

Revolting peasants

Four hundred years ago in the sleepy village of Cotesbach on the borders of Leicestershire, Warwickshire and Northamptonshire events were unfurling that would have a profound effect on the agricultural landscape of England and the very fabric of the countryside.

On the 7th July this year Cotesbach stirred to life once more to mark the quattrocentenary of the peasants revolt. In 1607 the estate of Cotesbach had been bought by John Quarles, a London merchant, and converted to pasture for grazing. The villagers were thrown off the land and threatened with hunger and destitution. This was happening all across the Midlands and, galvanised into action by the unlikely figure of Captain Pouch (whose source of protection was his pouch which later was found only to contain a lump of mouldy green cheese), five thousand peasants gathered at Cotesbach to tear down the hedges and fences and fill the ditches. The protests were completely non-violent and though recorded as 'riots' they involved the systematic removal of what threatened their livelihoods, using whatever tools they could lay their hands on and with the support of the local communities and the church. The only violence occurred at a later date when the authorities intervened to quell the uprisings. In many ways the nearest equivalents we have today are the GM protests and the day before the Cotesbach Quattrocentenary celebrations took place, the last remaining GM potato trial near Cambridge was 'de-contaminated.'

Ultimately the Cotesbach protests were in vain as the lands became enclosed and the Enclosure Act of 1845 signalled the triumph of capitalist agriculture over the peasant farming tradition of growing to meet basic needs. It is perhaps fanciful to imagine a return to peasant farming but as The Land Is Ours points out there are still real issues over access to land. With an acre of land for every man, woman and child in this country it can be argued that the distribution and utilisation of land is seriously flawed. World food production is dominated by large corporations with huge political muscle and we can seem powerless individually to prevent their advances.

As growers we are the most efficient users of land. As local food producers we are in the vanguard of a movement that is gathering momentum and will be of increasing pertinence in a post peak-oil economy. Access to good land for organic vegetable production has always been limited, with many of the pioneers growing on marginal (for veg) land in the wetter outposts of the country, corresponding often to lower

land prices. The larger producers on excellent soils who have converted are welcomed as they can supply the bulk quantities that the market requires, but there is still a need for the small grower. In many rural areas the land prices for fields with road access have been raised by the insatiable demand for horse paddocks. Land prices are also set to rise as land is diverted, foolishly, from food into biofuels. In order for the young grower to get started, partnerships are needed with landowners and organic farmers. For that reason the Soil Association's Land Trust is to be welcomed. The trend for growing your own vegetables is increasing but there is a world of difference between even a large garden and commercial production. The majority of the OCIS (Organic Conversion Information Service) clients I saw were middle class folk, who having bought a nice house in the country, were looking for something to do with the 5 acres that came with it. Some perceived organic growing to be a nice gentle occupation, to be fitted in around the school run, for others it was a yearning for the good life, while a few were keen amateur growers. While some of these do and can become capable producers, most are dissuaded from converting because of the disproportionate cost of certification, or by a realisation of the work involved. We shouldn't be dismissive of this scale of production - part-time growing is likely to increase with a shift in working patterns and more home-working. The enthusiasm is there, but the knowledge and skills need to be developed. Training needs to be made available to enable the leap from keen gardener to small-scale grower. They can be the new peasants for the post peak-oil age. Encouragement is also needed at certification level. The charity side of the Soil Association is all for local food, but since the demise of the group certification scheme the cost of organic registration may be prohibitive.

Local food production is not always easy, however, for crops will have to be grown on less than ideal land which brings its own challenges. Up to now crop varieties have been bred, selected and trialled on the best land for the job. Now, a new approach is needed to develop varieties adapted to harsher growing conditions, heavier soils and minimal irrigation.

As a small-scale grower who combines production with a full-time job, I know it can be done, though as with most growers I occasionally (and others more often) question my sanity! And, as I toil the land of Cotesbach I wonder what the peasants of 1607 would think? Rotavators, seed-drills, polytunnels, meshes and biodegradable plastic mulches make the life of the modern peasant a different prospect, but I think they would see more that is familiar to them here than in the broad arable acres across the road.

Phil Sumption