

Testimonials – Groundswell bursaries

JAMES JOHNSON (2021)

Since I came back from Harper Adams University, my father and I have been farming in a way that is probably seen as intensive agriculture, following the typical route of heavy cultivations, artificial fertilisers and high chemical inputs, something that we had both been taught to do.



However, even after following what we have been taught to produce our food, we have slowly been left with wheat yields that are stagnant if not decreasing compared to 20 years ago, grass land needing huge amounts of fertiliser to feed our cattle and the climate changing in a way that's making working windows smaller and smaller.

Our soils are getting less and less resilient to change in our climate and over the last few years I've really started to question why are we doing this and is this the only way we can produce food? Is this the only way we can farm?

Over the COVID 19 outbreak, and the loss of my social life, it gave me time to really start to research. I came across Gabe Brown a rancher in America who focused purely on soil health and diversity. After watching many you tube videos and reading his book 'Dirt to Soil', the questions in my head were starting to be answered and new ones forming. This was America however, does this happen in the UK?

Groundswell gave me the opportunity to experience the idea of regenerative agriculture first-hand, being able to go to lectures from

forward-thinking farmers who have been toying with reduced inputs and building natural fertility for 20 years - farmers such as Tim Parton; the first lecture I went to and it was mind blowing. It looked at plant leaf pH to determine if it's more susceptible to pest or disease attack before it's even occurred and being able to put that right before any damage had taken place.

Talks on carbon credits and how they may be used in the future was also intriguing, very much in the early stages, but could definitely be a welcome income stream in the days after BPS, that is if their calculations are correct.

There was a fantastic showing of machinery too, but I'm not going to lie, I spent my time looking at cover crop mixes, compost demonstrations, lectures and talking to other farmers; gaining as much knowledge as I could to bring home to the farm.

The only thing coming from a mixed farmer is that the show was very much arable focused. Apart from the mob grazing on herbal lays demonstration, which was very interesting, as this is something we had toyed with the idea at home but had never seen it. Safe to say we are putting some in next year! Hopefully in time they will develop a grasslands part to the show.

What separates Groundswell from other shows is the ability to be able to network. During the day or at the bar in the evening, everyone is willing to chat about their journey, their mistakes, their success and any advice they may share. There's no blueprint of 200kg/acre N fertiliser or T1, T2 chemical sprays, everyone's farm is different, and that's what makes it so interesting.

Groundswell has definitely helped me on my journey of regenerative agriculture, fuelling my passion in soil health and diversity and which in turn will help my father and I drive our farming business forward and make it more resilient to future change.

Thanks again to Future Farmers of Yorkshire and YAS for giving me this fantastic opportunity!



BEATRICE GUTHRIE (2021)

I arrived at Groundswell at 9 o'clock on the Wednesday morning. It was a gorgeous sunny day and the grounds were buzzing with people. With a rumbling stomach, my first point of call was the food stands. There was a great selection to choose between, from curries to wagyu burgers to wood fired pizzas.

Out of the seven talks I listened to over the two-day event, my first was the panel which discussed whether fungicides have a place in regenerative agriculture. All the speakers agreed that the usual timings of applications that farmers have been using for years, (T0, T1, T2...) are likely going to change.

The key agronomic activities that farmers will have to adopt to reduce fungicide inputs include selecting varieties for high disease resistance and implementing longer crop rotation to reduce disease inoculum.

More farmers will be likely to adopt new technologies like weather stations with disease modelling to help plan fungicide timings and rates. Their research highlighted that the use of multiple species intercropping (e.g. beans with oats) can reduce disease pressure on various trial plots. They concluded that fungicides should be used as a last resort rather than a pre-planned routine.

This may be tricky as most farmers use fungicides at specific timings to prevent disease from travelling up the crop. Using fungicides as a last resort would mean that they will have to solely use eradicant fungicides which are less effective and are limited to a small number of products.

Another very interesting talk was discussing the future of agronomy. It's evident that agronomy is going to change due to the termination of the BPS and the introduction of the new ELM scheme. They said that the use of technology and AI will play a big part in an agronomist's job.

Agronomists may also have to advise farmers to achieve higher profit margins instead of higher yield. This will mean that agronomists will need to access farms' financial accounts (such as labour and machinery costs) on top of their traditional agronomic methods.

This higher workload could mean that the farmer may need more than one agronomist which will specialise in each individual aspect of the role. Maybe the farmer will have to take on the agronomy themselves and employ a consultant for financial and environmental scheme advice. It was a very thought-provoking talk and it will be exciting to see what will happen.

My favourite talk was given by David Purdy and Philip Wright which was about how soil structure is affected and developed through plants and biology working together. They went on to say that high intensity cultivation (e.g. ploughing) has been shown to reduce the biology and worm numbers in the soil over time. Having a higher worm number has shown to increase infiltration rates and improve soil structure which will benefit the farmer. Machinery weight and tyre pressure has a huge impact on soil structure and they recommended farmers to try and adopt controlled traffic farming (CTF) and to reduce tyre pressures to help to alleviate soil compaction and improve drainage.

I thoroughly enjoyed Groundswell and would like to thank Future Farmers and YAS for the bursary opportunity; it's an amazing event providing an insight into what agriculture will look like in the future. Bring on Groundswell 2022!