



# OGI—Bord Bia UK Farm Research Trip Overview

October 2025

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# Overview

On the 19th October a small group of commercial Irish Growers arrived in the UK to begin an action packed two days visiting three different Organic Horticultural Enterprises.

UK growers face similar and varying challenges to Irish growers and this was an opportunity to learn directly from the people observing and experiencing the changes as they arise. Everyone we met was so generous with their knowledge, and enthusiastic to share what is happening on their farms and how they are learning on the ground on an ongoing basis.



OGI UK Trip

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# The Bull Inn

The Bull Inn, located in Totnes, Devon (and owned by Geetie Singh-Watson) hosted us for dinner on the first evening and this was a prime example of what can be done in terms of a fully organic restaurant and pub using local seasonal produce.

The choice of both food and drinks was extensive, showcasing the abundance of organic produce in the area.

This organic and ethical Inn had a connection to our first farming enterprise as Geetie is married to Guy the founder of Riverford Organic Farmers.



# Riverford Organic Farm

Day 1 of the trip started on the site of Riverford Organic Farmers root processing facility. Riverford works with many farmers and growers in the locality to ensure a constant supply and choice of organic produce which it then distributes through a delivery box scheme to its customers. It also has a with very small amount wholesale to the business.





# Andy Hayllor's Farm

Andy Hayllor's farm hosts the root processing facility and he grows a range of crops for Riverford, mainly root with 150 acre of potatoes, as well as carrots, beetroot, savoy cabbage, cauliflower and other brassicas. Andy is part of the South Devon Organic Producers co-operative, a group of local farmers who supply Riverford with organic produce.

His farm has a 'programme' that is agreed with the company and he supplies the quantities outlined on a weekly basis.

Part of the programme arrangement guarantees the company will use Andy's produce or if there is a surplus they will help find a market for it.





# Andy Hayllor's Farm

As we sheltered from the relentless heavy rain Andy filled us in on the economics, practicalities and challenges that they are currently facing farmers in the UK. There is a very evident “cost of living crisis” that is affecting consumer spending and this has resulted in a reduction in sales, thus next year they intend to produce less as there is also a price freeze on their programme with Riverford. The general feeling is according to Andy is that “the money is just not circulating!”

The weather has presented challenges as they farm on clay loam mainly, wet weather makes every step of the growing process more difficult. The Labour force and costs of same are increasing in the UK and so they are working on becoming more and more mechanised and keeping as much labour as possible within the family.





# Andy Hayllor's Farm

Sourcing seed since Brexit has become increasingly difficult as the plant breeders are mainly based in Holland. Inheritance tax implications are also having a negative effect in relation to farming in the UK at this time.

We concluded our tour with Andy with the sorting area, storage sheds and packing facility. They are looking forward to the arrival of an opti-grade machine to sort the veg as this will significantly reduce the manual labour time spent on this task.



# Riverford Organic Farmers Pack House

Riverford Organic Farmers Pack House was our next destination. Here Harriet filled us in on how the co-owned company model works. Riverford employs around 1,100 staff, it is the biggest employer in that area of Devon after the council.

It became an employee co-owned business 7 years ago when the founder Guy Singh-Watson sold 77% of the business to its employees and followed this up with the final 23% in 2023.

This means that everyone who works for Riverford co-owns the business and as such avails of a percentage of the profits.

One third of the staff are based at the offices and packing centre in Devon with the other two thirds spread out between a another pack house in Peterborough, M3 and countrywide distribution hubs as well as employees that are involved in field sales and door to door delivery and logistics.

Riverford Organic Farm's most profitable years have been since co-ownership until this year – this year has it has been worse than the slump in 2008 in terms of sales.





# Business Model

The original business idea had been to achieve ‘national dominance’ by setting up a number of co-op models all over the country involving organic growers who would then work through localised distribution hubs to supply organic vegetables country wide. This ideal didn’t work, as enough farmers couldn’t be found who wanted to convert to grow organic vegetables.

Following from this idea a franchise model was set up for distributors in a particular area. This model worked to an extent but more recently the Co-ownership is buying back the Franchise aspect due to inconsistent service.

Riverford is known as a good and fair employer that pays and treats people well in order to increase staff retention. Apprenticeships are offered where people can work up through the business in particular areas, as well as a lot of training on offer as part of the business model.



# Riverford Packing Centre

Kerry gave us an excellent tour of the packing centre. It was quite an assault on the senses as the centre is comprised of many different areas all highly automated and very busy.

It packs an average of 70,000 organic produce boxes a week and was able to increase this to 91,000 during busier years.

The ethos of the whole company encompasses zero waste high on the agenda and as part of this any unsaleable produce is distributed to charities and co-owners.

The packaging is also zero waste and high rate of reuse and recycle. The boxes, and any additional packaging are returned to ensure minimum environmental impact by the whole system.



Packing centre



Reuse/recycle  
department



The centre is in operation six days a week rolling shifts cover from 6am to 10pm. There are a variety of boxes available ranging in size and contents, from veg, meat, and dairy, all organic and the majority locally sourced. The customers can choose what they would like in their box or they can avail of a recipe box bundle. Riverford invest a lot in customer care and value the importance of customer retention which sparks initiatives like the customer re-activate campaign.



Packing line



Various box sizes



# Customers

The main driving factors that bring customers to Riverford is personal health, quality fresh produce and knowing the impact of ultra-processed food or 'inconvenient food.'

Customers are kept on board due to convenience, quality, engagement through newsletters and the ethics of the business.

As it costs approximately £100 to recruit each new customer retention is a high priority.





# On-site restaurant

Lunch was served in the on-site restaurant and consisted of delicious dishes consisting of the finest organic produce.

It was great value to eat there and Guy joined some of our group over lunch.



Lunch venue



# Growing areas

The afternoon started with Ed giving us a tour of the growing areas around the restaurant and close by. He is polytunnel operations manager. As part of the environmental awareness ethos of Riverford there are constant trials being carried out in order to improve the way farming is done. At present they are trialling perennial kale as an alternative to an annual crop.



There are 1,500 acres around the area as part of Riverford Organic Farmers. 120 Acres are used to grow vegetables at present. They work on a **five year vegetable crop rotation** with three of these being in fertility building through green manures, clover, grazing cattle or silage production. Agroforestry in various forms are in early trial stage as well as a trial nursery of unusual edible trees like mulberry, Rowan, Szechuan pepper, and pomegranate close to the restaurant. After visits to the brassica and leek fields we finished in the polytunnels. There are three acres under tunnel growing a variety of salads, cucumber and tomatoes.



# Growing areas

The scale of Riverford's operation is much larger than anything we have in Ireland to date in the organic area. However it is definitely something that is achievable and maybe a model to aspire to?

Riverford Organic Farmers Ltd really embraced our visit and it wasn't possible for them to share anything more with us so full was the day.



Brassica fields



Tunnels

# Abbey Home Farm Cirencester

Abbey Home Farm in Cirencester was our next destination. After a three hour drive from Riverford we were very grateful to be greeted by a hot organic meal prepared by the Abbey Farm Café.

The café incorporates a shop which has a full range of organic produce from the farm as well as an abundant of other necessities in the organic and wholefood areas meaning it is a one stop shop for all organic needs.





# Abbey Home Farm Model

Day 2 began with a tour of the horticulture production areas of Abbey Home Farm with Andy Dibben as our very experienced guide.

Abbey Home Farms business model centres around concentrating on selling all their produce on farm to generate max income from a steady footfall of customers. They aim to supply variety and choice year round to the local community.

They aim to meet all customer's needs everyday, supplying the full nutritional needs of the community. Each week they sell 200 large Veg boxes. There are numerous different enterprises within the farm – from Dairy, Beef, Sheep, pigs, layers, broilers, veg, and soft fruit.





# Abbey Home Farm Model

Value is added as much as possible on farm through the dairy production, bakery, butchery. By adding value to everything a full circular model is possible as what would be counted as waste in some areas can be used in the making of products to selling in the shop or use in the café. They are all about choice for customers. This however leads to waste, in most production systems this is an issue however here there is a way to use this waste to add value and offer even more choice to the customer through even more additional products.

There are 40 employees on the farm. Will and Hilary Chester-Master run the farm and Hilary is the founding director of the café and is especially passionate about education which means there is a pre-school nursery on farm, a residential education centre and a three year horticultural apprentice scheme.

<https://www.thefarm.education/about-the-farm/>





# Abbey Home Farm Horticultural Production

There are 15 acres used for horticulture production which is what we explored. This part of the enterprise comprises of tunnels, glasshouses, market garden and field scale veg production as well as a relatively recent agroforestry production area.

Everything from propagation to sale is on farm.

The addition of glasshouses eight years ago means a more constant production year round.

The market garden is the oldest part of the horticultural area and is visible from the café, it has been in production for the last 27 years and along with the glasshouses has an added visual quality.



# Abbey Home Farm Agroforestry

The agroforestry area is located at the back of the café and again adds to the ambience of the café and shop.

The trees were planted 6-8 years ago and include thirteen different varieties of apple trees which produce 60/70kg of apples a week which results in a supply of apples until Mid March.



Apple trees at back  
of Café





# Abbey Home Farm Learnings

As the weather gets wetter and causes different challenges year on year, Abbey Home Farm are continually adapting in order and changing and are open to every new potential learning that arises and as such is also very happy to share their learnings.

The Abbey Home Farm business model is very successful, however there are certain factors that may not transfer to Ireland so easily for example the **concentration of affluent consumers in the area is particularly dense**. Otherwise is this a model we can bring home?



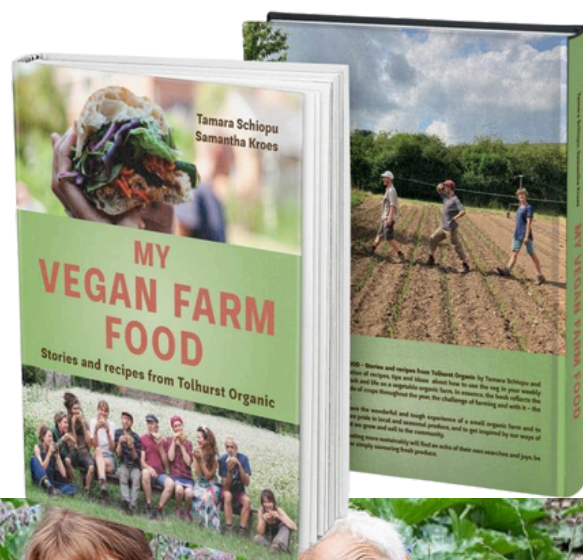


# Tolhurst Organic Partnership Farm

Just over an hour drive brought us to Tolhurst Organic Partnership Farm in South Oxfordshire, and another delightful organic lunch consisting of the farm's produce was freshly prepared for our arrival.

Tolhurst Farm has been growing organic vegetables for over 35 years on the banks of the Thames. Their business model is that of a C.I.C (Community Interest Company). This is a limited company structure with a purpose primarily around Community benefit rather than private profit.

Recipes available in the new book:  
<https://www.tolhurstorganic.co.uk/product/my-vegan-farm-food/>





# Tolhurst Organic Partnership Farm

Tolhurst Farm is run without any animal input and shows a very high level of fertility in a self-sufficient system. Historically the box scheme consisting of 150 regular customers, was the main bulk of the business, the farm shop selling another 40% of the farms produce, and two local shops a further 10%. Starting last year during winter they supply stable crops to universities and local colleges in Oxford, the colleges are taking the over production during the winter. 100 vegetable boxes are sold on a good week, the typical 150 customers end up only ordering every second week. Customer retention and acquisition is one of the major challenges.

The Walled Garden has been used for food production since the second world war and it is part of Hardwick Estate. Tolhurst Farm is the largest employer on the estate even though they occupy the least amount of land at 20 Acres, 5.5 full time staff, turning over 100-120 tonnes of veg each year, gross turnover of the business is 280-300K. They have started to add more value to the business in terms of events.





# Tolhurst Organic Partnership Farm

The start of October saw them host 2000 people at the farm at a squash and pumpkin festival, giving a useful income.

There is a need to diversify and reducing the amount of crops in the walled garden and substituting for grass and green manure gives space for large events. This was an economic decision as managing a small area of crops is no longer economically viable due to cost of labour. Now larger field scale is much more viable.





# Tolhurst Organic Strawberries

Strawberries are the main outdoor crop in the walled garden and are highly valuable. “Can sell any amount of strawberries” according to Iain.

The farm increased strawberry prices a huge amount this year and had no issue selling all of the crop, even through pick your own days. There is a very good market. Increasing from 10,000 to 40,000 plants next year makes economic sense.



Strawberry plants



Strawberry plants

# Tolhurst Organic Farm Shop

The farm shop is located 500m down the road from the Walled garden where we were greeted by an abundance of pumpkins – all ready for the upcoming Halloween holidays. The shop sells the produce from the tunnels in the walled garden consisting of mainly salad crops, as well as the field crops including beetroot, carrots, brassicas, potatoes, beans, sweet corn, onions and leeks.



Apples and pears are harvested from the trees in the agroforestry system and juiced. Tolhurst Farm don't buy out of season produce to fill the hungry gap, preferring to sell only their own in season produce, encouraging customers to eat in season and local. This can cause an issue in terms of customer loyalty.

The shop itself is off grid and self-service with an honesty box where customers can pay online, by card, or cash which 20% customers still use. Economically the farm shop works really well. It has become a hub for the community as a coffee cart comes at the weekend – again another way to add value to the enterprise and really bring the local community into what they do and engage with them and get local support. Currently all the produce is being sold within a 10/12 mile radius but ideally the farm would prefer to be supplying a 5 mile radius, keeping everything as local as possible.





# Tolhurst Organic Farm Shop

Tolhurst Organic Partnership Farm is a highly productive, ecologically conscious genuinely community focused enterprise which through a closed circular system is showing how this type of system can and does work. Tolhurst has a proven track record of successful growing and is still adapting to what is need to keep the enterprise economically viable. The way forward?

Overall a great trip full of an abundance of information and food for thought in relation to different business models and ideas that could potentially work to enhance the organic horticultural industry in Ireland.



# Challenges and Learnings from UK Farms

## A discussion

Some of the challenges faced by the three UK farms we visited—and how these hurdles are being turned into opportunities—are explored below. This aims to spark further discussion among OGI members, highlighting lessons learned from successes and failures on other farms and how these insights can be used to their advantage.

### Location

A common theme with all the farms we visited is that they are located in very affluent areas which has a big impact on how people shop and what they can and are willing to spend money on. Awareness and education is an important aspect of the daily investment customers make on Organic food. Would these enterprises be so successful in more urban, less financially well off areas?

Is this something that could potentially limit the success of similar models in less affluent areas?

### Climate change

Climate change was alluded to on numerous occasions, a general consensus of changes in the weather patterns cannot be denied, neither can the need to adapt to these changes. Some aspects that are in need of consideration include irrigation, changes in the seasonal timing of cultivation practices - for example preparing the ground earlier so the plants can better adapt to drought, or in the case of Andy Hayllor in Devon, have different machinery that is softer on wet land.

Tolly very much saw adaptation to weather as an ongoing challenge “even before climate change was invented” and in a way to him that means it’s not a challenge but something that is part of vegetable growing life. Keeping customers and giving them choice in order to retain a steady customer base is a challenge more experienced by Tolhurst Farm. Being one of the smaller scale enterprises may have an impact on marketing? Or is it a lower population density in the local area?



# Challenges and Learnings from UK Farms

## A discussion

### Customer retention

Riverford customers have an awareness of personal health, quality fresh produce and knowing the impact of ultra-processed food or “Inconvenient food”. Customers are kept on board due to convenience, quality, engagement through newsletters & social media and the ethics of the business. As it expensive to recruit each new customer so retention is a high priority for Riverford. Highlighting the value of a loyal customer base.

Abbey Home Farm offer variety, choice and a one stop shop all year round, to their local customers. This can only work as a successful model if there are multiple enterprises working together. Is this something that could be achieved successfully with more collaboration in Ireland?

The larger the number of enterprises working together the easier it is to create choice for consumers through adding value, which also means less waste.

### Labour costs

Labour costs are pushing horticulture more and more to a larger scale in order to mechanise processes rather than employing people to perform tasks by hand. This is most evident on Tolhurst Farm again as they had the largest market garden area. Andy Hayllor mentioned labour costs as one of their biggest challenges, and a need to keep the labour in the family as much as possible. Weeding is still an area that needs contract labour to control, no hard and fast solution in this area apparent yet. Staff retention is an additional challenge especially in relation to keeping skilled labour. Keeping the staff that have been trained within the farming unit is becoming more and more of a challenge within the horticultural industry. How can staff and students be engaged to increase retention levels, longevity and loyalty on farm?

# Challenges and Learnings from UK Farms

## A discussion

### Recruitment & Retention

Riverford is feeling the cost of staff recruitment especially in the wash house. They are finding solutions through training, staff engagement, promotion opportunities, and co-ownership. Their reputation as a good, fair employer also helps with retention.

Abbey home farm offers internships to provide skilled workers to the industry. Even though they don't tend to keep their qualified interns, as they are highly sought after. This is seen as a positive rather than a negative as this shows they are doing a great job teaching effectively. They seem to be happy with staff retention overall. They do however rely on a consistently high turnover in order to pay the high wage bill associated with this level of employment.

Chris Hoadley who has been working on Tolhurst Farm for over 20 years and he mentioned that although it is very stimulating to be constantly meeting new people, having a continual turnover of both part time and volunteer staff, he is looking forward to more permanent staff members on the team.

All three farms contribute to upskilling both their staff and the wider community through workshops, awareness campaigns, and on-farm education of various kinds. This plays a key role in supporting the long-term sustainability of the organic industry while continually raising awareness of the value of organic food.



# Challenges and Learnings from UK Farms

## A discussion

### **Alternative income streams**

Branching into alternative income streams—such as events or pick-your-own (PYO) activities for crops like dahlias and strawberries—allows the farm to maximize the value of each crop while engaging customers on-site. Each initiative empowers and educates visitors, providing greater involvement and a deeper connection to the farm. The value of adding value was clear in the way different enterprises were integrated on the farm, providing choice while minimising waste. Abbey Home Farm had this approach nailed!

### **Waste**

Riverford through its in-depth recycling solutions and eco-friendly packing are really keeping waste to a minimum. Working with co-owners and charities to ensure no food waste puts them high up in the ethics ranks and this is very much part of the ethos that is retaining their customer base.

As EU money is no longer there to support UK farms they've had to adapt. Post Brexit effects includes a reduction in organic seed in general as well as variety availability, a challenge that doesn't seem to have solution in sight!

However, grants are now becoming available to support Food Community Processing Equipment which local charities can avail of, and are. There is now the possibility of these charities adding value to unmarketable produce by processing into value added produce such as Kimchi and smoothies.

Is this something we could employ in Ireland? Adding value means no waste!

# Challenges and Learnings from UK Farms

## A discussion

It was impressive to see how the challenges discussed above are being embraced and turned into opportunities on these ever evolving adaptable and enterprising Farms. Can the lessons learnt be brought home and used to spark discussion and positive change for the future?

