

ZANDER METCALFE (2023)



I farm with my family near Northallerton on a small mixed farm of arable and grassland with sheep and cattle. My main job as an agronomist allows me to talk to a variety of people in the agricultural industry on all sizes of farms which has been useful in developing my knowledge of farming practices.

Coming from a relatively small farm, my current interest is around how these can be viable for the future, looking at different ways to make arable and livestock farming work on a more compact scale and other paths to expand the role of smaller farms beyond commodity crop production.

This year, the ORFC was out to prove a point. Having been forced online in the previous two iterations, the organisers clearly wanted to show that they were back with a bang. I came to the conference with key questions to answer. Ideas I had read about and issues that had arisen on my family's farm were at the forefront of my inquiries. As hoped for, ORFC was the place to find people with the answers. A fascinating insight into establishing and using herbal leys from Cotswolds Seeds clarified many of the details I had often questioned.

A lively discussion about enterprise stacking on small farms proved to me that it can be done and offered a path to profitability on a relatively small acreage. Improving the condition and health of our

soils is something that my family and I are keen to explore, and a demonstration of ways to measure soil improvements without laboratory equipment has opened new avenues of exploration underground. There really is great value to being up-close, listening to someone speak with conviction about a subject they consider important.

As I read back through my notes, I felt inspired, informed, enthusiastic and cheerful having spent my time in the city mingling with people with all types of connections to agriculture. This expanded my vision of what agriculture and food production means. I realise it goes well beyond what I have been limiting myself to in my time farming the land. This includes the authors who write about farming, the ecologists studying the natural world we farm in, the painters, poets and musicians who interpret their view of the landscape, the market gardeners, the smallholders and the industrial farmers. The interests and plights of everyone involved in agriculture is something you can grasp at an event like the ORFC.

In my day job as an agronomist, I regularly get asked questions by farmers about ways to improve their soil, reduce inputs and adapt to the times. Attending events like the ORFC will help me to provide more detailed, technical answers and will also bring opinions and learnings from many of the peripheries that surround these key issues.

I would offer a word of warning to anyone intending to go to an ORFC. I travelled down with three questions I wanted to answer and came back with a dozen more I had not thought to ask. Be careful when you open your eyes, it might be quite hard to close them again.



CAROLINE RHODES (2023)



While attending the Oxford Real Farming Conference, I listened to a variety of speakers who talked on a diverse range of topics some of which I had knowledge of and some new to me.

On Thursday morning, the opening plenary featured talks from farmers, LION (Land In Our Name), Landworkers' Alliance and music from Japanese drummers. My first session focused on the fertiliser crisis and on-farm home-grown fertility innovation. This looked at green waste compost, herbal leys, cover cropping and living mulches. This session was particularly informative as I have looked at using living mulches on my home farm and heard how it's working for another farmer first-hand.

Lunch featured a networking session for those new to the ORFC. I met lots of people from different backgrounds, market gardeners, florists and specialist livestock breeders, to name a few.

A talk from Lord Deben and Fabrizio Albanito on the role of agroecological farming in transitioning to net zero provided some alternative insights, offering data to suggest that some practices we assume are carbon negative are actually positive. The presentation questioned whether agroecology could provide food security together with sustainability. This was followed by a session on how animal welfare and sustainability work together, focusing on holistic

practices, like utilising herbal leys and tree browsing to improve diets and behaviour.

My final workshop of the day was systemic mapping which can be used to think about what is important to you personally and professionally and whether things are becoming closer or moving away.

Friday started with local food economies and building better infrastructure for producers to sell direct to the public and cut out the 'middleman' as well as making selling direct easier. Next was a session on land-use framework and best uses for land. Farmers talked about how they have changed their farming practices to reduce inputs but maintain profitability while increasing sustainability.

Over lunch was a session on moving forward with positivity by Satish Kumar of Schumacher College, Devon. I wasn't sure what to take from this but one thing I did note was that you need to 'love your land and love your work'. My final talk was on biodynamic farming which I had no clue about and don't think it's something I can see myself doing in the future, but was definitely a learning experience!

The conference focus was on agroecology, farming for the environment and UK food security. It was a really good chance to network with people outside of the traditional farming sector. This was an amazing opportunity for me. I learned a lot I can take back to my home farm and look at whether these concepts can be implemented or adapted to fit better into our system.



AMELIA PRESTON (2021)



Despite spending only one year at Harper Adams University, the decision to leave my Yorkshire comfort zone to study a degree in Agriculture was my best

decision yet. It certainly broadened my circle of friends and encouraged me to investigate farming practices beyond what the neighbours are doing.

I transferred to Askham Bryan College for the second and third years of the course and began working on a local dairy farm, to expand my practical knowledge and skillset.

My dissertation considered the effect of milk supplementation on piglet growth in the farrowing crate and discovered a noticeable gain in piglets from gilts, which equated to reducing the finishing period by 7 days. I then realised the importance of production efficiency in increasing farm profitability and sustainability. These factors are increasingly important with BPS being phased out by 2028 and the introduction of the environmentally focussed ELMS, which feature a 'sustainable farming incentive'.

Keen to continue learning, I applied to study a distance-based master's degree in Sustainable Food and Agriculture Policy at the

Royal Agricultural University and was lucky enough to be awarded an NFU centenary award which pays most of the course fees.

I hope to understand farm sustainability in the context of the future UK agri-food policy environment, in order to maximise the advice I can provide to farmers and land managers in my new role as technical rural assistant with Dee Atkinson & Harrison Rural Team. It's safe to say I am pleased I initially selected a mostly online course which was well adapted to home learning with the recent pandemic.

Throughout this time, I have been involved with Future Farmers and Women in Farming. Last spring I attended a Future Farmers meeting where the Oxford Farming Conference vs Oxford Real Farming Conference was debated. The delegates had a great understanding of the wider factors affecting UK farming and so when Future Farmers advertised bursary places for 2020, I didn't hesitate to apply. I thought it would benefit me to gain greater understanding and the 'virtual' element, meaning ease of accessibility, was a bonus!

The virtual conference has been extremely easy to tune into as it runs from 12 noon to 10pm and all sessions are recorded so you can flexibly listen to whatever suits. It's a shame to miss the physical characteristics and the conferences atmosphere, however, I feel that being online has potentially opened the floor to a greater range of speakers and therefore, a wider response to the proposed topics.

It's great to challenge yourself to look at farming from a different perspective and in one discussion it was highlighted that, to many, agriculture is life. Through agriculture we celebrate food, community,

provenance and the production system, something which we have been reminded of during the pandemic, with a sharp increase in food bank usage alongside a boost in community spirit.

Professionally beneficial topics included: increasing cropping biodiversity, woodland grazing pasture, international hedgerows, beaver dam reservoirs in reducing flooding impact, increasing soil

carbon sequestration, and improving water holding capacity. Personally, ‘the importance of food networks’ was an engaging topic, encouraging individuals supporting local producers and farmgate sales to become a food citizen rather than simply a consumer. My key take-home-message from ORFC is ‘keep learning and challenging’ to continue progressing UK agriculture.



DANIEL BINNS (2021)



Firstly, I would like to thank Future Farmers and the Yorkshire Agricultural Society for giving me the opportunity to attend the ORFC 2021, an event which otherwise would not have been brought to my attention.

For me the most beneficial part of the conference was being able to relate concepts to my own business and seeing agriculture from different angles. For example, in the panel discussion “agroecology across three continents”, Mr Paul Holmbeck talks about the support for consumer awareness as a method to increase popularity in the organic food sector.

I hope I can recreate this idea within my own business, to ensure my customers are aware of exactly where their meat comes from and support the importance of farming sustainably.

I enjoyed the discussion on making small scale abattoirs more sustainable, which was led by Patrick Holden. This was a key topic for myself as I deal with small scale abattoirs myself and I see a direct impact they have on the need for locally sourced food. The many positive points which are central to the fundamentals of my business were highlighted during this talk.

I feel the small-scale abattoirs are largely overlooked in the importance of small scale, locally produced produce (which was mentioned in various other talks throughout the conference). Small-scale abattoirs key to sustainable meat production.

I thought the speaker from FSA gave a very refreshing opinion on the subject, she talked about a more distributed slaughterhouse network being more resilient, I feel this is even more important with the burden of COVID-19.

Being a frequent user of smaller scale abattoirs myself I can offer a first-hand account of the benefits, in particular a more approachable method of processing produce, which can sometimes appear daunting to small holders and farmers who may be lesser familiar to the system. Another win for smaller abattoirs includes more readily available and personal advice, in my opinion a better quality service.

Most importantly for welfare and the need for a smaller carbon footprint, a more distributed slaughterhouse network would cut journey times of both livestock and products. Marisa Heath spoke about some very compelling issues faced by smaller scale abattoirs, such as the ever increasing costs of disposing of bi-products which could in fact be a very valuable commodity, for instance hides for leather.

To conclude, I found the conference supported the narrative that the future of meat production isn't necessarily in the consumer eating less meat (which wouldn't be good for business) but more so eating meat which is sustainably farmed. I feel this is a very current topic considering meat is generating such negative press amongst the current generation.

The conference has been a really interesting event for me and it has given me a insight into outlooks on the future of agriculture across the globe. Thank you very much to everyone who helped organise the event, I would highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in the sector. I would like to say thank you to Future Famers and YAS who have been fantastic in helping me attend the event and giving me the opportunity in the first place.



NATALIE MOORE (2020)



Thank you very much for the opportunity to attend the Oxford Real Farming Conference this year. I was unaware of its existence until 3 years ago when I was lucky enough to be

sponsored to go to the OFC and since then I have always fancied going to see how the two compare.

They are very different in their approaches with the OFC being very corporate and the ORFC as intended being very much more "grassroots" attracting many city farmers, market gardeners and organic farmers. Despite this, they were very much singing off the same hymn sheet this year with the very important and pressing issue of climate change.

In terms of the structure of the ORFC, the conference was completely split up into sessions with up to 10 every hour to choose from ensuring there was something for everyone. The first session I attended was on Silvopasture, a new concept to me, the idea being that the trees do their job of converting CO2 into Oxygen whilst providing shelter and food for livestock, in effect "killing two birds

with one stone”. I picked the session wondering if it was something that I could maybe introduce at home but there was still a lot of trial and error going on to find out how to best utilise the system and so I decided not at this stage but it was still great to learn about something new and to pick up new ideas to potentially use in the future.

The next session I picked was about the benefits of pulses in the arable rotation, they are something I would choose to put in an arable rotation myself given the chance. The session highlighted the benefits of pulses for nitrogen fixing and also as a habitat for pollinators but the main reason they were trying to push pulses in the rotation was so that we can try and replace soya in our feed rations with things we can grow ourselves.

We could do with growing more peas in this country but people are often put off by their inability to stand and the session looked at planting two crops in the same field at the same time, a great example being planting spring oats and peas together with the oats acting as “scaffolding” to keep the peas up. An ideal pairing when they are ready to harvest at the same time and the “grains” are also a different shape and size making them easy to separate out should you desire to. The session also got me thinking about what other

combinations could be successful and it planted a few seeds for the future.

On Day 2, I attended a session on livestock which was completely interactive unlike the other sessions. It was good to listen to the views of others finding that people shared the same values and concerns. Number one was animal welfare not just on farm but in the abattoir as well and there was maybe a slight feeling of a loss of control once the animals you have spent months caring for leave the farm. We all agreed that finding small local abattoirs was best but was not always an option for some people in certain areas. There was a session I was interested in attending on small abattoirs but it unfortunately clashed with another one; the only downside to having so much choice!

The best thing about attending any of these conferences is the people you get to meet; you can learn an awful lot by just talking to people. It was great to get to know Angus the other ORFC attendee and he also introduced me to some more people he knew whilst we were down there. I don't think you can ever know too many people and the more links you have between them all the better. The whole experience was very thought provoking with the conference going slightly against the grain compared to other farming conferences I've been to but I don't think it does you any harm to look at things in a different way now and again!



ANGUS GOWTHORPE (2020)



ORF has been an event I have wanted to attend for some time and I'm very grateful of the opportunity. The conference certainly impressed me in both how inclusive and alternative it was.

The four of us travelled down together to Oxford the day before the conferences started properly, this gave us all a good opportunity to get to know each other, which was very useful, particularly for myself, as I didn't know any of others.

The format of the ORFC is that of an opening plenary on the Wednesday, this year starting with the fantastic Shumei drummers, which is then followed by multiple sessions covering different topics. There are approximately 12 sessions at each time slot on both days, totalling nearly 120 different sessions across the two days. By studying the conference programme, it is possible to put together a programme to cover your own areas of interest. Where sessions clashed it has been possible to watch these on YouTube recently.

It was great to catch up with several of the speakers who I know well or have met on other occasions, as well as meeting delegates whom I know from my college days or more recently through social media.

My particular interest lies in soil, crop and animal health, how we can improve them and how they tie together, so I concentrated on this type of session.

I went to presentations on agroforestry, silvopasture and soil health assessment, how we may achieve Net Zero, reducing pesticide use, agroecological weed management and regeneration of soils using cover crops. Having heard the presentations, I aim to introduce lanes of trees within the permanent grazing grass both for shelter and as a feed source for the cows. I also would like to introduce mechanical and possibly robotic weeding of the arable crops within the next few years. All these measures will help the farm to achieve net zero or even better to be carbon positive.

On a slightly different note it was very interesting to hear about vertical and circular farming in a couple of the presentations. Vertical being cropping the farm in 3D instead of 2D, that is achieving a saleable crop from several different heights of tree and bush above grazing livestock and crops below, thus maximising output from the given area. One farm in Portugal was selling over 500 different product lines from 1,500 acres and collaborating with many local businesses whilst doing so – bread, fruits, nuts, flowers, wine, cork, eggs, meats. Circular farming being growing niche crops such as buckwheat and being a price maker instead of a price taker.

It was an honour and a pleasure to attend the evening dinner that the Society kindly booked myself and Natalie to attend. The meal was excellent, all organic and very locally sourced and presented another opportunity to meet and talk with others who were like-minded.