

INTERVIEW WITH THE NEW B.D.A.A. CHAIRMAN
TYLL VAN DER VOORT

Patricia McManamon

Q. What was your first contact with bio-dynamic agriculture?

A. A friend of mine who had been a teacher had suddenly moved to the countryside and taken up working on the land which for me was rather astonishing. Through him I also met anthroposophy. I went to visit him there on Hof Dannwisch (a farming community near Hamburg, Germany). Through working with him at the weekends when I visited, and having conversations, I first came into contact with bio-dynamics and also the seed was sown for me to start working on the land. (At that time I was working as an illustrator in Hamburg). My real interest in bio-dynamics came through anthroposophy, and the image of Christianising the earth. This was the first time, at 28 years of age, that the earth had consciously appeared within my horizons. Before that I had walked upon it, but didn't ever think about it. By that time I was rather over-educated, having had thirteen years at school and seven years at university, where I read sociology and ethnology, then trained at the Art Academy to become a teacher.

When I decided to take up bio-dynamic agriculture, I worked for one year with a rather brilliant gardener who was almost 70 years old. The holding had been run bio-dynamically since 1935 and was a very small, two-hectare garden, with much handwork and rather sophisticated cultivation practices. Then I decided to do a proper apprenticeship on a B-D holding between Hamburg and Kiel. That was larger, with about three hectares of fruit, three hectares of vegetables and the same of wheat, a forest and a herd of milking sheep for which I was responsible for those two years, which was good fun. After that my wife and I helped on a friend's farm and then attempted to start a farming community together with another farming couple. That failed because we just could not quite get the support we needed. Then we met friends who suggested we go and have a look at Camphill in England, because people were needed there, and they were working in the way we wished to work. So we had a look and ended up here in Oaklands Park, in Gloucestershire. Then I started working with Joachim Grundmann, helping with the orchard and field vegetables. From him I learned a tremendous amount, just by working alongside and peeping over his shoulder.

Q. What size of holding are you working now?

A. About seven acres of vegetables, 1-2 acres of potatoes and then the parkland and walled gardens. I have three apprentices and ten villagers to work with.

Q. How do you think bio-dynamic agriculture has changed from what Rudolf Steiner talked about in 1924?

A. I would think that on the one hand more people feel it to be more urgent now. But also, the bio-dynamic development is branching out into other contexts of life, for instance the social element which is becoming ever clearer, although we can already find hints of this in the *Agriculture* course. The starting point of bio-dynamics nowadays is so much more all-embracing than in the earlier days when it was seen to be more concerned with working with the life-forces of the earth and the plants. Through the decades it has become visible that actually everything is connected with the land and with how we work the land, and that it becomes an all-embracing question. You know, where people work bio-dynamically, things often start changing socially. Usually, wherever there is a farm where people start working bio-dynamically, social changes come about because people enjoy their work more and then you start sharing the work and ownership of the property differently and so on and so on.

Q. The work of the Bio-dynamic Agricultural Association Council has changed quite considerably in the last two years. How do you see that continuing?

A. I would go along with the view that was expressed at our last council meeting, that the council itself should consolidate and become a well-oiled working team. The structure that has been created over the last couple of years with the various working groups, for which the council is the organ of perception, should be strengthened and fleshed out in the years to come, not only to try to perceive what they want to do, but to spread the load and involve more people from outside the council. People who are members of the association could join in with different aspects of the work where their skills and interests lie, and so strengthen these groups. The focus on the regions should also be strengthened so that there are smaller centres of activity all over the country.

Q. That was my next question. What contacts would you like to see built up with other organisations?

A. I would think that in Britain we should work more closely with the Soil Association and the wider organic movement. There we probably have a task because without a spiritual background it is in danger of fizzling out. Maybe the BDAA has to provide a spiritual flame within the wider organic movement. Not by proselytising but by doing what we are doing properly. I think people will sense this.

Another aspect is that we stand to learn a lot from all the valuable technical work done by the organic movement, especially the Soil Association. There is something else that I see as important for the work of the council. It is the realisation that the agricultural crisis we are in is not an economic crisis but a social one. The answer to much more than is at first apparent lies in bio-dynamics.

Also socially. Wendell Berry said "You can't expect that if we treat the earth like dirt, then we will treat each other any better than we treat the earth", and so we start treating each other like dirt as well. I think the council also needs to be aware of the wider context in which our works stands.

HOW DOES MERCURY PROVIDENT PLC WORK?

Daniel Donahaye and Patricia McManamon

Money, used consciously, can be a powerful tool for social good. This was the founding philosophy of Mercury Provident Plc, an ethical banking institution launched in 1974. Since then it has grown to serve over 550 depositors and 100 borrowers, with deposits totalling over £2 million and a capital base of over £500,000. Mercury is the first ethical banking institution in the United Kingdom, and forms part of an international network of ethical banking in 12 countries with combined assets of over £82 million.

Mercury seeks to fund projects which are socially constructive. It lends in fields such as education, bio-dynamic and organic agriculture, care for the mentally handicapped, alternative medicine, and co-operative commerce. Projects borrowing from Mercury are typically community-oriented; many are charities or co-operatives. Borrowers can make use of Mercury's innovative forms of security, such as personal guarantees and "borrowing communities". These forms make the most of a project's community support, and enable Mercury to make loans which might not be available through conventional banking channels.

While banks and building societies offer widely varying interest rates, Mercury tries to encourage sensible long-range planning by keeping interest rates stable for deposits (current maximum of 7%) as well as loans (current maximum of 10%).

Over the years Mercury have been able to assist bio-dynamic farms and smallholdings with loan finance at very low rates of interest, sometimes as low as 3%. The following appear in the latest 'List of Projects' which currently have loans from Mercury:

—Hungary Lane Farm: Joe and Sue Bradley have taken over the lease of a 226 acre farm in Leicestershire. At present the farm, in its first year of operation under bio-dynamic methods, plans to supply grains, vegetables, lamb, turkey and beef to the local market.

—Old Plaw Hatch Farm: a small farm of about 200 acres, purchased by a trust in 1980, after receiving gifts from 93 people who wanted

to see a bio-dynamic farm established which would supply them with milk, yoghurt and cream. Today it supplies some 160 families with milk delivered to the door.

—Rural Development Programme: adapts bio-dynamic farming methods to the needs and climates of Third World countries, and runs courses at Emerson College. Interest-free deposits to support lending are needed.

—Sharpham Barton Farm, Devon: an existing bio-dynamic farm in South Devon which has been taken over by a charitable trust. The farmer has purchased the live and dead-stock in order to continue farming there. Mercury has lent £15,000 for this purpose.

—Sheiling School, Thornbury: a well-established Camphill community for children in need of special care. When the opportunity arose to buy an adjacent property for the school's bio-dynamic farm, Mercury assisted with a loan of £70,000.

—Ty'r Eithin Farm: a hill farm in west Wales has converted to organic/bio-dynamic methods, and aims to provide residential small-farm experience for young people, as well as a sheltered work place for adults with a mental handicap.

Mercury operates a unique deposit-to-loan allocation system, which allows depositors to identify exactly which projects their savings support. Depositors specify a preferred project or field of activity, as well as the rate of interest they feel they need — from 0% to 7%. Borrowers are charged sufficient interest to pay these supporting depositors, plus a 3% cover charge for Mercury's costs. In this way, a chosen project can benefit directly from a low-interest deposit.

The size and scope of Mercury's lending are currently limited by its capital base. To extend this base, Mercury has launched a public share offer. This offer covers Membership shares, which have no dividend but full voting rights, and Ordinary shares, which return a fixed annual dividend of 3%, 5% or 7%, according to the investor's choice.

Mercury have maintained regular contact with the council of the Bio-Dynamic Agricultural Association, and have thus kept in touch with developments in the bio-dynamic work in this country. Together with the BDAA they are establishing a Revolving Loan Fund to help farmers capitalise new ventures.

Further information about Mercury, deposit forms, and the Shares prospectus can be obtained from:

Mercury Provident Plc, Orlingbury House, Lewes Road, Forest Row, Sussex RH18 5AA. Telephone Forest Row (0342 82) 3739.