

Transition to agroecological approaches

Balcaskie Estate, Anstruther, Fife

The process of buying the current farm started in 2005 with the purchase of separate parcels that were not farmed as one holding before. Since then, more land has been added. The mixed farm, which includes arable, beef and sheep enterprises, is now 60% organic. Toby Anstruther decided to convert to organic and be certified to access the premium that would reward his way of farming.

The large mixed farm was set up new by buying land from several farms and is now converting to organic management, with the intention to convert the whole farm. The farmer, Toby Anstruther, and his team, have been experimenting with various improvements to cropping and soils, such as reduced nitrogen use in conventional production. In May 2016, 60% of the farm went into organic conversion. The beef and lamb is now certified organic and the arable enterprise will also be converted in time.

One important reason for the conversion was that there was no direct reward for the farm for using less nitrogen in conventional agriculture. The farm management was getting closer to organic, but they could only qualify to get a premium for doing what they were doing with organic conversion and certification.

The arable enterprise is currently farmed according to the principles of integrated crop management and the farm is a member of LEAF. Experimentation on the farm included diversification of different cash crops, and to improve efficiency, Toby and his team have also turned to precision farming technologies. Toby reflected that it is important to be able to question practices on the farm and why they are doing things using a particular approach. They are experimenting all the time, both deliberately but also by making mistakes and learning from them.

Toby feels that compared to the effort in establishing the farm in the first place, the transition to organic was not a very big change. However he feels that the available agricultural grants could not really match what he wanted to do on the farm.

One important learning process during transition was to engage with buyers and the whole supply chain and not just primary production. Toby wants to contribute to improving consumer perception and be more involved in the marketing of his products. Food production units are being established to support small businesses that can use products from the farm. The farm is now more community facing than in the past and Toby is delighted how supportive the local community has been.

“The soil health gives us confidence that we are heading in the right direction. Several small farms that we brought together were pretty much unworkable on their own and they have now come into reasonable health.”



Toby Anstruther

1,100 ha, mixed farm, family owned

Organic conversion, Integrated Farming