



# Bristol Bites Back

Fruits & Roots of  
Radical Resilience in  
South-West England



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**Cover picture:**

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Ria Burns Knitwear

Shift Bristol

Sims Hill CSA

Street Goat Bristol

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Upcycled Mushrooms

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## Foreword

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Every crisis has a silver lining. Last summer, as we reeled from the Covid crisis, Ursula Billington, a sustainability activist in Bristol (UK), reached out to ARC2020. Were we interested in stories about community-based food and farming projects in her corner of South-West England?

Ursula's stories of the sustainability movement couldn't have come at a better time.

As we faced into a second wave of Covid and another round of restrictions in the autumn, struggling to picture the new normal, Ursula regaled us with tales of agroecological transition in and around Bristol.

A balm to our beleaguered spirits, these stories are tangible, practical proof that ecosystem-based approaches to food, farming and sustainability do indeed bear fruit for their patient protagonists – in some cases after decades of going against the grain of a productivist mindset.

In the spirit of ARC2020's Letters From The Farm series, Ursula also widens the lens beyond the farm gate. Her focus on the people behind the projects and the wider community ties into broader issues of environmental and social justice, striking parallels with our Nos Campagnes en Résilience project in France.

What really comes across in these stories is the web of community that ties them all together, as the same names crop up like old friends. It's a reminder of the

importance of sticking together in the wake of another crisis – that of **Brexit**. Europe is, after all, more than the institutions of the EU - it's we the people.

Here in the EU, the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) seems ever less conducive to fairer, more nature-friendly farming. We watch with interest as the UK forges its own path with a new Agriculture Bill. Because as strong as the grassroots movement may be, government support is crucial to help enable Bristol's fledgling agroecological transition to take flight.

For the time being, however, British government policies have been little help, as allotments close and access to land slips away. We can learn from the communities in and around Bristol who are defying top-down challenges by coming together at local level. Radical approaches to resilience are more important than ever, and bearing fruits for the grassroots.

ARC2020, June 2021



## Introduction

A decade ago I signed up for Shift Bristol's **Practical Sustainability Course**. Much like Bristol, this “one year adventure in sustainability” appeared to be unique. The varied curriculum covered permaculture, soil and ecology, green energy, organic horticulture, woodland management, natural building and more.

Most exciting was the chance to experience **sustainable living as an everyday reality**, by visiting working projects across England and Wales.

The course cranked open my imagination and showed me an alternative is possible, and there for the taking.

It also reflected the ethos of Bristol at large. I began to notice this alternative thriving wherever I turned: **Bristol is alive with green activity and adventurous, creative changemakers**. The city-wide orchard project supporting garden and wasteland fruit tree growing; the **permaculture gardens** at the heart of Glastonbury, the world's largest music festival; the food growing project **Incredible Edible**, providing fresh produce in city centre parks, shopping centre planters and make-shift railway station gardens.

### Mycelium network

The course began to join the dots of the city for me. It weaved organically in and out of life as I knew it, throwing up new shoots and budding in unexpected places. Its mycelium network of green action weaves through all aspects of city life, the invisible strands binding each thread of change into a greater whole. **Collaboration, community and creativity join forces to engender a fearlessness that inspires pioneering projects and approaches.**

Bristol was hot on the heels of London in establishing the UK's first city farms in the 1970s, joined today by countless thriving community gardens and allotments.

### WHY BRISTOL?

Bristol is known for its creativity, diversity, independent shops and alternative attitudes. Whilst a population of 700,000 clearly represents a range of views and lifestyles, the city is majority left-leaning with 6 Labour MPs and a Green MEP serving 2004-20. There's a unique local currency, the Bristol Pound; eco-housing communities; and a history of counter-culture and activism. The environment sits at the core of much of this activity: the city embraced the Extinction Rebellion movement, and guerrilla gardening is part of the revolution here.

Livestock have been integrated into the urban landscape; with small-scale innovative operations such as mushroom growing and bee keeping they demonstrate the infinite potential of the metropolitan environment.

Resourceful Bristolians put unworked land to good use, and protect precious local spaces like the highly fertile **Blue Finger** on the city's fringe.

Regenerative agriculturalists Fernhill Farm sum up the Bristol spirit when they suggest: “We're probably a bit rebellious, a little anarchistic when it comes to being told...”

Mushroom grower Patrick Mallery reflects it in his attitude towards local growing: “I want to give people the power to take control of their food. It's one of the few things we can do that's quite revolutionary.”

It resonates with the words of ‘gangsta gardener’ **Ron Finley**, adopted by **Edible Bristol**: “Growing food in the city is the most radical art, and you get strawberries.” The project's punchy message sets its intent in veg beds strewn across the city: “Resistance is fertile.”

*“We're probably a bit rebellious, a little anarchistic when it comes to being told...”  
– Andy Wear, Fernhill Farm*

*“I want to give people the power to take control of their food. It’s one of the few things we can do that’s quite revolutionary.” – Patrick Mallery, Upcycled Mushrooms*

### Antidote to gloom and doom

The energy is infectious; it inspired me to get involved and play my part. But after jobs focusing, amongst other things, on the humanitarian impact of climate change, food justice, and the global soil fertility crisis, I was in need of an injection of positivity: I circled back to the inspiration so present on my doorstep.

My local story was in such refreshingly high contrast to the common ‘doom and gloom’ narrative of planetary destruction: the organic growers greening pockets of the city, goats roaming the streets, chemical-free wool shorn only a few miles down the road and dye plants grown just streets away. I was in the centre of a city but in my mind’s eye I saw a wash of green, buzzing wildlife, a hive of activity working towards a more nature-integrated urban landscape. The recent surge of appreciation for nature and local production is accompanied by increased action to tackle the city’s inequality, to make these spaces and facilities available for all.

Exploring each project, I felt renewed optimism for the future, and a reinvigorated desire to get my hands dirty. Hopefully readers near and far will feel the same.

Each project is keen to spread the word, to share skills and resources. Most of all, there’s an ethos of sustainability through diversity, of plants, people, projects and approaches.

In sowing a seed – whether the fruit be wildflowers, salads, fibres, forest schools or roundhouses – **each individual contributes to a beautiful patchwork of solutions to enable diverse communities to flourish.**

I’m sure Bristolians are not the only ones – there must be scores of creative changemakers out there, pioneering new ways with sustainability in their communities. Sharing the visions, practical methods and solutions will turn ripples of positive action into waves, ensuring a more nature-friendly future for people everywhere.

Ursula Billington, June 2021



© Simone Davis



# *Urban Food Revolution Gaining Ground In Bristol*

*Small-scale urban farming is a key piece of the food resilience puzzle. In the face of crisis, local growing has proved a reliable ally. For the city of Bristol, a turning point in the local food revolution has been a community growing project called Grow Wilder that is rooted in respect for the soil and a collaborative ecosystem.*

## Urban Food Revolution Gaining Ground In Bristol

Grow Wilder, a community food and wildlife haven founded on Bristol's urban fringe in 2012, caught immediate attention with its burgeoning produce in a year so wet that established projects reported crops rotting in the ground.

Its secret lies hidden in the rich red depths: the fertile soil of the Blue Finger, a strip of land just 4 miles from the urban centre running parallel to the city's main

connecting motorway. This soil is Grade 1 agricultural quality, a prime food-growing resource existent across only 3% of the UK. **Defined** as "Excellent quality with no or very minor limitations to agriculture. Yields are high and less variable than on land of lower quality" it is clearly a valuable resource – one that Grow Wilder work actively to sustain and protect.



Harvest and the roundhouse at Grow Wilder. © Sims Hill CSA



## Feeding cities

A mammoth **83%** of the UK population lives in urban areas, so ensuring sustainable food security for Britain's cities is crucial. Recently, emerging challenges have aligned to signpost small-scale urban farming as a key piece of the food resilience puzzle. The necessarily urgent response to environmental crises, the impact of the pandemic and Britain's EU-exit have converged to provoke a look inward to the state of our domestic resilience, which in many ways has been found wanting.

In South West England, increasing numbers have been turning to community producers, seeking solutions in supporting local. The solutions found are many, diverse and vital. Urban gardens and allotments support **10x greater** diversity of wildlife and pollinators; they build robust, healthy communities; reduced chemical use improves soil and environmental health.

Water use and emissions decrease, the local economy is boosted. The positives are endless.

Local growing is part of Bristol's past: the Blue Finger's historical market garden quarter provided urban dwellers with fresh fruit and vegetables. Gradually these peri-urban farms vanished, defeated by the industrialised food system, whilst the amount of land dedicated to urban allotments **decreased by 65%** in just 50 years.

The return of community growing to this area in the form of Grow Wilder sparked a turning point in the local food revolution. It became a beacon of urban farming success, inspiring questions around local land access; it calmly contested threats from road development schemes, surviving and rebounding stronger than ever; and it has been at the forefront of the response to rising demand for local food in the wake of the pandemic.



Making progress on the no-dig beds. © Sims Hill CSA

## Building soil

Grow Wilder project leader Matt Cracknell's approach from the get-go has been organic in principle and rooted in respect for the soil: "Building soil is the cornerstone of increasing biodiversity. We champion good soil management because it supports our whole ecosystem as well as addressing climate change."

No-dig and low-till systems reign across much of the site, affecting soil depth improvements that are reversing the damage done by 60 years of prior intense management. Specifically, Matt says, "We increased soil height by 15cm in the first seven years by adding organic matter. When we took it on, the ground was half a metre below normal but it's now back up to soil ground level."

## Collaboration

Grow Wilder quickly homed in on a concept emerging as crucial to community food resilience: collaboration. The six-acre site is shared by several small land-based businesses, supporting its overall sustainability through diversity. Grow Wilder houses a thriving CSA scheme, the Edible Futures salad cooperative and Unusual Edibles exotic vegetable venture; a wildflower nursery and medicinal herbalist attract pollinators to the heart of the site and mushroom cultivation supports soil regeneration.

They are joined by resident badgers, foxes, stoats and newts, a herd of Street Goats grazing on-site brambles and, usually, scores of volunteers, school children and visitors attending work days, plant sales and wildlife walks. It's a lively environment, buzzing with vitality.



Shared Harvest – Community Supported Agriculture. © Sims Hill CSA



Wildflowers and blue skies at Grow Wilder. © Sims Hill CSA

## Access to land

Grow Wilder's approach could well be a workable model for future urban farming: cooperatives splitting land into manageable portions, creating a patchwork of diverse businesses. The model could tackle prohibitive costs of land for new entrants whilst ensuring the various needs of the urban consumer are met and maintaining a healthy, wildlife-rich environment.

Indeed, this is not pure bucolic fantasy: this is what growers desperate to access land have said they want. **Bristol Food Producers** was established to scale-up local food production, helping to match land seekers with providers after finding that 'land access is one of the biggest challenges facing people getting in to farming.' Their 2016 survey found that over half those seeking land had considered cooperating with other tenants; 62% of those seeking 2 acres and 100% pursuing 5-10 acres actively favour a land partnership.



A thriving polytunnel. © Sims Hill CSA

### Rapid response to Covid crisis

When pandemic-provoked lockdowns hit Bristol in March 2020, Matt **urged** urbanites to “use this time to get Bristol buzzing again through our gardens.” The Grow Wilder umbrella also supported a practical response as the impact on food security became evident. As supermarket shelves emptied, it was the local growers that sprang into action to meet the needs of people across the city, including an increasing number struggling to feed their families.

A number of ventures on the site were able to respond rapidly to the crisis, diverting produce from retail customers to homes as well as upping production where possible. **Sims Hill**, the 10-year old CSA scheme employing natural farming and permaculture to their veg box production, gained access to additional land as a result of the Grow Wilder small enterprise model.

When Edible Futures managed to quickly **secure new land** elsewhere to scale up and meet increased demand, Sims Hill took over some of their Grow Wilder plot to increase their own growing.

“I wouldn’t say this is something that happens very often!” says Kristin Sponsler, one of Sims’ founding Directors. “Access to land for small-scale farmers is very difficult in Britain, especially on any kind of a permanent basis.”

## Support from local council

Kristin describes the “slightly fluky” scenario that enabled Sims Hill to become Bristol’s first CSA by establishing a patch of land on the Blue Finger: “It was really the result of special circumstances. The Council wanted to make better use of some of their land currently only used to graze horses, and a small group of growers were looking to establish a CSA. A local food activist helped connect the growers with the Council, who agreed to provide the land for a peppercorn rent if we could get a viable project set up.”

“This is not a circumstance that is going to happen every day,” notes Kristin. “It involved a lot of hard work by dedicated volunteers and some people willing to subsidise the project before spade hit the ground. It certainly wasn’t an easy process.”

The Council’s support has been a lifeline for those looking to establish agroecology projects around the city, where central government support has been notably lacking.

“I don’t feel the current UK government is necessarily a friend to the sustainable food movement,” says Kristin, “though I am open to being proved wrong on that one.”

Certainly, higher authorities have been at the centre of **proposals** to pave over Grow Wilder and Sims Hill sites for urban transport development. These moves have been opposed by city councillors and local MPs. Mayor Marvin Rees stated: “We have a responsibility to preserve important green space for local food production, public and environmental good... I would be interested to explore how our publicly-owned land can connect with aspirations for peri-urban farms (and support any opportunity to develop this.”



January vegetable harvest. © Sims Hill CSA



Grower Chloe explains plant spacing to [Duke of Edinburgh scheme](#) students. © Sims Hill CSA

## Viability

The pandemic does appear in some ways to have improved the viability of local food production. It proved a reliable ally in a time of crisis and highlighted the fragility of long supply chains.

“I think there is new momentum, perhaps especially because of food security issues brought up by the pandemic and Brexit,” says Kristin. “It seems that people suddenly realised how vulnerable the just-in-time delivery system was. Whereas local food businesses were able to pivot quite quickly to upscale deliveries because of the connection to local food supplies and networks.”

It wasn't just Sims Hill that responded rapidly to the surge in demand: local CSA [the Community Farm](#) fulfilled orders that had doubled overnight from 550 to 900+ veg boxes; whilst other urban projects, including therapeutic charity [Elm Tree Farm](#) and permaculture

garden [Purple Patch](#), expanded into vegetable provision in response to the crisis.

Community growers now hope that people will continue to support local. Small-scale producers have limited resources, requiring consistency and commitment to remain viable.

There's agreement that Bristol has become more food-resilient over the last year; the challenge now is to build on these achievements to create long-term systemic change. [Feeding Bristol](#) underlines safeguarding healthy living soils as absolutely critical life support in the urban environment.

If Bristol is to create a food system that supports community and environmental resilience, it will do all it can to protect the Blue Finger and open up land to those primed and itching to get growing.

January 2021



Fernhill fields. © Fernhill Farm

# *Old and New: Somerset's Regenerative Renaissance*

*Livestock farmers Jen and Andy of Fernhill Farm in Somerset, England have been practicing regenerative agriculture since before they had a name for it. Twenty years ago their “extensive nomadic ways” were dismissed as too traditional; now it’s clear these pioneers of sustainable agroecology were ahead of their time.*

*“The person who makes the decisions about what happens on the land is the only person that can save this planet.” – Jen Hunter, Fernhill Farm*

In Somerset, a large rural county in England's South West,  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the land is taken up by farming. The spacious wetland levels that offset the county's undulating hills are close to sea level and often submerged below water where historically – pre-Roman drainage – the area was awash and inhabitants boated between hill communities. In this rainy region, intensive agriculture practices leave soil compacted causing flooding, sediment run-off and pollution.

Across the 75% farms comprising grasslands, however, a renaissance is quietly brewing. Reinvigorated traditional agricultural practices focus on the long-term sustainability of the land. Jen Hunter and Andy Wear of **Fernhill Farm** are leading the charge with their ecologically-sound farm business comprising livestock, wool shop, and an education and events venue – all with nature at front and centre.

### Dedication to the land

Fernhill are pioneers of sustainable agroecology. Andy set about transforming the derelict 160-acre farm in

1997, renovating buildings with reclaimed materials and insulating with Fernhill fleece. Heating is home-grown logs and solar; waste-water is naturally filtered and recycled with willow. 6,000 sheep and 40 cattle roam the fields, and pigs inhabit the woodland. 20,000 visitors attend open days, wool workshops, festivals and weddings each year. It's a breath-taking, all-encompassing sustainability operation that clearly required visionary thinking and a dedication to the land.

For Jen, intimacy with the natural surroundings is absolutely key to their work. “That's the only way you learn,” she says. “Just being on your land and looking at it.”

That's why the pair decided, in 2017, to retrain in Holistic Management and Regenerative Agriculture with the **Savory Institute**: the organisation feeds data back to inform their land and animal management. Discovering Savory was a ‘coming home’ moment: “We thought, we're already doing that! It's not just extensive farming anymore – it's now got a name!”



Using fleece to keep outside vegetable beds warm through the colder months. © Ursula Billington



*“Nature isn’t tidy. It has as much right to roam as everything else on this planet.”  
– Jen Hunter, Fernhill Farm*



Jen with handcrafted Fernhill felt in the on-farm wool shop. © Ursula Billington

## Ecological Outcome Verification

The Institute’s **Ecological Outcome Verification** (EOV) scheme collects data annually for 5 years to measure land health benefits; increasing plant species, invertebrates and soil health qualities, for example, provide concrete evidence of regeneration which allows membership of the Land to Market platform, the ‘world’s first outcome-based sourcing solution (connecting) conscientious brands, retailers and consumers directly to supply from land verified regenerating.’

Fernhill have already received empirical confirmation that environmental health is increasing on-farm. Government botanists tasked with official biodiversity reporting found the farm is gaining species: 130 were observed per 1 km<sup>2</sup> where typically a conventional farm reports 50-60 and an arable farm only around 10 species. Jen nods to their no-till approach: “As soon as you drop the plough you kill the soil food web and everything else disappears.”

“Grass is always moist, and soil underneath a dense layer of sward is the right temperature,” continues Jen. “A ploughed field is dry and dusty, and leaches carbon. Without plants there’s no photosynthesis, so no sequestration.”

## Grasslands and herbivores

As Jen describes it: “Regenerative Agriculture systems mimic what large herbivores have always done. Our electric fence is the wolf that keeps them all in one space.”

Allan Savory, the Institute's founder, modelled his whole-system approach on the predator/prey relation-

ships with which grasslands co-evolved. Mobs of animals are given a small area of grass to consume over a short period before being moved to a fresh patch. The animals eat or squash down the grass; every blade left behind will photosynthesise, plants retain energy for long root growth which combats erosion, and carbon remains in the ground.



Jen records observations of soil through the swards after the sheep have moved on. © Fernhill Farm

## Old and New: Somerset's Regenerative Renaissance

The relationship between grasslands and herbivores is an ancient and mutually-beneficial one, says Jen: “Animals leave behind nutrients, their saliva interacts with the grass, microbes drip off their coat when it rains. The system needs animal waste, dead skin, sweat, and all these lovely nutrients – our soils have always had that here.”

“The key is how long the animals interact with a piece of land,” explains Jen. “Extending the non-grazing days allows plants to recover and mature.”

### Ecosystem services

Andy is a lifelong shepherd and natural philosopher with an organic ethos: “I’ve never applied any fertiliser – it grows too lush a grass. Animals like a variety of feeds and often eat the hedge first because there’s diversity and medicinal plants there.” He suggests regenerative farmers should receive a benefit for the ecosystem services their animals provide. “If I put my stock on an intensive arable unit they will excrete good biome on to it. I think I should get a payment for that,” argues Andy, referring to nomadic pastoralists

who were historically paid to bring animals onto depleted land to graze, trample and leave behind nutritious dung.

The suggestion ties neatly into the English government’s proposals for a new **Environmental Land Management scheme** (ELM) as the backbone of post-CAP agricultural policy following EU-exit. ‘Public payment for public goods’ would see subsidies given for on-farm environmental improvements. However, the scheme lacked detail and is now in danger of being eroded; and recent rejection by MPs of nature, climate change and food standards protections – called “**the biggest betrayal to British farming since the civil war**” – suggests the environment may take a backseat after all. U-turns have been made before though!

Amidst ongoing uncertainty regarding British farming’s future, it’s unsurprising that Jen and Andy are sceptical about Westminster’s discourse around agriculture: “We try to be aware of it, but not let it dictate to us. We’re probably a little bit rebellious, a little anarchistic when it comes to being told....”



Andy brings a sheep in for shearing while others look on. © Ursula Billington



Andy with his newly-shorn sheep. © Ursula Billington

## Responsible consumers

Jen and Andy remain ardently uncompromising in their farming principles, suggesting the only way to make an environmental difference is to patronise Regenerative systems.

The supply chain certainly has a significant role to play. Footwear brand Timberland has committed to regenerative leather use and is co-funding Savory's EOVS scheme. Wrangler recently committed to sustainable cotton sourcing by 2025 and sponsors farmer workshops in soil health.

Sustain, the UK's foremost campaigners for sustainable farming, emphasise the need to support local and British food producers where policy support is lacking.

Jen is looking to expand her responsible consumer base for Fernhill wool products.

The flock is blade-shorn by Andy to ensure the best possible wellbeing for the animal as more wool is left on the sheep: the essential lanolin layer left intact offers greater protection from cold weather or intense sunshine.

Andy is an award-winning shearer and has his moccasins on, sheep splayed and fleece off in under 4 minutes. It's beautiful to watch.



Andy at work with his blades. © Ursula Billington

### Adding value at farm level

Jen is an expert wool handler, sorting the fleece into grades for different purposes. Bulk orders for yarns, insulation and felt come from the commercial Romney X Shetland flock; the speciality and handcraft market is supplied with lustre long wool fibres from Teeswater and Leicester types.

A Nuffield scholar of global wool industry trends, Jen is researching inter-breeding for multi-functionality – “looking at the genetics to create a multi-purpose breed so there’s more income from wool. Traditionally in this country 90% of the income in sheep is from meat.” She hopes to reposition wool as a prima-

ry product in the UK, rather than a by-product of the meat industry.

For Jen “a main driver is passing on skills.” She hopes to establish funding for a Wool School pilot project, providing 6-week internships covering blade-shearing, handling, washing, carding, spinning and crafts: “Practical workshops showing what we can do with natural fibres to add value at farm level without the need for chemical interventions.”

## Wool ecology

The local wool ecology is picking up with recent funding of the South West England branch of Fibershed, a worldwide initiative **born in California** in 2010 that has energised interest in the soil-to-soil textile movement. It aims to rejuvenate regional fibre systems to combat a polluting global system that contributes heavily to climate change. Fernhill supplies fleece to **Bristol Cloth** which is sent off for spinning, travels back to Bristol for natural over-dyeing, then over the road to the Weaving Mill.

Jen expands on the realities of the global textile system, suggesting the local Fibershed should encompass the whole country rather than splitting regionally. "We're so small compared to California. The Bristol Cloth fleeces are sent up to Yorkshire for spinning – which is no distance at all when considering the majority of wool-growing countries have few, if any, wool

processing plants so everything goes back and forth to China. The distance between South and North of England is absolutely nothing compared to the foot-step of an average garment."

Sustainable fashion and fibres certainly seem to be on the rise, while a pandemic-induced resurgence of handicrafts and homegrown lifestyles suggests the time is ripe for Jen's Products with Provenance. Fernhill's own-brand of holistic education will continue to enlighten and inspire with the beauty and abundance of their alternative. The rebels see a rising interest in Regenerative Agriculture and are hoping to emerge ahead of the curve.

November 2020

*"We were once thought of as too traditional with our extensive nomadic ways; now it's seen as revolutionary and we've done nothing different for years. Hardly anything has changed except maybe our understanding of what our regenerative journey feels like!" – Jen Hunter, Fernhill Farm*



The Fernhill wool shop. Ursula Billington



A roe deer at Orchard Farm. Image courtesy of Dave and Helen Boyer

# *How Nature Brought A Family Farm Back To Life*

*As the English countryside is gobbled up by monoculture, one family farm is making space for nature. Dave and Helen Boyer have created a patchwork of habitats where people are welcome too. Could this be a model for a happier, healthier countryside?*

## How Nature Brought A Family Farm Back To Life

The Somerset countryside, in the South West of England, appears at first glance to be consumed by conventional monoculture. Delve deeper, however, and pockets of wild can be found scattered across the rolling landscape. Rustic oases are springing up amidst heavy cultivation.

Dave and Helen Boyer are encouraging the slow, creeping return of the natural world to their family farm. They're working with the landscape to create wetlands, woodlands and feeding grounds for overwintering birds. The revival of a patchwork of habitats is enabling nature to thrive.

### Rethinking the conventional farming approach

Orchard Farm has been in Dave's family for three generations and was, until recently, dedicated to dairy. Purchased by his grandfather in 1927, it's seen the birth of his father and Dave himself. He and Helen now share the farm with his brother's family. It represents the past but also a potential future – perhaps for a budding farmer or naturalist of the next generation. For now, the pair are working to integrate nature more fully into the operation.

Their journey back to the heart of rural England, however, has not been a conventional one.



Helen Boyer with conservation grazers – Exmoor ponies. Image courtesy of Dave and Helen Boyer



## How Nature Brought A Family Farm Back To Life



Dave Boyer (left) and Bruce, a volunteer, clearing reeds. Image courtesy of Dave and Helen Boyer

Raised on the farm, Dave completed an agricultural degree before promptly setting off with Helen to honeymoon in southern Africa. The pair didn't return for 27 years. In that time, they learned the principles of ecological land management and the benefits of nature connection. As a game park ranger, Dave enjoyed exclusive entry to the area's vast nature reserves. Moving into marine biology and losing this privilege, he realised the value of free-roaming access to the natural world.

Intent on developing their own Somerset 'game park' when they returned to the farm in 2003, Dave says this understanding was front of mind: "We said, let's have a nature reserve but let's get people in there – for awareness, education, enjoyment."

It's a refreshing attitude where only 8% of English countryside is publicly accessible, with the remaining 92% subject to trespassing laws.

At the time of their return, Dave says, Orchard Farm "was not a going concern," and his parents were struggling. It was the right time to rethink the conventional farming approach. For Dave, this meant bringing the needs of the natural environment to the fore. The Boyers set to work on what would become the Carymarsh nature reserve, with support from the Country-side Stewardship scheme.

## How Nature Brought A Family Farm Back To Life



Carymarsh nature reserve before development, and below, a few years after development. Images courtesy of Dave and Helen Boyer



## How Nature Brought A Family Farm Back To Life

### Restoring wetland and woodland

They first restored one particularly boggy area to the natural wetland that predominates over this part of Somerset.

“Ecologically, prior to agriculture, the bottom part of our farm would have been very wet,” explains Dave. “There would have been reed beds and a lot of scrubby damp vegetation.” It made sense, then, to deliberately flood patches and divert ditches to feed water directly into the field. The area now comprises 3hs of reedbeds and one of open water, surrounded by marshy expanses of just over 8hs in total.

The pair moved on to the woodland next, analysing a pre-intensive agriculture pollen species mix to replicate as closely as possible in their planting.



Volunteers planting reeds in the wetfield. Image courtesy of Dave and Helen Boyer

Converting the fields, traditionally set to maize, has had a dramatic impact on local wildlife.



“If we can get otters, we’ve made it!” Wetfield volunteers in 2006. Image courtesy of Dave and Helen Boyer

## How Nature Brought A Family Farm Back To Life

The Boyers were thrilled when otters started visiting the wetland area. “We always said, if we can get otters, we’ve made it!” says Dave.

He suggests the creatures benefit when water courses link across the landscape. “It seems that if we have a particularly wet year, with fields and villages flooded, there’s a lot of movement of otters. I think they’re dispersing up these flooded rivers and ditches, to places like ours, quite far from where you’d normally see them.”

### Hopes for birds

They’ve also had some success in attracting farmland birds – those beleaguered species so steeply in decline in the UK and across Europe.

“When we developed the woodland area we had what we believe was the last breeding population of tree sparrows in Somerset. There’s great hopes that we can increase their population,” says Dave.

A 1h strip of the farm’s land has been set to winter seed, providing forage for birds throughout the cold period. Dave says it proved successful for a time: “We had huge populations of chaffinches, yellow hammers, reed bunting – all the farmland birds.”

Numbers have dropped in the last few years, which could be due to warmer winter temperatures; they continue to plant and wait to see if the birds will return.



Tree Sparrow, seen in 2011. Image credit: Stewart Canham



Two great cranes on Orchard Farm. Image courtesy of Dave and Helen Boyer

### Softly-softly approach

With their softly-softly approach, the Boyers are bringing the neighbours along on their nature restoration journey. The response of some local farmers suggests an interest in more ecologically sound methods may be on the rise: “These are traditional, old farmers that in my mind would see lots of green grass as a good field; one with dandelions and buttercups is terrible. But some of them have surprised us. They’re keen and interested, definitely,” says Dave.

Orchard Farm rents nearly 60hs to a dairy farmer who, whilst running a conventional operation, does his best to integrate environmental principles. The Countryside Stewardship ethos has remained despite the scheme lapsing in 2014. Practically this means ecological management of trees and hedges, leaving aside margins for nature, and a long-term view on

soil and environmental health. Dave says the tenancy agreement works on an informal basis of mutual understanding: “He’s very aware that he’s expected to operate as far as possible in a nature-friendly manner.”

And the development of Carymarsh is supporting a burgeoning local nature restoration movement. Typical to a landscape comprising 75% grassland enterprises, Orchard Farm is surrounded on three sides by pasture and monoculture; but the 4th is inhabited by an **environmental centre**. Its large nature reserve adjoins the Boyers’ own, growing the block of wilderness to 50hs.

## How Nature Brought A Family Farm Back To Life



A grass snake spotted at Orchard Farm. Image courtesy of Dave and Helen Boyer

The centre usually welcomes around 5-6000 children annually. Meanwhile, the Boyers have been happy to see their own reserve in use over the lockdown period.

“In the last year, the place has been buzzing,” Dave says. “Every day there’ll be 15, 20 people wandering around, some with dogs, some with cameras or binoculars. It’s become very popular and, hopefully, much appreciated.”

This could be the model for a happier, healthier countryside: linked-up patches of wild amidst cultivated fields, creating a nature-friendly network for wildlife roaming the countryside. And the harmonious integration of human life, enjoying and appreciating the benefits of nature, thriving within and alongside the natural world.

April 2021



Dave (right) and Andrew (volunteer) hedgelaying. Image courtesy of Dave and Helen Boyer



The playful nature of goats! © Simone Davis

# *Street Goat: A Blueprint for Urban Agroecology*

*Street Goat is a new urban farming project that grazes goats on disused land around the city of Bristol. Run by a 20-member community cooperative, it provides local people with sustainable, healthy milk and meat, while helping to recover overgrown land for horticultural use.*

## Street Goat: A Blueprint for Urban Agroecology

Viral videos were a feature of many locked-down lives in 2020, and a [candid local news clip](#) captured the imagination of the UK earlier this year: a wild Kashmiri goat herd, emboldened by the deserted streets of lockdown, trotting into Llandudno in north Wales and making themselves at home in the town. Roaming the streets with wild eyes askew and tongues lolling, they raised a collective smile from people across the country isolated in their homes.

Now a new project settling into Bristol, in south west England, is making those remarkable scenes from locked-down Wales a part of the urban everyday: take a stroll around the city – the largest in the region with a population of almost 700,000 – and clusters of goats pop into view grazing pockets of disused land and municipal allotments.

**Street Goat** is a thriving urban agroecology project producing sustainable food. The first goats arrived on an abandoned allotment site just 3 miles from the city centre, following a fruitful community engagement and crowdfunding campaign in 2016. The purpose-built

roundwood timber milking parlour was sourced from local, sustainable woodland. The project has been transformative.

The original Street Goat concept focused on turning disused land into productive space: bringing goats in to clear scrub, improving sustainability whilst providing a workable model for non-intensive urban dairy production. The team hoped to encourage engagement in farming by exploring innovative ways to integrate these activities into city life. The unfolding project revealed that goats bring a myriad of benefits to the urban setting. Their playful nature amuses and endears in equal measure – as members Bex Ashton and Simone Davis attest.

“Goats are approachable. They greet you and want attention. They have interesting characters,” say Bex and Simone. “They’re cheeky, stubborn, really funny; and they’re smart. They’re lovely animals to work with, even when it’s hard work.”



Goats graze on bramble to make way for growing space at the back of Bridge Farm eco-community. © Ursula Billington



## Street Goat: A Blueprint for Urban Agroecology



Communing with the kids. Image © Simone Davis

### Reimagining a city

Simone Davis found her initial curiosity in the project turning into more of a lifestyle shift. Her interest arose from concern for the environment and questions around ethical food consumption, particularly the poor conditions of industrial dairy farms – but now:

“I know where my milk’s coming from, I’ve worked for it, it’s raw and I believe there are health benefits to that. I don’t have to buy processed milk that’s unethical for the animals, there’s no packaging – all this appeals to me.”

But she found there’s far more to it than that. Connection with the animals brings a sense of perspective that might otherwise be missing for a typical urbanite:

“Waking in the winter at 7am, it’s pitch black and freezing cold, but when I’m milking and leaning my head against the warm belly of a goat – then it’s worth it! I watch the sunrise and it grounds me.”

Street Goat is a cooperative. Members pay an annual fee for a milk share, then book milking shifts in on

a weekly basis to suit their schedules. Herein lies its glory: many Bristolians dream of adopting land-based lifestyles but love the city. A pragmatic model based on shared responsibility and workload enables the best of both worlds. It’s farming, first and foremost, but structured to fit with an urban style of work, play and social life: “Owning a goat is a huge commitment, the animal needs you twice a day without fail. But being part of a coop, it’s possible to live in an urban environment and you don’t have to be a farmer every day,” explains founding member Bex Ashton.

It’s a way of reimagining a city, making it happier and healthier for people and planet, with greater food sovereignty and environmental connection. It brings the benefits of rural life to the culture and opportunities of the urban environment. But that doesn’t mean involvement is a frivolous affair: animal husbandry is a serious endeavour. The Milkers’ Agreement states the project is ‘not a petting zoo’ and workshops teach butchery, skin-stretching and tanning hides.

## Street Goat: A Blueprint for Urban Agroecology



Bridge Farm eco-community: the entrance is under a motorway. Image © Ursula Billington

### Full community involvement

The original group found learning together strengthened members' commitment, and choosing a non-hierarchical model has been beneficial: "We're sharing the responsibility. It's completely outside of any other organisational structure because it's all of our responsibilities, with these lives at the centre of it. It's what ties us all together."

Building relationships has always been central to Street Goat, whose ethos is full community involve-

ment. Local support was instrumental from the outset. The City Council was supportive, keen to uphold Bristol's reputation as a 'green city' and backing the valuable use of otherwise unworkable land. The regional **Wildlife Trust** took on grazing goats to encourage wildflowers, maintain limestone scree and increase biodiversity and grassland habitat. Goats are helping to clear land at the **Bridge Farm eco-community**. Grazers will soon be employed to maintain land around wind turbines.

Founding member Carol Laslett leads on the grazing aspect: "The land is being managed in line with sustainable, resilient principles which bring levels of benefits, much more than machines. It takes longer but is gentler and more sympathetic to the surrounding area. There's a lot of community benefit, opportunity for education and huge benefits to the environment."

Carol is also instrumental in the Meat Goat arm of the project, explaining that meat production is integral to the sustainable farming model given few billy goats are needed for breeding purposes: "We take a waste product of the dairy industry – the male kids – raise them on waste or wild land for conservation grazing, give them a good life for 9-18 months, and then they become a food source."



Fruits of their grazers: Troopers Hill allotments is the site the first goats were introduced to. Image © Ursula Billington

## Street Goat: A Blueprint for Urban Agroecology



“Waking in the winter at 7am, it’s pitch black and freezing cold, but when I’m milking and leaning my head against the warm belly of a goat – then it’s worth it! I watch the sunrise and it grounds me.” Simone Davis has found unexpected benefits to her milking shifts. Image © Simone Davis

### *“Know it’s possible, take a risk and throw yourself in”*

Challenges are so far a sidenote in the life of Street Goat and its popularity is on the rise. This year Bex, in her day job at one of Bristol’s two city farms, saw a boost to food growing; from there she anticipated an increased interest in Street Goat: “We’ve never seen that many people on their allotments. We sold more seedlings than ever before. We felt, people are going to want a connection, a green space to go to. We predicted it.” Now UK estate agents are reporting record levels of interest in rural homes from city dwellers looking to escape the concrete jungle for the countryside; whilst those at home in the city seek a greater connection to environment and community. A wave of enthusiasm for the project has resulted in three new sites being established around the city this year.

Street Goat are currently working on blueprint resources for other cities inspired to boost their green credentials with goats. The model is financially sustainable, the interest is on the rise and the tools are simple. Simone is enthusiastic about the potential for much more grazing in our cities: “Know it’s possible, take a risk and throw yourself in!”

And, if any urbanites need a little more encouragement – with goats, it seems, there are endless ways to inspire. Simone introduces the concept of goat yoga: “It’s outdoor yoga with little kid goats jumping on you – picture people doing downward dog surrounded by goats on top of them. It could be coming our way in Bristol!” Or, perhaps, to a city near you...

October 2020



Patrick Mallery with Grey Oysters growing on felled poplar. Image courtesy of Patrick Mallery

# *Waking Up To The Power Of Mushrooms*

*Interest is mushrooming in the power of fungi to feed and heal people and the planet. On one urban farm in Bristol, mushrooms upcycled from wood chip are building topsoil as well as feeding the local eaters. Meanwhile another nearby mushroom growing initiative is giving wealthy landowners an incentive to preserve their woodland.*

## Waking Up To The Power Of Mushrooms

Fungi were only granted Kingdom of Life status in the 1960's, yet they possess a wealth of unique qualities and a dramatic potential to shape our lives. Their powers range from health-giving and medicinal properties to soil remediation, **toxic waste clean-up** and sustainable food solutions. **Mushroom leather** is even being employed in the production of vegan shoes.

As well as these practical applications, fungi provide a shining example of effective reciprocal relationships with other life in the surrounding environment.

Fungi's root-like tendrils, the mycelial networks covering vast distances underground, support and sustain nearly all living systems – dating back 500m years to the first ancestors of plants which, as freshwater algae, landed on the marshy shores of rivers and took root in the fungi found there.

These foraged for water and nutrients for their new algal partners; the algae reciprocated with energy-containing carbon compounds obtained by photosynthesis. A relational way of being developed between the organic life forms.



An Upcycled Mushroom harvest. Image courtesy of Patrick Mallery

### Upcycled mushrooms

Above ground, Bristol city's food and wildlife project **Grow Wilder** demonstrates this natural reciprocity in its collection of complementary sustainable land-based enterprises. Alongside wildflowers, medicinal herbs and veg production, fungi have played a vital role in restoring soil and supporting neighbouring plants.

**Upcycled Mushrooms**, the brainchild of Patrick Mallery, brought edible mushroom cultivation – along with its many life-sustaining benefits – to the site.

The wine cap, 'garden giant' or 'godzilla mushroom', is a secondary decomposer that thrives on leftover wood: brash, small branches and pulp. This favoured food source can be easily replicated with a wood-chipper, and the city is heaving with tree surgeons.

Grow Wilder set up an 'open door policy' for wood-chip dumping on-site and created masses of mushroom beds; the wine caps consumed the wood, leaving healthy topsoil behind.

"It's an amazing mushroom – next level!" beams Patrick. Twenty-five centimetres of woodchip became 5 cm of chip and 2.5 cm of topsoil within one growing season, plus a crop of fresh mushrooms ready for the local market.



"It's an amazing mushroom – next level!" The wine cap or 'godzilla mushroom'. Image courtesy of Patrick Mallery

## Complexity and scalability

Food production reaped the benefits too: lacing the woodchip mulch around fruit bushes with wine caps resulted in faster growth and bigger bushes as the mushrooms rapidly processed the chip back into nutrients; greater foliage then provided the perfect shady canopy for the mushroom to fruit underneath – a premier example of companion planting in a mutually-beneficial fungus-plant relationship.

Patrick suggests there are significant implications for larger scale agriculture: “There’s nothing to stop it being done, using tractors and big chippers. It would be interesting to incorporate as part of a largescale rotation, similar to lays where the ground is covered for 3-4 years and cattle graze on it to rebuild the nutrient base. Wine caps could be used to restore topsoil before returning the land to arable.”



Patrick also helped set up Bristol's urban goat farm. Image courtesy of Patrick Mallery

## Waking Up To The Power Of Mushrooms

There's also growing evidence that mushrooms can provide support for pollinators: bees have been seen eating wine cap mycelium in what is presumed to be a preventative health measure. Studies in the US suggest that adding a reishi mushroom tincture to sugar syrup improves bees' immune system, significantly reducing virus levels.

It's an emerging field and Patrick is cautiously optimistic, suggesting the complexity of nature is a challenge to identifying specific medicinal sources, but also a positive in and of itself.

"The relationships are so site-specific: for example, maybe they also need particular wildflowers in place [to benefit from specific mushrooms]," he notes.

"But any increase in diversity is always going to be a benefit," Patrick adds. "Food growing areas are usually non-diverse as we try to manage them into efficient productivity machines; any way we can add complexity will almost certainly benefit the wider environment."



Mushroom foraging in the woods. Image courtesy of 42 Acres

## Host trees

Patrick is also involved in an exciting project in England's South West to establish a woodland-based shiitake growing enterprise on the site of **42 Acres**, a retreat centre and regenerative organic farm. The area is semi-rural, surrounded by rich woods and agriculture.

The operation intends to demonstrate to the many surrounding wealthy landowners that woodlands can

generate an income whilst, as Patrick notes, highlighting “the ecological benefits of keeping them as woodlands.”

“There are loads of farms that own giant tracts of woods that they deem unproductive,” explains Patrick. “My aim is to turn them into something that creates money so they can be kept as woodland, rather than the owners chopping them down for profit.”



Although 42 Acres are keen to return their conifer plantations back to native broadleaf, Patrick is concerned about killing host trees and thus losing a “whole heap of fungi” that have taken decades to build up. Image courtesy of 42 Acres



## Waking Up To The Power Of Mushrooms

He's had to navigate challenges along the way: whilst 42 Acres are keen to quickly return the conifer plantation part of their 45-acre woodland back to native broadleaf, Patrick is concerned for "the whole heap of fungi associated with this conifer. If they kill the host trees and with them the mycorrhizal species, we lose

a plethora of fungi that's spent 20-30 years building up to the point of producing fruiting bodies."

Patrick has suggested a more gradual approach: taking out some trees, maybe one in every four, keeping the wider ecology in mind; hoping mycelial networks will remain intact and reassociate with the new saplings.



Fruiting mushroom logs. Image courtesy of 42 Acres

For this particular cultivation operation, Patrick obtained a shiitake culture from a supplier – as a non-native species he can't clone from the wild, as he often would – choosing one with the right characteristics to thrive outdoors.

He uses local wood, typically a beech that needs felling, impregnating the logs with a special drill bit and tool for stamping culture into the holes, then sealing them up against contaminants with wax.

After 12-18 months the logs are shocked, in a bath of cold water, into producing fruiting bodies. They typically fruit for 3-4 years, twice in spring and once or twice in autumn, weather-dependent.

## Waking Up To The Power Of Mushrooms



“People are still waking up to the power of mushrooms,” says Tasha, pictured here with her harvest. Image courtesy of 42 Acres

### Bio-mimicry

“Our outdoor mushroom farm is a form of biomimicry,” says Tasha Elena Stevens, the retreat’s resident mushroom expert. “We’re copying the natural process – we harness the intelligence in the form of the mushroom, whereby they act as alchemist and turn the tree and sunlight into food, medicine and nutrients.”

Tasha expands on the operation at 42 Acres: “We’re growing our own native medicinal and edible strains found on-site, as well as the shiitakes. It’s a much slower, more sustainable process than growing indoors. We work with respect for and in collaboration with nature.”

## Waking Up To The Power Of Mushrooms



Working the land at 42 Acres. “We work with respect for and in collaboration with nature,” says Tasha. Image courtesy of 42 Acres

### Natural feedback

The beauty lies in the natural feedback into the local ecosystem. Patrick primarily works with decomposers which turn wood back into soil and nutrients. Primary decomposers such as shiitake grow directly on logs or dense wood in the wild; the woody pulp they leave after feeding is then consumed by secondary decomposers.

The cultivation system’s in-built recycling process takes a log and slowly turns it back into soil via a series of different fungi; the nutrients contribute directly to the health of the forest floor, surrounding plants and trees.



Grow your own: Patrick wants to give people the power to take control of their food. Pictured: Lion's Mane DIY kit and the resulting fruit. Image courtesy of Patrick Mallery

## Waking Up To The Power Of Mushrooms

### *“I want to give people the power to take control of their food”*

As well as cultivation, Patrick’s passion lies in sharing the joy and benefits of mushrooms – and food production – as widely as possible.

Following the success of cultivation for the local food market, Patrick has diversified into production of grow-your-own mushroom kits, teaching and agro-ecology consultancy around the world, from Scotland to France to Kenya.

His DIY growing kits are designed to remove the challenging technical elements so that even the greenest

of beginners can experience the thrill of their own homegrown mushroom.

And, in the spirit of interconnectedness, it doesn’t stop there: “The idea spreads beyond fungi. It’s food, and by proxy the environment, as a wider thing – pulling all the pieces together,” says Patrick.

“I want to give people the power to take control of their food. It’s one of the few things we can do that’s quite revolutionary,” he continues. “To see radical, systemic change we need to start taking ownership of those basic things – food, water, shelter, energy.”



*“To see radical, systemic change we need to start taking ownership of those basic things – food, water, shelter, energy,” says Patrick. Image courtesy of 42 Acres*

“Even inspiring people to ask questions around whether it’s possible to grow their own food... Everyone starts from somewhere,” acknowledges Patrick. “There are a lot of people that think it’s overwhelming, so if I can take all the technicalities out and inspire

them with the first taste of their own Lion’s Mane – that’s what I want to do. My teaching is very much trying to push that idea forwards.”

February 2021



Grapes thriving in the Aldwick vineyard. © Aldwick Estate

# *Sustainable Wine's Reign of Terroir*

*Undaunted by the challenge of growing grapes in rainy England, the family-run Aldwick Estate turned to wine production as a way to improve soil health. Ursula Billington spoke to the wine growers about fungicides, inspiration from France, and the future of wine-making in the UK.*

## Sustainable Wine's Reign of Terroir

Wine-making could be seen as a bold venture in England's famously soggy West Country, with grapes so notoriously prone to fungal disease. Yet it's here that **Aldwick Estate** manages to produce their internationally award-winning wines – whilst improving the health of soil and environment as they go.

Under the charge of the Watts family for five generations to date, the 300-acre Estate has seen a number of different uses, incorporating viniculture for the first time in 2008, and focusing on practices that are enriching the land for generations to come.

### **Bloom and boom: the state of sustainable wines in the UK**

Despite the UK's considerable consumption of the stuff, local conditions are not congenial to wine production: vineyards in England and Wales account for

just 1% of the domestic market. A rapid increase in the last decade now puts England's official vineyard count at 450, with production of 15.6m bottles per year.

Vineyards are normally located in southerly regions with warm, drier climates that make for higher sugar levels in the grapes; suitable for white and sparkling varieties which favour the chalky limestone of England's East Coast counties such as Kent and Sussex – with soil and climate comparable to France's Champagne region.

The rise in popularity of domestic wines has been attributed, largely, to a changing climate that includes our recent spate of hotter summers; and to the high rate of returns a farmer sees compared to standard crops.



Sandy Luck, Owner and Managing Director at Aldwick Estate, in the vineyard she established. The Estate has been in her family for five generations. © Aldwick Estate

## Sustainable Wine's Reign of Terroir

But the most exciting explanation, by far, is the growth of interest in the local food movement. Consumers are actively choosing to reduce air miles and support local, in numbers significant enough to render home-grown wine production viable.

What difference does this make to the state and sustainability of Britain's green and pleasant land?

According to the headlines organic wine is booming in the UK – sales are up a **whopping 47%** this year – yet the methodology accounts for only 3% of English vineyards, and only 1% are biodynamic.

This might not be altogether bad news. The heavy chemical application of conventional wine production is notoriously hard on soil health; whilst organic methods have become controversial for reliance on a similarly intense use of additives – notably copper which lingers in the ground, reducing soil fertility and harming wildlife, groundwater and farmers.

In the face of these challenges, many growers are adopting a more pragmatic philosophy that, rather than adhering strictly to specific labels, production should aim for environmental sustainability whilst working to achieve this in the best possible way for the local landscape.



The Aldwick Estate introduced viniculture in 2008, with a focus on practices that will enrich the land for generations to come. © Aldwick Estate

## Agroecology à la Aldwick

Nestled in the heart of North Somerset, Aldwick Estate comprises a sheep farm, events venue and 12 acres of established vineyard. It historically farmed dairy, then arable, then an intensive pig operation until 2012. This final use impacted heavily on the land, with feed additives killing off earthworms and microbial fauna. Removing the pigs and implementing sustainable land management, however, has improved the soil significantly and worm numbers are now back up.

Agroecological practices across the farm include rotational grazing, haylage production, closed-loop processes and diversification; vineyard management focuses on a well-rounded approach to sustainability with soil health as a foundation and a long-term view towards ecologically responsible wine production of the highest order.

Dave Morris joined Aldwick as vineyard manager in January 2020 following years of practice in biodynamic wine production. He recognises the Estate's approach is more complex but feels the ethos matches his own in spirit, in that land management should reflect the needs of the landscape in the context of local geography and climate.

In Somerset, this means use of fungicides and herbicides but with an emphasis on long-term reduction and absolute minimisation – predicting the viable possibility of a spray programme that falls within the bounds of organic certification within the next few years. This relies on an improved soil structure which supports vine health to the point that susceptibility to disease is reduced. Healthy vines and reduced spraying regimes are a win-win for the land and the Estate: knock-on effects include increased soil microbiology, reduced compaction, less diesel use and lower farm costs.



Vineyard manager Dave Morris at work © Aldwick Estate



## Soil first

With these benefits in mind, a focus on soil improvements is absolutely key: “Soil health has always been a cornerstone of the approach here at Aldwick and remains of utmost importance,” says Dave.

This begins with a unique under-vine composting regime. The latest recipe is proportionally high in carbon to compensate for the site’s naturally high nitrogen content. It consists of mixed wastes from neighbouring farms to supplement the Estate’s own straw and hay waste from the stables, grape marc from the winery, wood chippings from the tree surgeon’s yard, grass clippings and shredded office paper. Dave is proud of this closed circuit of waste re-purposing “as aimed for in the most ambitious sustainable systems.”

Compost application aims to improve the vineyard’s heavy clay topsoil, increasing organic matter, biota, water storage and fertility – so as to supply all the vines’ nutritional needs without petrochemical-derived foliar feeds.

Dave has already seen benefits: “There’s been significant improvement in the water-holding capacity of the soil – less water-logging and hard setting in dry summer months. Building the vineyards from the soil up, we see incidental evidence year-on-year of greater diversity of plants and wildlife across the site.”

The better the soil, the easier it is to weed and the larger the weeding-window – meaning fewer passes with the mechanical weeder and reduced spraying without reduced efficacy.



“Building the vineyards from the soil up, we see incidental evidence year-on-year of greater diversity of plants and wildlife across the site,” says vineyard manager Dave Morris. © Aldwick Estate

## Spot spraying and sustainability

Dave likens the approach to the lutte raisonnée systems of France, focused on weed removal under vines to minimise disease pressure.

In Somerset, with rainfall and nitrogen plentiful, weeds appear continuously through the growing season meaning mechanical weeding is necessary; every effort is made to protect soil structure by limiting machine use, so spot spraying augments the weeding programme.

Purists might disapprove, but Dave reasons: “Spot spraying allows us to minimise tractor use, diesel consumption and many extra mechanical weeding passes without having to perform full blanket herbicide application. Not relying on one method allows us to be adaptable in timing and application of either one to optimum conditions.”

This approach, says Dave, is key to achieving many goals of the Estate, including long-term sustainability: “Where little or no synthetic chemicals are used for disease control, as in biodynamics, focus must be on the highest quality cultural practices – maximising air-flow and sunlight through the canopy – aided by natural plant and mineral sprays. This invariably means smaller crops and higher prices.”

Aldwick use the same high-quality cultural techniques, but with support from minimal applications of synthetic fungicides that are well timed, carefully planned and adaptive to reflect conditions and disease pressure.

Chemical intervention is further restricted by use of homemade compost and willow teas: “This allows us to achieve another really important thread of sustainability – producing very good yields of high-quality grapes at less cost than a biodynamic or organic system, which is reflected in the final price of the wine.”



Raise a glass to a rosé future: With the UK's new agriculture bill and an ecologically minded younger generation of wine growers, the future looks bright for sustainable British wines. © Aldwick Estate

## Fresh start

Dave is optimistic about Aldwick's future – and cautiously hopeful for the domestic industry in light of new environment-centred agricultural policy.

“It's difficult to say until the detail is filled in between now and 2024, but the focus on soil seems to show a new way of thinking from Government,” he notes. “Hopefully the ideals of rewarding those who are putting more into the land, improving soil health and ecology whilst maintaining productivity, are put into legislation. Our approach fits very well with those ideals.”

He suggests related financial incentives could have beneficial repercussions such as access to better machinery, reducing land impacts and emissions. For the industry as a whole: “I hope and believe that many producers will begin or have started farming their land in a more ecological way that best reflects the specifics of their site and circumstances. A dynamic government policy such as ELM can only accelerate that.”

A newly-established national scheme, Sustainable Wines of Great Britain, aims to minimise the sector's impact on the environment and support its contribution to conservation and biodiversity. Membership already constitutes 40% of domestic wine production.

The youth of the UK wine industry could actually work in its favour, muses Dave: “Lack of history makes it easier to start out on a better path ecologically than many other wine-growing regions find themselves. I hope viticulture continues to grow as a responsible, ecologically-sound type of farming.”

There could be opportunities, too, in marginal land unsuited to food production: “I hope there'll be a greater move towards using these sites for wine – as is the norm in traditional grape-growing countries. If Government policy could incentivise this, it could be beneficial to everyone.”

December 2020



Sheep ready for shearing on Fernhill Farm. Image credit: Ursula Billington

# Who Grew Your Clothes? Soil to Soil Textiles

*An innovative textile community in Bristol is spearheading new ways with wool. Ursula Billington unravels the disconnect with where our clothes come from, and spotlights some of the women working to pull the wool from our eyes.*

## Who Grew Your Clothes? Soil to Soil Textiles

Asked to consider soil, farming, sustainability, most will settle immediately on a subject close to many hearts: food.

Yet we're equally dependent on another soil-based system, one that has similarly dramatic consequences for the planet: our second skin, that of our clothes.

### The next sustainability challenge

Whilst awareness around the environmental impacts of global food systems and their sustainable counterparts appears to be growing, there is a widespread disconnect of perception between the state of the environment and the garments we clothe ourselves in.

Soil-depleting growing methods, emissions generated by monumental global supply chains, polluting chemical dyes go unnoticed. Meanwhile, traditional skills, regional livelihoods, and opportunities to regenerate land with circular natural fibre-derived processes are lost.



Slow fashion: Wool workshop at Fernhill Farm. Image credit: Ursula Billington

The globalised textiles industry has devastating consequences for the environment upon which it relies. Cotton, for example, which accounts for 40% of global textile production, relies on more pesticides and insecticides than any other single major crop. 60% of textiles are produced from fossil-fuel based synthetic fibres; polyester alone is responsible for c.35% of the ocean's microfibres. Annual global emissions from textile production – before transportation – exceed the carbon footprint of international flights and shipping combined.



Ria's Naturally Dyed Knitted Boxy Crop, dyed with Coreopsis, Indigo, Eucalyptus leaves and Birch Bark. Image credit: Ria Burns Knitwear

## Disconnect

Why do those that consider so carefully the sustainable sourcing of what they put in their bodies, neglect to consider the fibres they put on their bodies every day?

Sustainable fashion researcher/writer **Rebekah Smith** suggests the issue is a fundamentally systemic one, the globalised nature of the industry itself. “Some of the disconnect comes from the supply chain being so fragmented. The fibres are grown in one place, then it’s (*the garment*) made in another place, packaged in another and sold in another country. A lot of disconnection comes from the fact it’s not right in front of our noses.”

She suggests the industry may be complicit in keeping the pervasive environmental and human rights impacts under the radar. “There is resistance to looking too deeply into these issues, to transparency. The conversation around sustainability in fashion has only started to pick up momentum in the last couple of years, and it’s only really those already interested in sustainability that are thinking about it.”

Fast fashion, she suggests, only works in a world where the consumer is removed from its effects: “Ignorance is bliss when it comes to the fashion industry!”



Fernhill Farm supplies the South West England Fibreshed, part of a movement aiming to restore soil health, build carbon stock and strengthen local economies by regenerating local textile ecosystems. Image credit: Ursula Billington

## Turning the tide

The burgeoning soil-to-soil textile movement plans to change all that. The cause has been brought to light in the main by **Rebecca Burgess** who, in attempting to source all her clothing from fibres grown, woven and sewn within her 240km bioregion of North Central California, spawned the global Fibershed movement.

Burgess compared food and fibre to striking effect in her book *Fibershed*, highlighting the absurdity of a globalised textiles industry: “Imagine living in a community where noone had a kitchen, and the closest refrigerator, stove, oven, cooking pots and pans were all located overseas... Food would arrive from overseas in boxes with no ingredients list.”

According to **Greenpeace**, ‘If the fashion industry were a country, its emissions would rank almost as highly as the entire European continent.’ On its current path, fashion will increase its water consumption, energy emissions, and waste creation by over 50% by 2030, **compared to 2015 levels**.

Fibershed intends to turn the tide of destruction by re-localising the industry. The initiative has been widely adopted, with bioregional ‘sheds’ cropping up around the globe. It aims to restore soil health, build carbon stock and strengthen local economies by regenerating local textile ecosystems.



Weaving with natural fleece at Fernhill Farm. Image credit: Ursula Billington



A jumper dyed with *Coreopsis Tinctoria*. Image credit: Ria Burns Knitwear

## Uncomplicated message

The UK's first **Fibreshed** is located in South West England, a region well known for its green initiatives and support for local food. The project was masterminded by active participants of the **Bristol Textile quarter**, itself an umbrella collective housing **Working Wool**, an educational project pioneered by local regenerative agriculturalists **Fernhill Farm**; and the **Bristol Cloth**, a fabric created from Fernhill wool, natural dyed by **Botanical Inks**, and processed at the **Bristol Weaving Mill**.

Rebekah Smith has been working with Fibreshed South West's founder, Emma Hague, to define and establish the project. She explains Hague's ultimate aim is to connect farmers to producers and then custom-

ers: "She's concentrating on Regenerative Agriculture within textiles, as well as local production; to promote a way of producing textiles which is completely natural so you can compost it at the end of the life cycle."

The collective intends to deliver a clear, uncomplicated message to the responsible consumer: "They're trying to redefine sustainable textiles and cut through the green washing, laying out what sustainable or regenerative actually means. There's currently a lot of confusion and grey areas."

## Who Grew Your Clothes? Soil to Soil Textiles



Fernhill Farm uses fleece to its full potential – from building insulation to warmth for over-wintering plants and nutritious mulch for vegetables. Pictured: A fleece-lined key-hole garden ready to be filled with compost and plants. Image credit: Ursula Billington

### Regenerative economy

In defining a set of fixed criteria for their textiles, Rebekah says, the hope is to invigorate the local ethical consumer market and drive sales, rendering the business viable for small scale producers: “Fibreshed are very big on community – what it means to have a sustainable community or regenerative economy; it’s not just about the environment, but also being financially sustainable, being inclusive, the whole package!”

An official Fibreshed Certification label will indicate to consumers that garments have been locally and sustainably sourced and made. This has potential to galvanise support for the cause and, ultimately, bolster the local system so producers are supported whilst consumer prices can be lowered.



Yarn drying in Ria’s natural dye garden. Image credit: Ria Burns Knitwear



## Beyond wool

There's potential, also, to include other fibre crops – whilst wool dominates the UK market, flax, used for linen, is also a minor player.

And there is a growing interest in hemp, a particularly **soil-friendly** crop that grows faster than cotton and produces a stronger fibre. Whilst long fallen out of favour, hemp has a significant history in the UK, with **evidence** of widespread growth across the country from the Middle Ages. In the 16th century farmers were ordered to grow hemp to support the navy's rope production, and fined if they did not oblige.

Today, legal restrictions are hampering the burgeoning industry but the biggest problem lies in the lack of necessary equipment. Whilst the ambition is there, there are still practicalities to grapple with, as Rebekah explains: "There is definitely motivation to grow hemp for textiles; but there's not a single machine that takes the fibre out of the stalk, so companies will have to raise money to buy one before they can start actually producing."



Ria holding a freshly harvested Weld plant, also used to dye the jumper she is wearing. Image credit: Ria Burns Knitwear

## New ways with wool

Bristol-based knitwear producer **Ria Burns** began developing an interest in sustainable local sourcing and garment production when studying for a degree in fashion design: “I became aware of how bad the mainstream fashion industry is. The UK wool industry is really quite a broken system. I wanted to use British wool and I was constantly trying to get to the source.”

This proved a complicated ambition. Ria found yarn companies were elusive; or, where information was given, it would often be concerning: “You didn’t always get a good answer, or if you did it wasn’t necessarily the one you were expecting! Some products listed as British wool were actually imported merino spun in the

UK; or a British fibre had been sent to South Africa to be spun. I was surprised that’s allowed to be called a British product.”

Wool textiles were historically central to the British economy, but the contemporary situation is dire. Of the UK’s 30m kilos of raw wool produced each year, **less than 1%** remains to be made into garments. Wool is now seen as a by-product of the meat industry; meat-centric breeds produce fibres only fit for carpets.

Now, according to Jen Hunter of **Fernhill Farm**, 90% of the English sheep farmer’s income comes from meat. Farmers received just £0.15 (€0.17) per kilo of wool in 2020 – ten times less than the previous year, and **not enough** even to cover shearing costs.



Flowers from the dye garden: Coreopsis Tinctoria Roulette. Image credit: Ria Burns Knitwear

## Farmers

The time is ripe for change. Responsible producers like Ria are teaming up with regenerative farms such as Fernhill to spearhead a new appreciation of wool as a healthy, sustainable and valuable material. The proximity of Fernhill to Ria’s Bristol workshop base, just 24kms away, fit her ethos perfectly: her garments are now 100% Bristol-sourced.

Fernhill are unusual in that their wool operation accounts for different scales of producer: a solo maker can buy one fleece for hand spinning, but it’s also possible to bulk buy in large quantities. Their breeds are suitable for both meat and fibre, and the flock is integrated into the wider farm rotation to create a truly regenerative system.

More could be done to demonstrate to farmers that sustainable, profitable sheep farming is possible, suggests Ria: “It’s about trying to encourage farmers with land appropriate for softer fleece-producing breeds to diversify. On the [Rare Breeds Survival Trust](#) list of British sheep, there are about 60 breeds that are rare and potentially endangered – of those, a lot would be good for fibre.”



Jen Hunter of Fernhill Farm delivers a wool workshop. Image credit: Ursula Billington

## Infrastructure

Access to wool isn’t the only factor; to make local processing viable the regional infrastructure needs to be developed significantly.

Cornwall’s [Natural Fibre Company](#) is the only spinning mill in South West England, resulting in bottle necks of processing and year-long waiting lists. Ria sends her fleece to a mill in Wales, technically outside the boundaries of the [South West Fibreshed](#) – the region’s textile community, of which she is a member – but still a tiny distance compared to the standard global movement of textiles.

The Fibreshed intends to bolster local activities and support new processing initiatives. Plans for a second mill, a micro-version for a minimum order of 1kg of wool to be located on Southwest England’s Jurassic coast, are already underway.

The emergence of a thriving, dynamic local textiles movement should also amplify consumer interest in regional products.

Jen, the driving force behind [Fernhill Fibres](#), is keen to find local buyers for her fleece: “I have lots of wool and I need to sell it, but I want to sell it properly. I don’t want it to be shipped to China like the majority, I want to find buyers in this country and for them to know what they’re getting is local, high welfare.”

Her flock is raised without chemicals, nomadically grazed on high-biodiversity pasture and traditionally blade-sheared. The fleece is used to its full potential across the farm – from building insulation to warmth for over-wintering plants and nutritious mulch for vegetables.



Ria's natural dye garden – Sulfur Cosmos (back left), Dahlias (back right), Coreopsis Tinctoria (centre left) and Zinnias at the front. Image credit: Ria Burns Knitwear

## Soil and seasons

Chemical-free wool is a valuable soil improver. Ria has incorporated it into the development of her natural dye garden, a small urban plot in the middle of Bristol. She works with the landscape at every stage – from preparing beds, to the plants she chooses, to dealing with waste.

“I’m growing organically, trying to think about ways to put nutrients back into the soil as most of the crops are annual,” Ria explains. “I make my own compost and all my yarn scraps go into that as wool’s a great nitrogen source; it’s literally soil-to-soil in that respect!”

Local climate places some limitations on what Ria is able to grow, and the dyes she can produce. Nevertheless, the range and quantity she’s producing suit her purposes: with some supplemental local foraging, her brand is self-sufficient. Conditions allow successful growth of madder for red, weld for yellow, and woad and Japanese indigo for blue; and for additional flowery plants like coreopsis, dahlias and orange cosmos. “Bristol’s got a nice micro-climate, my garden’s quite hot so they do well here,” she says.

Ria’s learning to respond to the natural process in an organic way, working with the ‘native colour palette’ and impact of the season’s conditions: “What I’m learning with growing the dyes is that I have to accept I’m not going to get the same colours every year when it comes to the end product – whether it be the weather, the soil, the plants differing from one year to the next. I’m learning to embrace that and accept it’s just part of it being a natural product.” She’s happy to incorporate the changeable face of nature into her brand: “It’s built in a seasonality to the process, which is nice.”

Ria is optimistic for the future of the movement to re-localise fashion: “Hopefully the Fibreshed network will keep growing. If we start to work together as a whole UK to join the dots where there are missing bits in the regions, to share knowledge and resources – it can become a much bigger campaign for local textiles.”

May 2021

Who Grew Your Clothes? Soil to Soil Textiles



A jumper dyed with Madder. Image credit: Ria Burns Knitwear



Harvest. Image courtesy of The Community Farm

# *City Farms Opening Their Gates to Equity*

*In the UK, where the Black Lives Matter movement coalesced with a pandemic-provoked appreciation for green space and local food for all, questions of unequal land access and ownership are becoming impossible to ignore. Now some urban farms are opening their gates to inclusion.*

## City Farms Opening Their Gates to Equity

The statistics speak for themselves: in England, 1% of the population owns 50% of the land. 98.6% of farm managers and holders are White-British. Just 3.5% of

environment professionals come from an ethnic minority background.



Hoeing. Image courtesy of The Community Farm

### Structural inequalities

This inequality has historic roots, compounded by many issues including urbanisation – over 98% of Black people live in cities, often in areas deprived of nature; a whitewashed media in relation to outdoor pursuits; and hostile rural areas and agricultural institutions.

These issues are eloquently unpacked by people with lived experience of the issues; for example Beth Collier, of Wild in the City, writes clearly on black absence in green spaces; while the agricultural perspective is given in this 'Farming So White' discussion.

In Bristol, where 91 different languages are spoken, the inequality is confronting. The largest city in south-

## City Farms Opening Their Gates to Equity

west England prides itself not only on its environmental credentials but also its ethnic diversity and spirit of inclusion. But good intentions do not automatically surmount ingrained structural inequalities.

Whilst striving for **Gold Sustainable Food City** status, Bristol must grapple with the reality that agroecology is perceived and experienced as a white, middle class space. Concerted action is needed to diversify and build an anti-racist farming movement in this corner of the UK.



St Werburghs City Farm set up the Equity Project to figure out how to include the local community. Image credit: Ursula Billington

### Including the local community

The **St. Werburghs City Farm** have been quick to act. In a residential district of central Bristol, the Farm nestles in a cosy spot on a side-street surrounded by patches of green, eco-housing and a local pub. Home to small clutches of animals, it also offers community gardens, 13 acres of allotments, open days and workshops; for health and wellbeing, food growing and education for all.

But last year the team came to realise that the Farm's local community, comprising a 33% ethnic minority population – twice Bristol's 16% average – was not

choosing to make use of their services. The **Equity Project** set out to find out why.

Manu Maunganidze, the project's Equality, Diversity & Inclusion advisor, and one of the report's writers along with Rhian Grant and Esme Worrell, suggests the barriers stem partly from the area's economic make-up. The Farm sits in one of the most diverse areas in the South West: its immediate area visibly more White-British and affluent than the surrounding, lower-income neighbourhoods, where people of minority backgrounds more typically reside.

This disparity impacts on perceptions of the Farm and who feels comfortable there.



St Werburghs City Farm is literally making space for community groups. Image credit: Ursula Billington

“The economic angle points to a systemic issue of exclusion,” explains Manu; “People who are disenfranchised from society and the economy, however close they live to something that could aid their wellbeing, will still not access it because it becomes associated with people that have higher economic, social or cultural capital.”

In other words, people from these communities feel the Farm is ‘not for them’.

This speaks to the sector at large; according to the report:

*‘The exclusivity of a space becomes internalised, and fits into a narrative fixed by what is already know about horticultural and farming spaces in the UK, i.e. that they are dominated by middle-class white people, culturally determined according to the needs and preferences of this particular group.’*



## City Farms Opening Their Gates to Equity

Urban farms can often find themselves amidst wealthier communities as close proximity to nature raises house prices, driving those on lower incomes out the area. The repercussions for minority groups are reflected in the statistical realities of urban life: over

40% of people from ethnic minority backgrounds live in the most green space-deprived areas, compared to 14% of white people. Only 19% of ethnic minority individuals live within walking distance of nature.



The Community Farm's market garden: "These places are on the frontline of a social justice fight to allow diverse communities to be more fully engaged with the land". Image courtesy of The Community Farm

So it's even more vital that these communities feel welcome and comfortable where urban nature exists. The report outlines actions for positive change on a cultural, physical, and global level, for the UK's urban farming and environment sector at large.

The aim is to make it as easy as possible to engage, starting with tackling physical barriers – offering affordable refreshments, communal seating, inclusive events, advertising and information: "Have you translated posters when you're putting them into different neighbourhoods? Have you thought about the imagery you're using, or whether your website shows people that everybody can relate to?" asks Manu.

Manu suggests unequal access to green space is a limiting factor for children, with potential lifelong impacts. City farms play a crucial role in this regard: "These places are on the frontline of a social justice fight to allow diverse communities to be more fully engaged with the land, with the place that they live.

They give urban children the opportunity to fall in love with the outdoors, enabling them to imagine a future in food and farming."



Poster at St Werburghs City Farm: City farms give urban children the opportunity to fall in love with the outdoors, enabling them to imagine a future in food and farming. Image credit: Ursula Billington

### Food sovereignty in whose name?

There are also consequences for the future of sustainable farming, says Manu: “Things like food sovereignty and localism in the context of agriculture – we’re

facing the reality of a sizable chunk of the population not being in any way connected to the land in the first place. What are the repercussions of that? In whose name is that food sovereignty?”

*“We’re facing the reality of a sizable chunk of the population not being in any way connected to the land in the first place. What are the repercussions of that? In whose name is that food sovereignty?” – Manu Maunganidze, The Equality Project*

He set up **NYCE** – *Nature Youth Connection & Education* – to teach children from ethnic minority backgrounds about the natural world, with knock-on benefits for wellbeing, confidence and life ambitions. And, for Manu, “It’s also an avenue to making a political point – to say, why is it that the Nigerian kid that lives right by the river doesn’t know about the river? And what does it mean for the environmental sector, the second least diverse employer in the UK?”

Children need representative role models, to feel comfortable and inspired to get involved. The Equality Project report stresses it’s crucial for city farms to recruit people of all backgrounds, particularly those that reflect the local area.



Acomo Oloya at the Community Farm. Image courtesy of The Community Farm

## A taste of home means a lot

The **Community Farm**, an organic farm and social enterprise on Bristol's outskirts, recently addressed this by appointing a Black Lives Matter champion. **Acomo Oloya** was raised on a farm in Uganda and continued growing after arriving in the UK; she asserts: "Very few, if any, ethnic people are getting into working with the land in this country."

She thinks different types of farming should be encouraged: "There's a need to get people into small-scale farming. Or it could be a farm they acquire as a community and work together. That is what's lacking." She's hopeful for change, believing "It's complicated

but not impossible. Maybe another 10 years and we'll get there!"

Acomo is forging links with urban organisations to reach the communities the Farm doesn't normally attract. She's also exploring growing different vegetables to appeal to diverse communities: "They've got to be attractive enough for people to want to make the journey. A taste of home means a lot!"

Discussing the different approach to farming in Uganda, Acomo describes an intuitive understanding of the land: "You'd know where things can grow or when things should be done that wouldn't destroy the land. The knowledge is passed on from one generation to another. It comes naturally."



Acomo Oloya on the family farm in Uganda. Image courtesy of Acomo Oloya

## Shared ethos

This resonates with the regenerative, earth-care narrative of the young land equity collective **Land In Our Names** (LION), working actively to redress the racial disparity in UK land access and ownership. Following the 2020 Real Farming conference (ORFC), it **gathered** people of colour on the land to reflect on identity, landscape and farming. It was the first community event of its kind, proving at once cathartic and a catalyst for the movement.

LION also aims to establish non-extractive farming practices, **suggesting** Afro-indigenous approaches consider the needs of the environment above its ex-

ploitation for productivity – an ethos shared by agro-ecology.

At the forefront of the movement for sustainable farming and food sovereignty, the Landworkers Alliance are ensuring these issues are raised and represented with formation of a **BIPOC (Black, Indigenous & People of Colour) group** led by **Dee Woods**.

Speaking **on racial justice** at this year's ORFC, Dee suggested the journey, though potentially long, could be a positive one: "This is not about building back better. This is about justice, healing and repair; going forward from a place of heart with joy, love, respect and honour for each other, the Earth and the elements."

April 2021

*"This is not about building back better. This is about justice, healing and repair; going forward from a place of heart with joy, love, respect and honour for each other, the Earth and the elements." – Dee Woods, food justice campaigner*

## Conclusion

One question remains: how do we build on Bristol's foundations of sustainability to grow the movement?

As we emerge, blinking, into the sunlight, the future for local food and farming seems bright.

The exposed fragility of the industrial food system has been offset by reliable local producers stepping up production to support the community; their ability to thrive in a time of crisis has re-energised the local food movement.

At this year's Feeding Bristol **conference**, University of Bristol researchers confirmed **the city is more food resilient post-pandemic, suggesting the movement was necessarily unified by the lack of central government support**. Feeding Bristol is communicating this success to government, to 'inform and drive positive changes in local and national policies.'

"What we've seen over the last 12 months is a wonderful level of **cooperation and collaboration, working towards co-creation of a better plan for the city's food system**," says Ped Asgarian, Director of Feeding Bristol. "We can achieve so much more if we're working together to push in the right direction. But we need financial resources to fund the people doing this work, and it has to come from central government."

This mirrors the approach of organisations like the **Food Foundation**, whose **report** on the surge in UK veg box sales in 2020 supports the **call for greater government investment in local production**.

The explosion of interest in homegrown could also serve to drive other sustainable sectors. After a year of regrouping, consolidating and strategizing, new projects like the **Fibreshed** are bursting forth from their Covid-cocoons to take on the world as it reawakens. An associated label affirming local, regenerative

sourcing and production could transform the regional textiles market.

The focus on nature, environment and community appears to be having positive repercussions for local politics. A **'green surge' in this year's local elections** has placed the Greens, with an unprecedented 24 seats of a total 70, as the joint largest party in Bristol city council; greater action on social and environmental justice is predicted. The council has already **banned** junk food advertising in the city, the first outside of London to do so.

Mayor Marvin Rees, who has been vocally supportive of upscaling local food production and peri-urban farming, recently set an **intention to establish community food growing in every ward of the city**.

There is still the question, though, of the limiting impact of a Conservative government that is not known as a friend to agroecology. **Sustain** provide a **useful round-up** of how council and mayoral election results could impact on good food and farming across the UK.

The pressure will be on Mayor Rees to provide land for new entrants – not least due to Bristol's involvement in the **Fringe Farming** project in which major cities across the UK are collaborating to **boost opportunities for peri-urban agroecological food production**.

These opportunities could contribute significantly to a **green economic recovery** as well as local authorities' existing health, climate change and quality targets, says project lead Rob Logan.

Fringe Farming aims to tackle some of the sector's pervasive problems. "Access to finance and business development training will be high up the list of priorities in future years," explains Logan. "Possible solutions point to government subsidising agroecological farmers via

*"We can achieve so much more if we're working together to push in the right direction. But we need financial resources to fund the people doing this work, and it has to come from central government." – Ped Asgarian, Feeding Bristol*

## Conclusion

*“Without council or wider Government support, it will be really difficult to train up the next generation of farmers that we need in the city.” – Steph Wetherell, Bristol Food Producers*

ELMs; learning from farmstart models in France and providing new entrants with social security or universal basic income; and generating comprehensive training programmes for the 21st century farmer.”

There are **2,000 acres** of land in the city that could be **unlocked for growing**, with the potential to produce 60,000 tonnes of vegetables per year – around 15% of Bristol’s **annual requirements**.

But **Bristol Food Producers**, the project’s official partners, are vocal about the difficulties for new entrant farmers locally. **“Land access is a huge issue in Bristol - land is expensive to buy, there’s a huge amount of competition, and it can be challenging to find secure tenure on rented land,”** says coordinator Steph Wetherell.

“We’ve seen a huge increase in demand for local produce, and there’s a **growing interest in pursuing a career in farming**,” Wetherell notes. “However, alongside the challenges of accessing suitable and affordable land, there is a **lack of appropriate training**, making it very difficult for new entrants.”

Again, **greater support is crucial to enable systemic change**. “Without council or wider Government support, it will be really difficult to train up the next generation of farmers that we need in the city,” Wetherell points out.

Bristol is now a **Gold Sustainable Food City** in the wake of an ambitious campaign to **“lay the foundation for the next decade of building a city that puts food that’s good for our health, communities and nature at its heart”**. In this context, issues of training and land access are more important than ever. One posi-

tive impact of the “going for gold” campaign was an imminent official review of all of Bristol city council’s land assets, rendering additional land available for application through private tender.

Meanwhile, the **grassroots are taking matters into their own hands**, as so often happens here. Action to tackle the pervasive whiteness of agroecology and the sustainable food movement is beginning from the ground up.

Bristol Food Producers are **working towards** access to locally grown, culturally appropriate foods for all, and **equal opportunities to pursue a career in food production**.

Small producers are stepping up positive action, such as **Edible Futures** Farm2Plate series of global **cooking classes**, intended to **‘make local food accessible to diverse communities.’**

The **Black Seeds Network** will provide a platform for environmentalists of colour, in order to **‘bridge the representation gap.’**

Feeding Bristol is working to address issues of equality and representation in the sector. “We’re trying to tackle the more difficult questions around increasing access and diversity; how do we create fair, sustainable food systems that are inclusive and accessible for everyone?” notes Ped Asgarian. “We need to get better at creating safe spaces to have those difficult conversations comfortably because that’s how we grow as society.”

*“How do we create fair, sustainable food systems that are inclusive and accessible for everyone? We need to get better at creating safe spaces to have those difficult conversations comfortably because that’s how we grow as society.” – Ped Asgarian, Feeding Bristol*

## Conclusion

*“If you want to get behind this movement, keep supporting local producers after the crisis, buy from independent suppliers and distributors. You are all part of this network and through solidarity it gets stronger.” – Matt Cracknell, Grow Wilder*

Asgarian suggests progress will come from viewing **food as an integral part of social justice**. “We have to approach sustainable food holistically,” he says. “Locally-grounded sustainable food systems are a huge part of how we feed people, create jobs and better social cohesion; food and farming has an important role to play in making communities better and stronger. But we need to consider how it sits across every aspect rather than in a siloed way.”

Other issues are also being confronted head-on. Bristol Food Producers’ **Oral Histories project** aims to capture the imagination of consumers with stories of local farmers and producers.

Incredible Edible are **campaigning** for policy change to allow leases for ‘**meanwhile gardening**’ on land earmarked for development, to be handed back to owners when needed.

And according to **Matt Cracknell** of Grow Wilder, the potential of the German citizen investment-based **Regionalwert model** - where local food groups have generated €4m, with returns paid back in natural cap-

ital such as improved soils and biodiversity – is under discussion.

Cracknell is keen to garner widespread involvement for urban agroecology: “If you want to get behind this movement, keep supporting local producers after the crisis, buy from independent suppliers and distributors. You are all part of this network and through solidarity it gets stronger.”

“Take the plunge, pluck up the courage and ask,” urges Cracknell. Street Goat’s Simone Davis provides similarly enthusiastic encouragement: “Know it’s possible, take a risk and throw yourself in!”

With an injection of Bristol spirit and ‘get up and go’, **citizen action is activism, and food growing is revolution.**

What, these Bristolians would ask, is stopping us? Wherever we may be, let’s get cracking and make a shift for a better food future in our own patch.

Ursula Billington, June 2021



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## About ARC2020

The **Agricultural and Rural Convention (ARC2020)** first came together in 2010 to develop a shared vision for sustainable farming and rural renaissance.

We continue to work with others to try to make the **Common Agricultural Policy (CAP)** more fit for purpose – more adapted to the real needs of people and planet.

As well as policy work, we try to keep our feet on the ground and our hands in the soil too. We see socio-ecological transition, involving real people in living places, as core to what we do. So finding and engaging with on the ground practitioners in agroecology and rural renaissance warms our collective souls. We give people a chance to share ideas and practices, concerns and opportunities. Our Letter From The Farm series gives a voice to food producers around Europe.

We do try to meld the practical community orientated work and the debates we facilitate with policy proposals: we want what we learn from the communities we work with to feed into our submissions on long term visions and strategies for Rural Europe.

With our latest project “Nos campagnes en résilience”, we’re going deep into the French countryside to connect with people who are engaged in experiments in socio-ecological transition. The seeds of resilience are often sown on farms that are exploring new forms of community. So we’re creating a space for these French farmers to connect with their European colleagues, and to tell their stories.

Since 2016, ARC2020 is an independent NGO based in Paris, with a Brussels office and smaller offices and workers in France, Ireland, Germany and the Czech Republic. We have a team of contributors who span the widest reaches of the continent – from Iceland to Georgia.

Welcome aboard the ARC!

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All contributions represent the opinions of the author and do not necessarily represent the position of ARC2020 or its funders.

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The logo for the Fondation de France, which is a solid blue square containing the text "Fondation de France" in white.

The logo for the Stiftung Edith Maryon, featuring the text "STIFTUNG EDITH MARYON" in white capital letters on a dark red rectangular background.