

## ***Beechenhill's organic conversion diary 1990 to 2000***

**1990-95:** Stopped using organophosphates on the farm. Organophosphates are very powerful nerve agents, used in many products, sheep dips, wormers, insecticides etc. Too many tales of farmers badly affected by sheep dip. Discovered that domestic chemical fly strips seem to cause unpleasant symptoms- they are organophosphate based too.

**1997:** Heard Peter Day on BBC Radio Four's 'In Business' talking about the Globalisation - how ultimately, things will be made wherever in the world it is cheapest to produce. Suddenly realised that means milk too! He was actually citing white goods like fridges and washing machines, but the principal will surely relate to the white stuff too!

**9 August 1997:** Met an organic farming lecturer at a friend's, spent the whole night discussing the possibility of converting Beechenhill. Very boring for the other guests, but riveting for us. Decided to investigate further. Rang MAFF about organic milk production.

**September 1997:** Phoned Organic Help Line and booked free half day of expert advice to see if it will be feasible to convert farm.

**2 October 1997:** Had visit from organic advisor. She looked at the whole farm and answered all our questions. She also had lots of ideas and we were able to arrive at an achievable plan. Very interesting, worthwhile exercise - it looks like it will be possible!

**6 October 1997:** Travelled down to Step Farm, Near Oxford for an organic farm walk. Learned all about OMSCO –Organic Milk Suppliers' Co. During the farm walk we were able to discuss practical issues with fellow visitors, got advice from them on sowing clover into existing pasture. The visit introduced us to the practical reality of organic farming, and the fact that it doesn't really matter if there are a few weeds around.

**19 March 1998:** Had 2<sup>nd</sup> free advice visit, this time from organic advisor with financial expertise. He took us through the figures very thoroughly and showed us how to prepare conversion plans and registration info for the Soil Association and how to apply for the MAFF Organic Aid Scheme. Looked around for organic feed companies, could only find one.

**20 May 1998:** Took soil samples from all fields, 6 or 8 samples per field, packed into boxes, sent off for analysis. Results showed that soil had become quite acidic so whole farm was dressed with lime. We were advised to spray herbicide on some fields to reduce the dock problem before conversion. This was partially effective.

**5 June 1998:** Registration forms went off to Soil Association for conversion from 1<sup>st</sup> June 1998. Stopped using routine antibiotics on dairy cows. It turns out that the documentation we had prepared for SA was rather too much, we had got so paranoid about supplying details that we prepared and sent off too much! We needn't have got quite so panicky!

## **Organic Conversion:**

- ✍ Farm is registered with the Soil Association
- ✍ 28.15 ha (75%) in starting conversion process June 1998 (land surrounding farmstead)
- ✍ 8.85 ha (25%) to start conversion process June 1999 (land across road)
- ✍ Mixture of red and white clover sown in some fields- summer/autumn 1998, on going in 1999
- ✍ dairy herd of 45 Friesian Holsteins, 40 followers- to be reduced to 15/20
- ✍ 35 sheep- Mules lambing April
- ✍ Milk currently sold to Milk Marque, farm registered with OMSCO
- ✍ Plans for slurry store by winter 1999

**1 July 1998:** After 2<sup>nd</sup> cut silage, field 6 (Bitchenhill) was sown with clover, did it by hand with an old fiddle-drill. Did other fields with the old fertiliser spreader adapted to cope with tiny clover seeds. Clover seed varieties included Donna and Menna. Spear thistles were a big problem in field 13 so Terry spent 5 days digging them with a spike.

**23 July 1998:** First Soil Association inspection. was a long and tiring process. Everything was examined in great detail. All the field data sheets, medicinal records, animal records including any animals that may have any risk of being BSE contacts were all checked and actions agreed. Creeping thistles were scythed in field 8 (drive field). Lamber Close (11) was topped with the old forager (silage mower).

**13 August 1998:** Visited Elm Farm Research Centre saw their composting system for domestic waste from the locality; this is collected (from little green bins) stored, turned, composted and spread on fields. They are paid £12 per ton to avoid landfill. At the end of our visit we were asked to be one of their network of demo farms.....said yes.

**Autumn 1998:** White clover was sown in all silage fields south of the road. The clover mixture included Donna and Menna.

**May 1999:** Sprayed docks in the three fields across the road (Meer Close 1, Gibbet Moor 2 and Horse Park 3), these fields will enter conversion on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1999. Spear thistles in field 13 were dug again.

**July 1999:** Limed and sowed clover in fields 4 and 5. Having gathered extortionate quotes for building a slurry store, (in the realm of £50K) decide to re-examine problem. Eventually decide to run a loose housing system. Better welfare conditions for the cows and makes muck much easier to handle. Will need to raise roof of cubicle shed for ventilation and head space for cattle and machinery. At same time could roof over loafing area to reduce amount of rainwater that needs scraping up. Quote for this work –approx £18K.

**August 1999:** Red (Merviat 2.5kg/ha) and white clover (Alice5kg/ha) sown into fields across the road, red did not do very well. We tried red clover because it is higher yielding but it is not so persistent, it only lasts 2 or 3 years, and is usually better cultivated in rather than sown on to pasture. The weather was very dry after sowing.

Genetically modified organisms (GMOs) became a very worrying issue for organic farming.

**September-November 1999:** Conversion of the cubicle shed. The roof was raised 1.3 metres and the cubicle shed and silage shed were joined by a three bay extension to enable the cows to eat under cover and reduce the amount of dirty water. The old silage shed became the new muck composting shed. From now on silage would be big baled.



**December 1999:** At Beechenhill we had to get “GMO free” declarations for all animal foods. OMSCO set up mentoring groups, meeting other OMSCO producers was very useful.

**April 2000:** We had a visit to Weleda, a homoeopathic medicine company in Ilkestone, Derbyshire. Organic group had a talk from a homoeopathic vet, explained what to look for when treating homoeopathically, bought a couple of books.

**1 June 2000:** Beechenhill became an organic farm at last!!!! Gathered our first crop of organic big bale silage. The cows started on their organic diet, until now the cows could eat ordinary GMO free concentrated food. From 1<sup>st</sup> June their diet must be 90% organic. Through the organic group we heard about and joined an organic feed buying group purchasing food from a mill at Congleton.

**September 2000:** Milk became organic after 3 months of organic feeding. Sold the 21-year-old Leyland tractor and purchased a 5-year-old Zetor tractor with loader strong enough to lift the silage bales.

**October 2000:** Received our first organic milk cheque! We were paid 15.5p per litre in August 2000 and 29p per litre for September’s milk.