose, 1947, p.1-2).

The issue of having their own publication was regularly revisited: “it will be necessary to start a publication of our own... I would suggest that we form a Committee to publish the first number as soon as possible, and then decide as we go along exactly what form it should take, and how often it can be issued” (Shoobridge, 1949a, p.3). A six page quarterly *Newsletter* of the LSAT was launched with the October-December issue 1950 (LSAT, 1950b). It lasted for four issues, and until the July-September 1951 issue (Shoobridge, 1951, p.1), before ceasing, shortly, or immediately, thereafter (Shoobridge, 1953, p.1).

The quarterly *Digests* of the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* were a ready-made vehicle for the LSAT to both stay in touch with, as well as inform, its membership. During the course of the relationship between the organisations, the cover

price of the *Digest* doubled from 6d to 1/-, and doubled again to 2/- (Paull, 2008a). Despite an “80% increase in cost” to the *Association*, it was argued “this publication is of great educational value to members” (Honey, 1950). The second doubling in the price strained the financial viability of the relationship: “the cost of the *Farm and Garden Digest* is increased by 100% and the Association will have to consider the question of continuing with this Journal, or as an alternative to augment the News-Letter” (Honey, 1952). A single issue of the *Digest* appeared in 1953, and the final issue in 1954 (Paull, 2008a). No newsletters of the LSAT have been located beyond Number 4, the July-September 1951 issue.

Membership & Meetings

The reported membership of the LSAT peaked in 1952 at 274 (Fig.1). This total membership figure was achieved by Shoobridge aggregating the financial members (191), the life members (2), as well as those one year in arrears (40), two years in arrears (27), and three years in arrears (14) (1952, p.1). For the years 1948 and 1949, members in arrears were not disaggregated in the LSAT annual reports.

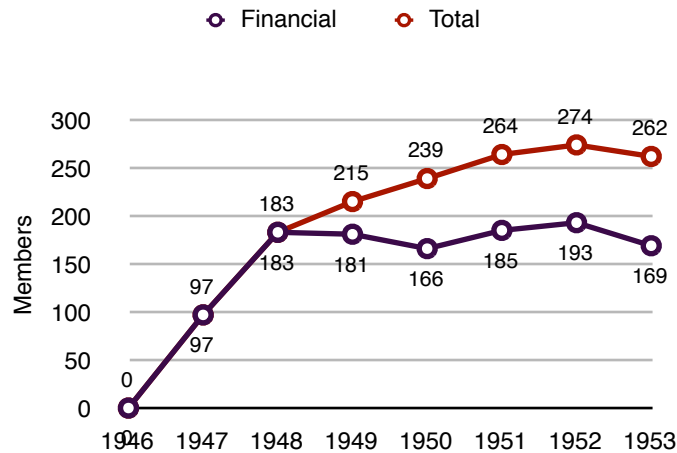


Figure 1: Membership of the Living Soil Association of Tasmania as at the 31st July each year; no data available past 1953. Financial members reported in this graph include life members. Total members include members in arrears of up to three years. The membership figures for 1948 and 1949 are not disaggregated in the LSAT annual reports; the 1949 financial figure is derived from the 1950 report; it appears that memberships received in the 1946/47 (part year) were all carried forward to 1948 (Shoobridge, 1947i; 1948; 1949b; 1950; 1951; 1952; 1953).

The recruitment of new members of LSAT was reported for the years 1947 through to 1953, and show a steady decline (Fig.2). For 1953, the last year when statistics are available, membership was reported as 167 financial members, two life members, 63 one-year arrears members, 16 two-year arrears members, and 14 three-year arrears members (Shoobridge, 1953, p.1). In 1953, there was, for the first time, a decline in both the total members reported, and in the financial members, of LSAT. The incoming transfusion of 18 new members in that year was no match for the bleed of 63 lapsing members (Fig.2). This occurrence of annual outgoing members exceeding incoming members by a factor of 3.5 was a reversal that may signal the terminal decline of the LSAT.

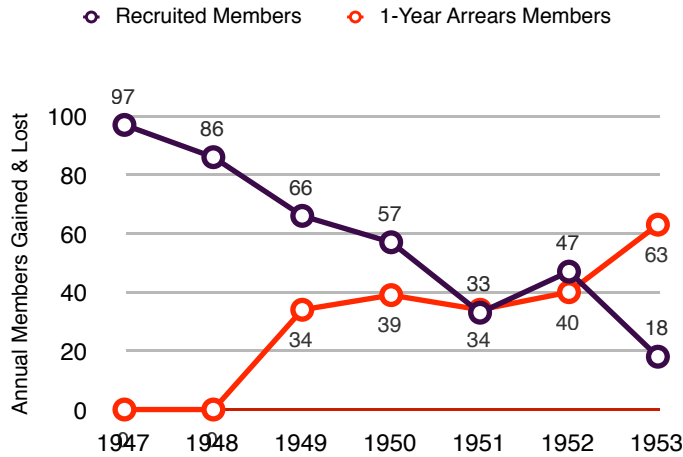


Figure 2: Annual recruitment gain of new members of the Living Soil Association of Tasmania versus annual lost members (i.e. 1-year arrears members) as at the 31st July each year; data unavailable after 1953. (Shoobridge, 1947i; 1948; 1949b; 1950; 1951; 1952; 1953).

The annual number of meetings of the LSAT peaked in 1947 amidst the great spirit of optimism for the launch of the new venture (Fig.3). The second peak was in 1950 which counted six film nights held at the “Hydo-Electric Theatrette, Hobart as “organisation meetings” (Shoobridge, 1950, p.1) (Fig.3).

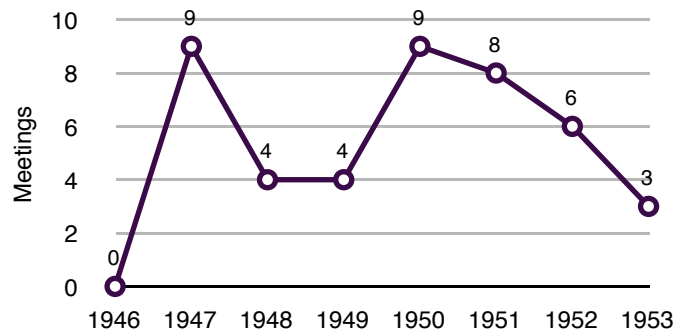


Figure 3: Meetings of the Living Soil Association of Tasmania for the year to the 31st July for each year; includes Committee, Council, Executive, Organisation and Annual General Meetings; no data available past 1953 (Shoobridge, 1947i; 1948; 1949b; 1950; 1951; 1952; 1953).

“As our members are scattered all over the State, we suggest that Groups be formed in every district ... This could probably be done most effectively by co-operation with other bodies which are interested in agriculture, education and health; and should always be accompanied by personal contact with schools, and especially the school gardens” (Shoobridge, 1949a, p.2-3). It appears that at least two groups were formed, one in the south east, and one in the north east of the State (Shoobridge, 1947i).

Experiences, Lessons & Successes

For a decade and a half (1946-1960) the LSAT disseminated information, and fueled debate in Tasmania about farming practices, soil fertility, organic agriculture, and health.

Henry Shoobridge was the prime mover in 1946, and remained as the President of the LSAT as far as the record goes. It seems there was no succession planning. In 1949 the number of nominations for the Council matched the nominees, and so no elections for office bearers were held, “and the President declared them duly elected members of the Executive” (LSAT, 1949, p.1).

Shoobridge (1947c) foresaw as early as 1947 that consumer demand could drive growth in an organic sector. “We must create a demand for this fully nutritious food so that our market gardeners and farmers are encouraged to supply this demand ... We must go forward along these lines” (1947c, p.10). At the time of this observation, organic standards, labelling, and certification were decades away, and thus, despite Shoobridge’s prescience, at the time, produce could not be differentiated by consumers based on production methodology.

Although the emphasis was on health, Shoobridge touched lightly on the Australian value of a ‘fair go’, when he wrote of the importance of the role of “protecting the life of the soil, which at present is certainly not being treated fairly” (Shoobridge, c.1947).

There was a bold start to the LSAT with, in 1947, 11 representatives from other organisations on the Council. These representatives promptly evaporated, and by 1949 there appear to be none (LSAT, 1949). The Department of Agriculture did not accept an invitation to be associated with the LSAT, and did not implement the concept of *Mother Earth Enquiry Centres*. There was some limited co-operation forthcoming from the Agriculture Department, but that relationship seems to have been more fraught than fruitful.

The social inclusion approach of the LSAT was laudable, though perhaps naive given the increasing asymmetry, of influence, power, and available finance for promotion, between organic farming and chemical farming. New South Wales farmer and organic farming advocate, Colonel H.F. White of the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society*, articulated the institutional resistance that was encountered by the early advocates of organic farming in Australia. He wrote that “here in Australia, the universities and Departments of Agriculture have neglected it, while boosting fertilisers in season and out of season. Indeed, one professor suggested a campaign against the advocates of organic farming before a gathering of C.S.I.R.³ people and was applauded” (White & Hicks, 1953, p.95)

The events described in this paper played out prior to the monetization of the concept of organic produce. Until certification of organic production had been conceived and implemented, organic farming and kindred organisations experienced the ongoing challenge of financing. The eventual demise of the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* in 1955, for example, was attributed to insufficient funds (Paull, 2008a).

By the beginning of 1953 the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* was faltering with its publication of the *Farm & Garden Digest*, which incorporated *The Organic Farming Digest*. Although the *Digest* continued to be badged as a quarterly, there was only a single issue in 1953 followed by a final issue dated December 1954

³ Australia’s CSIR was renamed CSIRO in 1949 (CSIRO, 2008).

(Paull, 2008a, p.7). This would have been a serious blow to the LSAT, which had adopted the *Organic Farming Digest*, and its successor the *Farm & Garden Digest*, as its “official organ”, and offered a subscription to the *Digest* as the single greatest tangible benefit of LSAT membership.

As early as 1947 the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* had signalled the vagaries of journal publishing: “As the publication of the magazine is somewhat hazardous, and through unfortunate circumstances associated therewith the Society is in debt to the extent of £100, it is proposed to accept suitable advertisements for the ‘Digest’ in order to maintain financial stability” (Jeremy, 1947). The circulation of the *Digest* was at that time 5,500 copies (AARDS, 1947), and the LSAT received 200 of each issue of the *Organic Farming Digest* (AOFGS, 1947a; 1947b).

Part of the promise of the LSAT was delivering a quarterly journal to its members. In this way its fate was to some extent tied to the fortunes or misfortunes of an external and distant body. When the *Australian Organic Farming and Gardening Society* faltered, and ultimately ceased on the 19th January 1955 (Paull, 2008a, p.15), this may have been a fatal blow also to the LSAT.

The *Rules & Constitution* of the LSAT lacked any provision for the winding up of the association (LSAT, 1947d), and that is surprising. Beyond 1955 the only evidence of the LSAT that was located by the author was a book inscribed “The Living Soil Association of Tasmania, Henry W. Shoobridge, Nov. 1959” in Shoobridge’s hand (Jenks, 1959), and the notes of two speeches (1960a; 1960b). At the time of the latter speech Henry Shoobridge was 85 years of age; he died three years later (RHC, 1963).

Concluding Remarks

These Australian pioneers of organic farming, food, advocacy, and practice, blazed a trail along which others have followed, albeit largely, or wholly, unknowingly. The approach of the LSAT, with its predilection for social inclusion and its avoidance of controversy, contrasts greatly with the original organic manifesto of Lord Northbourne (1940) which framed an explicit and direct contest of “organic versus chemical farming” (Paull, 2006b). The accommodating stance of the LSAT may have compromised its potential for stridency, or inhibited a clarity in advocating for organic farming.

When an organisation founders, it is an easy question to ask: ‘Well why did it fail?’ The flip-side of such a question is: ‘So why did it succeed?’ Organic farming was a very new idea in 1946, it was a foreign idea, and far from home. Yet there was clearly much initial enthusiasm in Tasmania, and uptake was immediate. There followed a decade of distributing journals, circulars, newsletters and pamphlets. There was more than a decade of interactions with a wide variety of government departments and technocrats, of communicating and sharing ideas across the island, across the country, and across the world. The LSAT disseminated its version of the concepts of organics broadly, and seeded the island of Tasmania for an uptake of organic agriculture.

From the account of the present paper and a previous paper, *The Lost History of Organic Farming in Australia* (Paull, 2008a), it is already clear that Australia was an early adopter of the civil society embrace and advocacy of organic farming ideas, and that this civil society activity was contemporaneous with similar developments in other parts of the Anglophone world, including the UK, the USA, and New Zealand.

This present and the previous paper consolidate the view that Australia has a rich, multihued and previously unreported history of organic food and farming advocacy,

innovation, and organisation, that extends back over the past seven decades. It may be that the multiple previous accounts of the history of organic farming in Australia that have started their accounts with the phrase “In the 1980s” (see Paull, 2008a, p.3) have served to cast a cloak of invisibility over the first four decades of organic agriculture advocacy in Australia from the 1940s to the 1970s, and have thereby inhibited the scholarship of seeking out, acknowledging, and recording these earliest pioneers of organics in Australia. Mulligan and Hill (2001) in their *Ecological Pioneers: A Social History of Australian Ecological Thought and Action* similarly give no account of these Australian organic pioneers.

Having now cast aside the cloak of invisibility, there is the opportunity to build on this account of the LSAT. Although the association was contemporaneous with the *Soil Association* of England, the people, the personalities, the place, and even the peacefulness, were all very different. It is reported that the records of England’s *Soil Association* “up until 1965 were lost” (Reed, 2003, p.71). So the archive of this very early organic association in Tasmania is quite a treasure. There is the potential for the account reported here to be augmented in the future by ex-centric archival material that may be held in other institutional archives or elsewhere.

The LSAT was a visionary organisation. The vision of an organic island, six decades on, has surely even more merit now than it did then, yet it remains still a dream, a potential if you prefer, largely unrealized. The report card for Tasmania seems forever stuck at the “could do better” check box.

Since the time of the LSAT, other organic organisations have arisen in Tasmania, and some of those have already ceased. The logic of the original vision of the LSAT remains potent. Tasmania could be a leader in organic agricultural practice. As an island state, at the bottom of the world, Tasmania is as far from sources of transnational pollution as is possible to achieve on a spherical planet. The pollution on the island is almost entirely self inflicted. Tantalizingly, Tasmania takes the lead in green issues, including organic issues, occasionally, and the LSAT is an excellent example of one such initiative, as is the state’s continuing moratorium on the planting of genetically modified organisms (GMOs). Such green initiatives contrast sharply with the history of bounty-hunting the thylacine to extinction, a bounty which was driven by agricultural expansion, and the continuing Tasmanian agricultural practice of poisoning its native wildlife, practices which cast a dirty dark shadow over what is a beautiful, somewhat green, island. It remains valid to ask: ‘when it comes to organics, is Tasmania a leader or a lagger?’ (Paull, 2006a).

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