

***Farming's next generation is looking back for the future***

About 20 years ago, around the time we were re-establishing our farm's ancient cider apple orchards as part of our [Countryside Stewardship](#) scheme, I recall having one of those conversations in the lane that farmers have with each other apropos nothing in particular. I remarked on the fine state of my neighbour's own mature apple orchard, to which he replied "and it's only still here because I refused point blank to scrub it up when MAFF [[Ministry of Agriculture, Farming and Food](#)] told me to. So, I missed out on MAFF paying me to do that, and then I missed out on being paid to put 'em back in!" Thank goodness for the (so-called) bloody-mindedness of farmers who have proved themselves to be the ultimate protector of many a traditional orchard, ancient hedgerow or native breed.

The last UK agriculture bill in 1947 heralded 70 years of agricultural innovation, obsessed with the singular pursuit of yield at the expense of all else. It has, by its own narrow measure, been hugely successful – a testament to what can be achieved when a systemic approach is taken to achieving a well-defined objective. It engaged all the strategic players – scientists, economists, legislators, educators, manufacturers, distributors and producers. During this time, many corporate interests have seen their power and profitability soar, whilst farmers unwittingly became enslaved by a system which commoditised their output, forcing them on to a treadmill of ever-increasing turnover for ever-decreasing profitability and control – and the environment certainly fared no better. The huge leap forward in agricultural production during the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century has, as the Secretary of State for Environment, Food, and Rural Affairs [Michael Gove noted in his plenary address at this year's ORFC](#), "literally, cost us the earth".

The opportunity, 72 years later, to reshape the future of food and farming in the UK, is re-energising farmers across the whole spectrum of UK agriculture. At this year's [ORFC](#), the energy was palpable, and much of it created by younger voices. This next generation of aspiring farmers self-evidently embrace the inherent complexity and interconnectedness of food production systems when working in harmony with nature and people. They got the whole sustainability thing some time ago, and can be forgiven for being ever so slightly frustrated as to why so many of their elders seem slow to 'discover' the holistic [agroecology principles](#) to which they instinctively subscribe. Indeed, the vision many of them articulated at the ORFC's *Secrets of Success: Young Farmers and New Entrants* event, co-hosted by the [Sustainable Food Trust](#) and [New Food Entrepreneurs](#), shares more in common with the farming wisdoms of our grandparents' generation than that of the incumbent generation of farmers, who now, like me, are well into middle age. History shows us that only when knowledge and wisdom are combined, do our actions create a legacy of good outcomes to underpin sustainable societies. This must not be misrepresented as a Luddites' Charter. It is not rejection of innovation, rather a recognition that society requires the next 70 years of agricultural innovation to spring from an altogether different mind-set: one that seeks to intelligently blend scientific and technological innovation with the wisdom of our forebears in order to function within planetary boundaries. This balance between what we *can* do, and what we *should* do, is driven by an understanding that farming, environment, food and health are all part of the same whole.

What we can learn from the past 70 years is that success depends on a systemic approach. Michael Gove has set the process running with a vision for sustainable farming in harmony with nature. The Agriculture and Environment Bills, once fully honed and developed during their passage into law, will create the context. But for farming to fulfil its role within a sustainable society, it needs all the strategic players to be working towards the same goal. Educators in the land-based sector will need to transform their programmes to equip their students –

our future farmers – with the skills needed to deliver sustainable food production for healthy people and planet. Scientists and technologists will need to dive deep into their specialist areas while keeping sight of the full breadth of the bigger sustainability picture. Knowledge will need to coalesce with wisdom. Single issue fixes will need to defer to holistic solutions. Wherever there is a failure to function as part of a sustainable system, Government must have the resolve and commitment to intervene along all the major points of the supply chain – be that through enforcement of legislation, application of meaningful sanction or development of effective fiscal policies that disincentivise those practices and products which deliver people and planet the least good for the most harm. Only then will we have a systemic approach which supports and enables sustainable farming systems to succeed.

So assuming that all happens...! We still need to create routes into farming for our aspiring young entrants, and in most cases that means access to land. Many, [including the SFT](#), are calling for government to develop policy that will create more entry points into farming. Government, as always, has a role to play, but when it comes down to the actual nuts and bolts of collaboration, farming is a business which still likes to work on a handshake. Trust is everything. If ways can be found to connect all those farmers with tired old backs to ambitious new entrants and, crucially, to broker trust between them, the positive repercussions could ripple out far beyond the mutual benefits to be found for the two parties directly involved.

For UK farming more generally it is a practical step towards reversing farming's ageing demographic which must be a strategic priority not just because farming is obviously reliant on a physically fit and able work force, but also because as with any other sector of our economy, farming needs a continual supply of fresh new talent to disrupt established thinking, in order to ensure its long-term health and vitality.

From a planetary and public health perspective, we need to eat more fruit, vegetables and pulses as part of a balanced diet with less, but better, meat. SFT, in common with many across the food, farming, and health sectors, points to the [huge opportunity that exists to increase UK production of fruit and vegetables](#). SFT is calling for government to develop policies, backed by serious funding, to enable the UK horticulture sector to meet the challenge. A viable horticultural enterprise can be created from a relatively modest amount of land. Horticulture is, and has always been, a hugely important way in for new entrants. Government has a golden win-win opportunity to create an enabling ecosystem of policy and funding to drive a significant increase in horticultural production, requiring a highly-skilled workforce. This will create the opportunity to open up new routes into farming and growing for our aspiring young land-based entrepreneurs.

If the ORFC is a measure, then there is no shortage of ambitious young people who want their chance to manage the land for healthy people and planet. At this watershed moment, farming and all its strategic partners, need to go that extra mile to find ways to let them in.