

A Biodynamic Summer Journey through Wales and England

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2 024 was a remarkable year for biodynamic farmers and growers involved in marking the 100th birthday of the Agriculture Course given on the Koberwitz estate in Silesia in 1924 by Rudolf Steiner.

GROOME
FARM



The palace in Koberwitz in 1924

Gatherings throughout the world have taken place to reflect and deepen our understanding of the spiritual scientific agricultural knowledge through these lectures. In Britain, books on their history have been published by Floris and Hawthorn Press, lectures given by leading BD practitioners at the Field Centre and Rudolf Steiner House, and stirring the preparations sessions have occurred up and down the country from the Scillies to Scotland!

As part of this activity in July, a journey was undertaken to see significant places in England and Wales where biodynamic practice was born. The journey was made by Dr John Paull from the

University of Hobart in Tasmania, and Vivian Griffiths, a trustee of Ruskin Mill Trust with responsibility for biodynamic practice, with the Trust generously sponsoring the trip. Both John and Vivian have an abiding interest in the history of biodynamics in these islands.

The idea came from a proposal by Chloe Hindmarsh from the education and training side of RMT to bring John over to the UK after reading his academic papers online, especially as he was visiting Europe for the BD100 celebration. John has been a reference point for academic peer reviewed BD history study that meets a Goethean perspective. This is part of Field 3, Biodynamic Ecology, of RMT's *Seven Fields of Practice*, and the Genius Loci Study (spirit of place, Field 1) in collaboration with the Biodynamic Association.

We began in Nailsworth on election day, with John arriving from Poland and Switzerland where he had been giving a keynote contribution on the 1924 Koberwitz lectures at the international centenary event. He had been delving into the archives at the Goetheanum, where there is still much to discover in the story of how biodynamic practice came about.

John had first become interested in biodynamics through the personality of Lord Walter Northbourne, who in his 1940 book *Look to the Land* arguably coined the term 'organic farming', from the BD's



John, Vivian and Steve



Ueli Hurter at the Biodynamics 100: Growing the Land, Growing People conference

‘farm organism’ self-sufficiency concept, indicated by Rudolf Steiner. This stemmed from Northbourne's appreciation of Rudolf Steiner's scientific adviser Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, whose work in the Netherlands and Switzerland resulted in an invitation to oversee a summer school at Betteshanger, his estate in Kent.

This important 1939 event, attended by land policy makers and nutritionists, opened up a huge area of study for John and he was very keen to visit the sites of early biodynamic activity in Britain.

The day after the Koberwitz lecture at the Field Centre – a real ‘what, why, when’, where we explored the events of 100 years ago – we journeyed to Wales to meet Phil Forder in Cardiff. Phil, who was part of Ruskin Mill Trust's work at Plas Dwbl, had been a Steiner school teacher in West Wales and had been mentored by Barbara Saunders-Davies. She was a remarkable figure, as we found out; she had her family home in Pembrokeshire and had taken Ehrenfried Pfeiffer on a motoring trip to St David's Head as a young student in the mid-1930s.

Here Pfeiffer had exclaimed that this place was the cradle of British biodynamics, its Celtic/Christian roots playing an important part in a new conscious agriculture. And here on file were the letters that Phil had inherited to show this very important connection, written to Barbara by Pfeiffer after their adventure to this significant spot. It was a defining moment; in a way we were two handshakes from Rudolf Steiner, and it set the bar high for further historical discoveries.

The next day, we were at RMT's Coleg Plas Dwbl being shown round by Laura Wallwork in the



Vivian, Phil, Chloe and John in Cardiff

shadow of the Preseli Hills where the Stonehenge stones came from; we subsequently heard on the news that one, the altar stone, had come from Scotland.

Laura mentioned Barbara's library in storage nearby, which will hopefully be installed at Plas Dwbl as part of a proposed research centre, and off we went on a surprise visit to Eric and Alma's farm to inspect the contents. Then it was time to say goodbye for a cross-country journey on the Heads of the Valleys road through South Wales – built in the 1930s by unemployed miners and now being comprehensively upgraded – arriving at Stourbridge in the English Midlands rather late.

In 1932, Ita Wegman's recommendation was to buy Clent Grove for the fledgling Sunfield Children's Home. The Grove seemed to come with half the village, so teachers were housed, guest



The library at Sunfield Garden School and Children's Home



A piece of historic pottery with Sunfield's mark



Early picture of Sunfield Children's Home in 1933

houses and laboratories converted, farms bought, and a veritable hub of anthroposophical therapeutic education study was created within a very short time. One of the results was a comprehensive reference library, still more or less intact, which delighted John, with helpful staff uncovering journals and early photographs. Indeed, one of the younger staff assigned to us commented on how the library, which she thought of as lost in a dusty recess, suddenly came alive for her as a source material for her studies.

John gave a lecture at Sunfield about George Adams Kaufmann, who did much with translating Steiner's lectures into English, including the Agriculture Course. The story of early British anthroposophy came alive through George's translation work, as well as difficult formative years in England as a conscientious objector, and his invaluable work with some of Steiner's indications in Goethean colour observation.

Two full days were spent at Sunfield looking at the farm and gardens, and the drawings for their development. To begin our research on the life of BD pioneer, Carl Mier, we met co-founder of the first Camphill urban community, Mark Gartner, now in his nineties, in Stourbridge. In the 1950s Mark knew Carl and his family at Botton, which we were to visit.

And so to the North East via Sheffield, looking at RMT's Sterling Works, meeting Chloe again and fellow staff. On past Leeds, to the little village of Huby a dozen miles north. Here in 1929 at Sleights Farm, Maurice Wood, now a committed anthroposophist, and friends of George Kaufmann converted the farm to BD practice and began growing wheat for milling. Here the Agriculture Course was translated into English by George and Maurice and some of the first preparations made. We met his farming colleague



Sleights Farm – the first biodynamic farm from 1929



Marna Pease in her biodynamic garden at the Old Mill House, Bray

who eventually bought the farm. Now in his eighties, he had, with Maurice, filled the bags of flour which were sent all over the country – sometimes three collections a day by the mail van, giving ‘flours by post’ a whole new definition!

Vital knowledge about Maurice and his family was shared, his passion for Steiner education, sending his children all the way to Stuttgart in the 1930s to get the education they needed and how difficult it was getting them back with war clouds threatening.

We were beginning to experience that we had made this journey just in time, so to speak, with people still alive to tell the tale before it becomes a folk memory.

From Huby to Otterburn, north of Newcastle, another important place for early biodynamics, where the recently widowed Marna Pease – sister of Eleanor Merry of the 1923 Anthroposophical Society of Great Britain – ran this agricultural borderland estate. They introduced probably the first preps that she and Carl Mier had put together. He had just arrived from the Koberwitz estate to give the BD lecture at the inspiring International English Conference for Anthroposophy in London, translated by George Adams in 1928. He stayed on in Britain for the rest of his life, firstly travelling with Marna to Northumberland.

New information appearing from the Pease family archive is an important development. Incidentally Maria’s husband, buried in the churchyard at Otterburn in 1928 has the *Ex Deo Nascimur* inscription on his gravestone, showing a distinct anthroposophical influence.

Our journey then took us south in atrocious weather across to the North York Moors to the Botton Estate where Carl Mier and family were part of the pioneering Camphill adult village community for people with special educational needs, founded in 1955.

He was attracted by the threefold social order approach adopted by the fledgling community, remembering that the *Agriculture Course* organiser, Carl Keyserlingk, had said at Koberwitz that spiritual agriculture will thrive in a threefold social order community environment. A Covid outbreak prevented any meetings, but The Lodge where the Miers had lived was duly photographed.

Then south for the final days of our tour, past Weleda in Ilkeston, Derbyshire, originally a Steiner school for the children of this town, set in DH Lawrence country, and on to Kings Langley in Hertfordshire where Rudolf Steiner visited in 1922 to see a remarkable educational experiment where the children did everything – growing the food and cooking it, cleaning the classrooms, doing the gardening. It was a school that hoped to be a Steiner school, inspired by Margaret Cross and built in the Arts and Crafts style in the ruins of a priory.

Margaret Cross became the secretary in 1935 of the Biodynamic Association, set up after splits and disagreements in Steiner circles. This was the second BD organisation in this country, lasting for 15 years until an eventual merger was agreed and the centre of activity returned to the Anthroposophical Agricultural Foundation’s office at Clent, with Carl Mier as secretary.

We were guests of Odilia Kirst whose family was very involved in the Kings Langley Steiner school. They very kindly put us up, organising a picnic on the land adjoining the former school which had been biodynamic allotments since the beginning of the school, now owned by the Christian Community.

Our fond farewells made, we journeyed to our destination, the Old Mill House, Bray on Thames near Maidenhead, on a beautiful summer's day.

It reminded us of *Three Men in a Boat*, the river slowly passing by. It was here that in 1929 Marna Pease and Carl and Gertrude Mier, along with Eleanor Merry and garden help, came and settled, establishing the first office and centre of the Anthroposophical Agricultural Foundation. It was a kind of anthroposophical country retreat house with cooking courses masterminded by Gertrude, but it was also a hive of activity – literally – with a bee garden, created with Marna's skills. Biodynamic compost heaps, beautifully crafted like altars, were amongst the hives. The office sent out the *Agriculture Course* in English to new members, numbered with instructions not to divulge its contents. The *Nine Lectures on Bees* by Rudolf Steiner in 1924 were translated into English in 1933 by Carl and Marna.

We were joined for this final day by Mark Moodie whose website considera.org has lots of information on BD history. A fitting climax to our 12 days of travelling, ten venues, two historians and a hire car!

What a journey! So many impressions, so much kindness from the gardener at Bray to the family who showed us Sleights Farm, who were so interested in our impromptu visits.

It is a living history project really, although we missed out Scotland due to time and travel limitations. Scotland has biodynamic estates up in Aberdeenshire and the biggest number of members of the Anthroposophical Society outside London.

With thanks to Dr John Paull who has contributed a wealth of material with new insights on UK BD history, and to Ruskin Mill Trust which has generously contributed to the many events marking the 100 years of BD practice.



