



“The intention is in its name – we’re surfing on the swell created by other people.”

A festival of ideas

Groundswell is agriculture’s event with a difference. CPM visits the Cherry family at Weston Park Farms in Hertfordshire to discover the back story to what’s fast becoming the UK’s most talked about event – put on by farmers, for farmers.

By Lucy de la Pasture

The third week of June is eagerly anticipated by thousands of people. Programmes are poured over to prioritise the ‘can’t miss’ sessions and note when to be at which stage. With a buzz of excitement, tents are thrown into cars along with footwear for all eventualities. It’s a chance to cut loose from the day-to-day responsibilities and meet up with friends old and new.

While a great many will be heading to Glastonbury, a growing number will be heading to farming’s fastest growing event, Groundswell. One is a festival of music, the other is a festival of ideas.

As well as shared dates, Glastonbury and Groundswell have a lot more in common. One of those is that they’re both hosted by a farming family with a passion for the genres they provide.

So how did it all start for the Cherry family?

Brothers John and Paul Cherry took the reins at Weston Park Farms some 35 years ago and their journey really has been a road to Damascus.

Farming was boring

“When we took over the farm, the outgoing tenant had been averaging around 6.2t/ha (2.5t/acre) for his winter wheat. We were pretty sure we’d do better and join those pushing the boundaries at that time, producing 10t/ha. But we’ve never averaged that here,” explains John.

The farm is a chalky boulder clay and where the chalk comes to the surface, it’s easy soil. But in the main, the clay is anything but easy and has a tendency to slump and become tight, adds Paul.

“The farm now averages wheat yields of 8.5t/ha, with the odd field occasionally producing 10-12t/ha. The soil really isn’t good enough to produce more.”

Until relatively recently, the farming system has been very conventional with tillage at its backbone. The farm started on a plough-based system and quickly moved to max-till, discing and pressing, but it became obvious that the heavy clay land was getting more difficult to work.

The Cherry brothers describe farming as pretty boring at the time, rolling out the same system year-on-year and become more and more divorced from the growing crop and the soil.

“Our agronomist made the recommendations, often passing them directly to our sprayer operator. We weren’t really that involved. I was getting sick of farming and doing the same old, same old...,” says John.

So what changed? It was more a case of reconnecting with their values after realising how far they’d strayed from them. John explains: “I was always interested in soil health. When I



With an increasing thirst for information and lots of unanswered questions, Paul (right) and John Cherry were inspired to host the first Groundswell event in 2016.

was at university I was reading 'The Living Soil' by Lady Eve Balfour but there was very little mention of soil health in lectures, it was a much more industrial approach to the soil. So I was aware, but I didn't have the 'know how'.

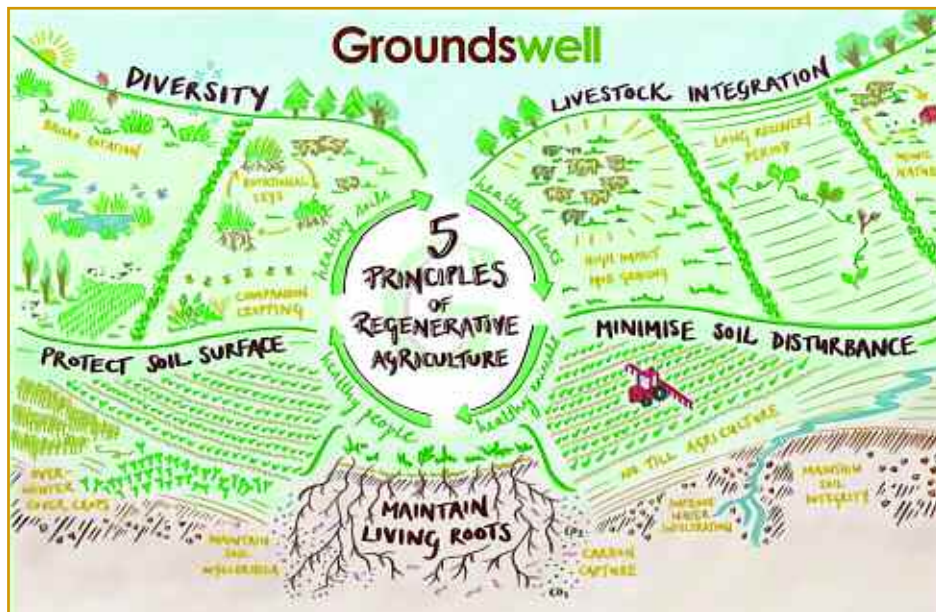
Eureka moments

"My eureka moment was when I found farmers who were putting their soil first. I visited Tony Reynolds' farm in Lincolnshire and there were skylarks just everywhere. It was because of the way he was farming."

John then went to the US for the No-till on the Plains conference and met lots of no-till farmers from Kansas while he was out there. "I saw the rainfall simulator on a prairie soil which compared grass with cultivated soil and where there were living roots, the water came out clear.

"It backed up what we were seeing at home and clarified that cultivated soil holds less water than soil that's been left alone, and that water doesn't run through fluffy soils created by machines."

At around the same time, Paul witnessed a rainfall event in a valley on the farm, where the Cherry's field runs down to border a neighbour's field the other side of the valley. "Our field was in stubble and the neighbouring field had been ploughed. After the rain, his field was covered in gulleys where the water had run down the hill, taking the topsoil with it. Our stubble field had no



The five principles of regenerative agriculture takes pride of place on the wall in the Cherry's farm office.

soil movement at all. It made me realise that we couldn't go on treating the soil like dirt and that we could be working with nature better. It doesn't have to be a battlefield."

So in 2010 the decision was made to go no-till with the purchase of a second-hand John Deere 750A and it went on to drill the whole acreage at Weston Park Farms that year. That

drill did another year and then the farm bought a new one.

The aim now is to produce what the land wants to produce rather than strain the system in the endless pursuit for more. "We want to make the soil better every day," says John.

"The wheels came off in various places because we'd changed the system and were ▶

Lacking the financial confidence to keep your business healthy?

That's taken care of.

Get simple, reliable farm accounting software to make stressful and daunting business tasks a thing of the past. Farmplan Business Cloud gives you complete confidence by making financial reporting easy and accessible. Share, schedule, audit, report all in one safe and secure place.

From one agricultural expert to another, we are here to support your business and make digital accounting simple.

For simply smarter farm accounting visit farmplan.co.uk/FBC

Farmplan business

Farmplan Business Cloud provides you with regulated account information services as a PSD2 agent of <https://plaid.com/uk/>, an authorised payment institution regulated by the <https://www.fca.org.uk/> under the Payment Services Regulations 2017 (Firm Registration Number: 804718) for the provision of payment services, including account information services.

events showcase



If you're interested in direct drills then they'll all be on show at Groundswell, though it remains primarily a festival of ideas.

► learning how to make a regenerative approach work. Yes, there were a lot of challenges, but yields didn't really suffer."

Taking centre stage on the farm office wall behind where John is sitting is the infographic showing the five principles of regenerative agriculture. One of those is maintaining living roots and John is positive that it's these that make such a difference to his more difficult clay soils.

While no year is ever the same in farming, it holds even more true in a regenerative system.

"We don't have a standard rotation, it has to be much more flexible," says Paul.

Instead the cropping decisions are driven by factors such as the weed burden in fields, he says. "In practice, there tend to be less weeds in a no-till system as the weeds seeds remain on the surface. You can keep fields clean if you're clever, which we haven't always been," he admits.

Flexibility gives options

But the flexible system gives the farm options. "If we find ourselves with a carpet of blackgrass then we clean it up over the winter and plant a spring crop. Another option we have is to take the crop off as silage for our suckler cows if we want to prevent seed return."

The farm has always had a few animals around, adds John. "But we started the suckler herd in the 1990s and it's one of the best things we did. If we run into real problems with blackgrass then we'll take it out of arable production and put it into a four-year herbal ley for the cows, which gives the ground a proper clean up and super-charges the soil at the same time."

The second major factor that helps determine the cropping is the soil itself and, in particular,



It was the transformation of his father and uncle that rekindled Alex Cherry's enthusiasm for farming and brought him back from a career in the city to run the Groundswell event.

feeding the biology, explains Paul. "The one thing we've learnt is that we can't follow a straw crop with a straw crop, the biology needs diversity so break crops play an important part on the farm."

This year the Cherrys have a winter wheat and winter bean mixture in the ground which Paul says is looking really well having had very little nitrogen and no fungicides. "It's a proper



Groundswell

THE REGENERATIVE AGRICULTURE SHOW AND CONFERENCE

22nd - 23rd June 2022



Tickets on Sale via the website now

See 20 Direct Drills Demonstrating Establishment into Standing Cover Crop

GROUNDSWELLAG.COM

"BY FARMERS, FOR FARMERS"

companion crop and the plan is to harvest the field and then separate out the beans.”

Paul’s son, Alex, notes that the root nodules on the bean roots are bright red inside, indicating the presence of leghaemoglobin which means they’re busy fixing N.

As on many other farms, the very dry start to the year is beginning to affect crops on the farm, says John. “We drill quite late as the conventional wisdom is that a regen crop wants to be a fortnight behind coming into the spring. We also didn’t terminate our cover crops early enough this year so there was some competition from them. It goes to show that every day is a school day.”

Even though regenerative systems aim to reduce inputs, nitrogen use on the farm this year is actually lower than was intended. “We were going to put some urea on but the ground’s so dry, there didn’t seem to be much point so it’s still in the shed. Tissue tests are showing that crops are okay for nitrogen and crops do look well.”

Last year the Cherrys tried a no fungicide approach on some winter wheat and it wasn’t a great success, says Paul. “The change in weather meant we had to put on a fungicide at T3, but it really went on too late.”

Nonetheless, reducing inputs remains an aim and nitrogen fertiliser use, in particular, is problematic, believes John. “It’s expensive and at high rates it messes up the soil for a couple of reasons — because it’s a salt, and because it alters the C:N ratio in the soil which encourages soil biology to eat up the humus. In a no-till system using higher rates of N has the effect of encouraging the soil to compact.”

For Alex, a career in farming hadn’t been on the cards and, instead, he was working in London as a chartered surveyor. “I wasn’t inspired to be a farmer until the farm changed to no-till. I saw John and Paul evolve very quickly as farmers when they started getting into soil health. Everything changed, attitudes changed, and our conversations became more excited

because we could see a positive future. Before the farm was on a treadmill and it really wasn’t clear where we were going.

“In the second and third years of no-till, the farm started to produce its best ever margins and that really sealed the deal. Farming was becoming fun and exciting, and we were saving on time and inputs while benefitting the environment,” says Alex.

Rekindling the flame of enthusiasm by farming in this way led the Cherrys to attend BASE and other soil health events. “These were full of energy and exciting compared with other farming events. It was more interesting than the farming I grew up with,” he says.

Sharing ideas

With an increasing thirst for information and lots of unanswered questions, the Cherrys were inspired to host the first Groundswell event in 2016, run by Alex who left the city to return home to take the reins as event director. It made sense to bring together all the experts in soil health and regenerative approaches. “The intention is in its name — we’re surfing on the swell created by other people,” explains John.

Traditionally farming events have been mostly about industry extracting money from farmers, adds Paul. “We’re not providing a space to sell machinery at Groundswell, it’s all about selling ideas. It brings together like-minded people, whether you’re an academic, a farmer, or a student. There’s huge value in sharing experiences when facing the challenges of moving to a regen system.”

John adds: “We are very lucky to have Alex, as he has a festival mind from his experience organising music festivals. I think the reason why Groundswell works so well is because people love coming to it — it’s a mixture of entertainment and information.”

The lovely thing about the regen world is that a lot of people are experimenting, he adds. Groundswell provides a platform for the discussion of those ideas and the event has



With nearly all the sessions recorded, the event is truly open source, remaining true to its ethos of sharing information for the benefit of all.

had more than 150 session applications with different speakers in 2022.

“We had 450 attendees at the first event and one of the speakers was Jill Clapperton. She advised us not to run Groundswell every year as we’d find it hard to get speakers. Seven years on and we have an incredible interest from people wanting to share their experiences at Groundswell.”

Jill is returning in 2022, when around 5,500 people are expected to visit the event, and she’ll be sharing more about the link between a healthy soil and producing healthy, nutrient-dense food. This connection between farming and food is something that will feature at this year’s event with its ‘Food for Thought’ theme, says Alex.

“We’re engaging much more with hospitality and chefs. The regen story is so good that there’s a lot of interest from foody retailers and the Groundswell Real Bread Bakery will be open each day providing bread made from heritage grains. The SSAW Collective are also hosting a three-course long table banquet on both evenings of the event.”

Fibre production is another area where there are opportunities for regen growers and that will also form part of the conversation, and it is conversation that is really what Groundswell is all about, says Paul.

There are seven stages this year with a programme that’s sure to promote discussion, adds Alex. “Regen farmers should be rewarded for what they’re doing, either privately or through public money. So we’re bringing together people from all corners — companies measuring carbon, trading carbon, the soil and carbon — into a ‘boxing ring’ to discuss their ideas and help people understand carbon better.”

If you can’t make it to Groundswell then Alex says all bar the Speaker’s Corner sessions will be recorded and available on YouTube, making the event truly open source and remaining true to its ethos of sharing information for the benefit of all. ■



As Lannock Manor farm transforms into an event venue, life remains unchanged for the Cherry’s herd of beef shorthorns.