



Abbey Home Farm Report



November 2025



“Abbey Home Farm are caretakers of 215 acres of mixed woodland and we are passionate about protecting and sustaining this natural resource to the best of our ability.”

Organic Fruit and Vegetables have been grown on site for over twenty years now. The scale of production is tailored to meet the needs of our Shop customers and Café visitors. We currently grow on an area of 5.5 hectares, producing over 80 types of fruit and vegetables for as long a season as possible. We use a variety of techniques and approaches to achieve this.



Andy Dibben



Overview

We visited Abbey Home Farm just outside Cirencester on the morning of the 21st October. Andy Dibben was our guide who has a wealth of experience in farming and particularly growing. He was very generous with both his time and knowledge.

Background

Andy looks after 15 Acres of fruit and veg with 40 employees in this area. The horticulture was the area which we concentrated on with this visit.

Abbey home farm consists of much more than just horticulture as it also has livestock, educational, retail and hospitality enterprises within it. The farm has been certified Organic for 35 years. The owners of Abbey Home Farm Will and Hilary Chester-Master want everyone in the local community to have access to quality, locally produced food and to that end as much as possible is produced on farm, value added and is available in the farm shop and café. Everything grown is sold on the farm, and the real skill lies in producing just enough to meet customer demand while offering maximum choice and minimising waste.

Matching supply to footfall is key, with the café playing a crucial role by using surplus produce, allowing overall grading standards to remain high. The farm grows a significant amount of soft fruit, which is sold fresh and also processed into frozen fruit year-round, further helping to manage any grade-out.



Horticultural Internship

Abbey Farm runs a very successful horticultural internship over three years. It is a very sought after programme and the participants are often “poached” quickly after completion. This means Abbey Farm is really improving and feeding into the improvement of the industry as a whole.

As part of the apprenticeship participants are encouraged to learn from their mistakes (once the mistakes are not economically detrimental!), this gives a responsibility to the learning. Apprentices are exposed to all areas of the business, starting with harvesting, to understand the purpose of each step in the process. They receive one hour of theory training per week with Andy. There are typically three apprentices on the farm at any one time, one in each year of the programme. In return for their work, they receive minimum wage and support with housing, alongside valuable hands-on learning.



Processes

Propagation

All production from propagation to harvest is done on farm. Even though not financially viable to propagate on farm it is an important part of teaching and also means more control over variety and quality of the plants. No propagation is carried out in winter as no advantage, however using a hot box like system with heating and light, tomato propagation starts in February.

Compost

The compost used is woodchip, are composted for 2/3 years. Plug trays rather than blocks are used all peat free. Klassman peat free compost is the compost of choice for the module trays, and finds it holds well. They don't seed save as it's another skill set.



Tunnels

- The tunnels have a variety of cultivation techniques employed including no dig. Very chalky soil with a PH of 7.5-8.5 if tunnels dry out the soil turns white and hard.
- Use of a two wheel tractor for cultivation. Ideally mix up the type of cultivation used in different areas so give the best chance of recovery.
- Empty the tunnels before summer crops are introduced. Produce on average 300 packs of 150g salad bags a week. Rocket planted in drills.
- Cut flowers have a dedicated tunnel.
- Tomatoes are planted in among other crops like beet and lettuce, also strawberry runners (Christine), the flowers are nipped to increase growth and give an earlier crop.



Salad tunnels



Weed control

Weed control is through hoeing, stale seed beds and flame weeder. Fertility mainly through top dressing. Main input is woodchip compost and the tunnels and glasshouses are “eating through” this according to Andy as the soil is very poor with a thin layer of topsoil being only approximately 10cm in some places. Outside fertility is through cover crops and green manure, not so much inside. No animal inputs are applied to the soil used for fruit and vegetables, as farmyard manure is reserved for the tillage areas of the farm.

Rotation in tunnels

Rotation in the tunnels is 6 yearly cycle. The woodchip compost is really great as it gives a slow release of nutrients and increases fungal activity. Rotation is crucial to feed the crops. Observation and experience rather than frequent soil tests relied on for nutrient levels in the soil.

Irrigation

Irrigation in the tunnels is overhead, which leads to better crop vigour but needs very little irrigation overall.



Cut flower tunnel



Propagation tunnel

Glasshouses

- The glasshouses arrived in 2017 from the Netherlands, they are 5.5m tall and arrived modular and flat packed with their own team to put them up, costing approximately 100k at the time. The standard height in Holland is now 8.5-10m tall. The beds are laid out in 75m lengths. Five bays fit well with a 5-year rotation.
- The glasshouses have extended the growing season considerably, in addition to increasing the cropping area by 1000m². The first crops are out of the glasshouse, followed by the tunnels early summer/spring, and market garden summer/autumn and the glasshouses also mean later winter salads too, giving more year round supply.
- Essentially the glasshouses have given a season extension, starting with early spinach for which there is a huge demand, winter greens, cut and come again (at 15cm spacing) early in the year and pointed cabbage. Salad varieties used include Grenoble, red and green salad bowl, Jack Ice and Cerbiatta.



“...the glasshouses have given a season extension”

Glasshouses (cont.)

- A local (Cotswold) perennial wildflower mix is planted in strips, this provides a habitat for predator insects, but on the flip side can also house slugs and other pests. In relation to pest control Andy summed it up with “Nature loves a vacuum” so it is important not to leave bare areas, provide for nature to sort things out.
- The nectarine trees which are planted in a 75m strip provide habitat for insects that keep pests at bay and over time the pest pressure within the glasshouses have steadily decreased. The Nectarine trees produced 80 kg of fruit this year. They are root pruned to contain them and their behaviour is changing over time essentially they are being trained. There are also grapes and passionflower climbers which apart from providing fruit they provide shade from the potential intense heat. Hops are a consideration for planting outside to use as a sort of natural curtain as they can be easily cut if negative effects noted, a flexible natural system is the ideal.
- Irrigation within the glasshouse consists of two heavy watering’s at the start of the season, need to be careful as has hard pan so can end up wasted, after that irrigation is only about every three weeks or so, very efficient. The farm has a bore hole source. The houses felt very humid and warm when came in.
- Soil fertility is via wood chip compost which is applied twice in the 5 year rotation as well as use of green manures. The soil was very poor to start, now it is just acceptable. Needs a lot of organic matter and nutrient addition.
- There is an automation option which involves humidity, heat and light, however the weather station is only programmed for temperature at present.

*“Nature
loves a vacuum.”*



Market gardens

The market gardens were next, they have been cultivated for the last 27 years, designed then by Iain Tolhurst in the traditional Victorian style. They are tired and have been used as an experiment and learning area by interns over the last few years.

Although holding their own and nutrients are being introduced by green manures and cover crops there has been some leaching with rain over time. Too many grassy areas now, mowed grass is the ultimate for slugs. The overall consensus on this area is that it needs an overhaul.



The Farm Shop



Agroforestry

The agroforestry area was started 8 years ago. Part of the plan was that the trees would act as a wind break as well as a visual for the café. It also produces more crops for the shop.

The trees were planted 6-8 years ago and include thirteen different varieties of apple trees, 98 in total.

They produce 60/70kg of apples a week which results in a supply of apples until mid-March if stored in the right conditions. The choice of apple varieties was based on increased yield with the least amount of input so not really suited to heritage varieties. The Russet doesn't like it there as prefers less calcium rich soils and so is more prone to rust. MM106 is a successful rootstock from experience.

The area is set up in 1.5m bed system of 11 beds. The tree spacing was chosen to accommodate the irrigation boom but in hindsight Andy would have wider strips if starting again.

He notices the trees have a negative effect on crops especially if planted too close, shadows affect growth significantly. **Willow and Wild Cherry** being the worst offenders, both suck water, do not plant these near where want to cultivate crops. The rotation in this area is 5 years. 2 years for fertility building followed by potatoes (Charlotte), Alliums, Brassica, and finally squash/beet/ sweetcorn, these can be under sown with a Green manure when established and this will give an even longer fertility building space. Phacelia, chicory, red clover and cocksfoot typical cover crop mix.



Agroforestry (cont.)

- Trees provide a long pollen season for insects which increases wildlife on the farm overall. Elder is a late source of pollen. Concentrate on wildlife and coppice (Hazel, Alder) trees. Can coppice every 5 years ideally when a green manure is alongside so can chip straight onto the GM, however the soil biology really needs to be abundant to break this down. A local wildflower perennial mix under the trees add to the abundance of song birds and insects.
- Establishing the understory is key to getting healthy vigorous tree growth.
- Till the strip the summer before planning to plant, follow with a wildflower mix and in autumn/winter plant the young trees and heavily mulch with woodchip



Pests

- Pests are really **decreased by the increase in wildlife**, they support an integrated pest management system. The songbirds take care of the caterpillars.
- Monoculture really is the issue as white moth land approx. three times before laying, a variety of crops decreases the likelihood of a severe outbreak.
- **Pigeons** are an issue with brassicas, they are covered until the crops have 6 leaves and are likely to be able to outgrow the predation. It's important to remove the netting as soon as possible so the songbirds can take care of the smaller pests.
- **Flea beetle** is really bad on brassica, due to close proximity to rape fields, aim to have strong vigorous plants so not as susceptible to pest pressure.
- Changes for next year in this area are to plough as early as possible to combat drought. This year there was patchy germination due to water stress, also upgrade the irrigation system.

For more information see Andy's book on Silvohorticulture:

[https://www.dubraybooks.ie/product/silvohorticulture-9781915294364?](https://www.dubraybooks.ie/product/silvohorticulture-9781915294364?srltid=AfmBOoqJFLAjQDTTCjZZKwfs7tfBa94uEgcPZomIOybe6BpnGBezysXI)

[srltid=AfmBOoqJFLAjQDTTCjZZKwfs7tfBa94uEgcPZomIOybe6BpnGBezysXI](https://www.dubraybooks.ie/product/silvohorticulture-9781915294364?srltid=AfmBOoqJFLAjQDTTCjZZKwfs7tfBa94uEgcPZomIOybe6BpnGBezysXI)



Field scale crops

- The final area was the field scale crops. This is managed on a 5-year rotation which consists of 2-year fertility building, potatoes, brassica and carrot/parsnips. The potatoes are pushed hard and fast, with increased irrigation in order to combat blight, they are planted in March. Varieties used are Charlotte, Colleen, Maris bard, and Nicola. Carla/Orla/Alouette are the earlies that are particularly blight resistant.
- Carrot varieties include Rodelika which has more carotene making them more resistant. Oxhella are not good with the cold but very easy to harvest. The varieties are really important in relation to longevity in storage.
- Tundra, Russian Kale, cabbage, green and white Deli Stem are some of the brassicas grown. The succulent deli stems are becoming very popular and come into their own mid-September to mid-December.



Nutrition

- Green manure is broadcast with a spinner often as the rain is seen coming in. Cultivate, broadcast, roll. Seeding is done with a manual single Jang seeder. Andy enjoys the dynamic aspect of manual working. Although he did mention earlier in the day that more mechanisation is potentially called for.
- Compost is produced on farm. Fast which is composed of veg and straw is ready in 12 weeks. The slow woodchip compost is carbon: nitrogen perfect in order to compost itself, it's creation is slow and steady but takes up to 2 years. Don't usually need to buy in compost.

Andy gave us so much information in a very short space of time. His honesty and experience are invaluable for learning.

Abbey Home Farm are inspiring in how the “whole package” is offered in a one stop shop.