

GOD SAVE THE EARTH

What do farmers, chefs, rock stars and models have in common? *AMY WAKEHAM* gets the lowdown on how regenerative farming became the new rock 'n' roll

Pigs fertilise the soil on Helen Browning's Wiltshire farm



Back in June, as sound tests began on the Pyramid Stage and the first tent pegs were hammered in on Worthy Farm, another festival was in full swing.

Just like Glastonbury, it featured wellies, anoraks and a whole lot of mud. But instead of Sir Paul McCartney, Billie Eilish and Sam Fender, the headliners at Groundswell were Henry Dimbleby, the government's food czar, Minette Batters, president of the National Farmers' Union, and Helen Browning, head of the Soil Association – and mud, not music, was what everyone had shown up for.

Well, not mud, exactly – rather, soil, which is the cornerstone of the regenerative farming movement that everyone from Groove Armada's Andy Cato to model Arizona Muse has jumped on to. It's the new rock 'n' roll for creatives with a conscience.

So what's all this fuss about dirt? According to the International Union for Conservation of Nature, soil has the power to store more carbon than vegetation and the atmosphere combined – UN scientists say that improving soil health could



Not your usual festival: Groundswell in Hertfordshire



Mandy Lieu is regenerating Ewhurst Park in Hampshire

lead to an extra two billion tonnes of CO² being sequestered by 2030. It also supports greater biodiversity and water storage and minimises erosion and desertification, as well as leading to better, more nutritious food for humans.

The regenerative agriculture movement is difficult to define – it encompasses organic, permaculture and biodynamic processes (see our *Get Cramming* glossary on page 82 for more details), but essentially comes down to protecting and restoring soil health through not ploughing, sowing cover crops, increasing plant diversity, and allowing grazing animals to fertilise the soil.

The movement has grown apace in the last few years, with Groundswell its flagship event. The festival was started by the Cherry family on their farm in north Hertfordshire in 2016, as a means of sharing information about regenerative farming techniques. Originally, it was 450 farmers in a barn; this year, there were 5,000 attendees over two days, with talks, workshops and exhibits from scientists, businesses and industry experts.

'It's symptomatic of what's going on, in the total mindset of everything across all industries, but especially farming where farmers really can be the heroes,' explains Alex Cherry, who quit his job as a chartered surveyor and used his experience of putting on music festivals to start Groundswell with his father and uncle. 'Regeneration for farmers provides a positive opportunity to change their system.'

Malaysia-born model and actress Mandy Lieu, who starred in campaigns for brands like Dior, bought 925-acre Ewhurst Park in Hampshire for £28m in 2020. She joins other creative types like Andy Cato, who sold his music publishing rights to fund his first farm in France, and who now has a UK-based regenerative wheat business called Wildfarmed together with TV presenter George Lamb.

'When I first started on this journey 18 months ago, I began to wonder what I could do to the land to make it better,' explains Mandy. 'Make no mistake, this is a life-long project and a multi-generational one.'

So how does a jet-setting model end up worrying about the earthworm population in a small corner of Hampshire? 'It has a lot to do with my upbringing,' she says. 'The forest was our playground. If we were hungry, we'd snack from the banana trees that grew there, and take the leaves home for my mum to steam fish in. Everything very much had a purpose, and nothing was wasted. I remember coming to Ewhurst and thinking that, with all the amazing trees and food growing in abundance, it was not dissimilar to how I grew up.'

But it's not just conscious creatives that are getting swept up in the movement. Big businesses like McCain, Nestlé and Unilever are investing heavily in regenerative farming.

Like every movement, though, regeneration has its culture clashes – and a big one is with its close cousin, rewilding. Environmental activist



ABOVE & BELOW: Creating 'mosaic' habitats and a 'purposeful landscape' is central to Mandy Lieu's plan for the 925-acre Ewhurst Estate

George Monbiot, a speaker at this year's Groundswell Festival, is firmly on the rewilding side, asserting in his new book *Regenesi*s that farming is the greatest cause of environmental destruction (see more on p83). A potentially inflammatory statement at a gathering of 5,000 farmers.

'Monbiot was received surprisingly well at Groundswell,' counters Alex. 'He's got a lot of very good points and I think farmers are agreeing with some of those – although maybe not.' He recalls the first time Isabella Tree and Charles Burrell – who popularised the concept with their book *Wilding* (Pan MacMillan, £9.99), based upon their work at the Knepp Estate in Sussex back in 2018 – spoke at the festival.

'We were really worried there would be cow pats flying across the room. But they're totally engaged with what we're doing. Whenever they start to talk about Knepp, they always say, "This is not the answer for the whole country. There should be a patchwork of recovery projects, but the majority of the land should be farmed in a regenerative way."' Tellingly, in 2021 the Knepp Estate itself moved into regenerative agriculture.

This middle way is also followed by Mandy at Ewhurst. 'What we're doing here is neither rewilding nor regenerative agriculture; we're trying to create a more purposeful landscape that not only produces food for humans and wildlife, but also creates all these



PHOTOS: © CHRISTIAN CASSIEL; © PHIL WHITEHOUSE

mosaic habitats so that different wildlife can thrive.'

Another bone of contention in the regenerative movement is productivity, especially in a time of global shortages and soaring food prices. Sri Lanka, whose sudden switch to organic systems in 2021 has led to catastrophic consequences, shows that there are no quick-fix solutions.

'Sri Lanka's crisis tells us nothing about organic farming,' argues Helen Browning. 'Governments across the UK and Europe are backing organic because evidence proves it can feed everyone a healthy diet while restoring nature and slashing farming emissions. A panicked Sri Lanka government imposed chemical bans overnight simply because it ran out of foreign exchange to buy fertiliser. But chemical-reliant farmers cannot go "cold turkey", they need support to shift to diverse, resilient, nature-friendly farming – which is the most evidence-based solution for restoring climate, wildlife and public health.'

However, she acknowledges that it demands changes for us, too. 'It means we don't feed as much maize to livestock, and we reduce our meat consumption,' she says. 'It has to be more about sustainably reared beef and lamb than all these grain-eating pigs and chickens. It does require dietary change.'

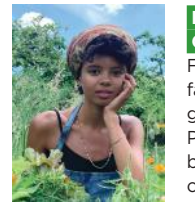
Alex agrees. He recommends always opting for pasture-fed meat and using platforms like Ooooby.org as a way of supporting local regenerative farmers.

The final word comes from chef and regen activist Thomasina Miers. 'Every single time we buy food, we're making a statement about the kind of world we want to live in,' she says. 'That is the most empowering statement, because otherwise climate change feels insurmountable. But if every single one of us believed that how we spent our money and our purchasing power made an impact, then I feel that we could actually change the world.'

Changing the world and challenging the status quo? That's very rock 'n' roll. You heard it here first – soil is super cool. Come and get your hands dirty.

HEADLINE ACTS

The names making waves in the regenerative field



POPPY OKOTCHA

Fashion's favourite gardener, Poppy, shares bucolic snaps of her organic edible and medicinal garden in Devon on social media. @poppyokotcha



ANDY CATO

One half of the electronic music duo Groove Armada, Andy rents a National

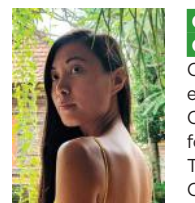
Trust farm in Oxfordshire and has launched a regenerative wheat brand called Wildfarmed alongside TV presenter George Lamb. @wildfarmed



FEARGAL SHARKEY

Lead singer of punk band The Undertones, Feargal is now a vocal advocate for

regenerating British rivers – key for preventing soil erosion. @fsharkeylive



CATHERINE CHONG

Climate economist Catherine co-founded Farms To Feed Us CIC alongside Cathy St

German, working with over 400 small-scale farmers and producers across the UK. @so_klim



CLAIRE RATINSON

Organic food grower and author Claire is passionate about the power of plants for

nourishing, connecting and healing. @claireratinson

Holkham Hall sits at the centre of the 25,000-acre estate, now farmed using regenerative ideas



THE BEST JOB IN THE WORLD

His brothers [Ralph and Joseph] may be accomplished actors, but *Jake Fiennes*, Director of Conservation at the Holkham Estate, finds his calling is to the wild

On numerous occasions I am asked, what's your favourite bird, what is your favourite part of the Estate and why do you consider your role to be the best in England. If I'm honest it's not as simple as that. I admire every bird for the moment I am graced by its presence. Whether that is the wood pigeon that sits on the fence cooing in my garden or the marsh harrier gliding majestically over the reedbeds. Each and every one of them has its place in the hierarchy of the natural world. The 25,000 acres of the Holkham Estate is rich and diverse, with the National Nature Reserve being its greatest natural asset. The tens of thousands of acres of farmland have the potential and, in some instances, demonstrate real possibilities in making our farmed landscapes equally rich in nature while still producing food. So, there are wonderful parts and places to discover around every corner.



The creation of my role [Director of Conservation] at Holkham is unique and a clear demonstration that the Estate is committed to protecting and enhancing all its natural assets. The opportunity to mould and develop and to engage with the multiple stakeholders involved in this vast rural business is a real honour. But also, to demonstrate to the hundreds of thousands of people that visit annually the possibilities and the pleasures of the natural world. The Holkham National Nature Reserve covers just under 10,000 acres of which two and a half

thousand acres are freshwater grazing marsh – home to an array of species of birds, plants and invertebrates. For me, the grazing marsh is a farmed landscape that produces beef with biodiversity in abundance. It is well documented that we have a climate crisis and with that a biodiversity crisis, with significant declines in numerous species and habitats across the globe.

Farming operates in 40 per cent of habitable land across the planet and in England 70 per cent of land is managed to produce food. Surely the easiest way to ensure our impacts on climate and nature are significantly reduced is for farmland to play a major part? Not necessarily just to reduce its impact, but actually be the key to the door that unlocks the possibility of reversing the damage that has been done. Undoubtedly things will have to change; we cannot continue in the current trajectory. Already across the globe there are farmers producing healthy, sustainable, nutritious food but also improving our soils. I'm making space for nature within our farm businesses. It is being demonstrated by a minority, but for it to truly make a difference it has to be the majority.

Land Healer – How Farming Can Save Britain's Countryside by Jake Fiennes is out now (Witness Books, £20)

GET CRAMMING

The technical terms to bone up on for your next dinner party

BIOSEQUESTRATION

The net removal of CO2 from the atmosphere by plants and micro-organisms, and its storage in vegetation and the soil.

AGROFORESTRY

A land management approach that combines trees and shrubs with crop and livestock farming systems, delivering a multitude of benefits both for the farm and for nature.

NO TILL / LOW TILL / NO DIG FARMING

Instead of ploughing, crops are sown directly into the soil using a variety of techniques. Benefits include healthier soil, increased water retention and decreased erosion.

HERBAL LEYS

Diverse grassland that includes different legumes, grasses and herbs, which can be sown into arable and horticultural land, providing food for pollinators and improving soil structure and fertility.

BIODYNAMIC

A holistic farming approach developed by Rudolf Steiner in 1924, which became one of the first organic agriculture movements. It considers the care of soil, plants and livestock as interrelated. Some methods use an astrological sowing and planting calendar.

SILVOPASTURE

Integrating trees and pasture into a single system for raising livestock.

WHERE'S THE GOVERNMENT?

A new policy is set to reward regenerative farming practices, says *Ben Goldsmith*

Our countryside is a wonder of the world, a great patchwork quilt of green fields, hedgerows and rolling hills. But our sad little secret is that England ranks among the most nature-depleted countries in the world. Countless species have vanished altogether, and others cling on in isolated patches of remnant nature.

The EU's gigantic Common Agricultural Policy (known as the CAP) has provided the principal impetus for what has gone wrong. Under the influence of the CAP, farming has grown into a kind of war against nature. As the biological function of the soil has declined and ecosystems have withered, farmers have been forced to use ever-greater quantities of chemical fertilisers and pesticides. It's not just wildlife we're losing. If you've ever wondered why our rivers and coastal waters run brown, it is because exposed soil is simply being washed away.

Under the CAP, subsidies have been doled out each year to farmers according simply to how much farmable land they own in a policy which, if proposed today for the first time would be dismissed as ludicrous. Under CAP rules, pockets of nature are condemned as ineligible features.

The impact of the CAP has been especially harsh in our remoter, less productive landscapes, including our national parks. Britain is one of the least wild countries in Europe, principally because our moors have been systematically stripped of nature to make way for sheep. One of the consequences is flooding. The science is crystal clear (unlike the water in our rivers): if you strip hills of nature, you significantly exacerbate the cycle of flash-flooding and seasonal drought.

Environmental decline has gone hand-in-hand with economic and social decline. Even with CAP hand-outs, in much of Britain intensive farming just does not pay. As the average age of



Britain's rethink of farm subsidies is a win for nature, Ben argues

hill farmers creeps ever higher, many of Britain's rural communities are dwindling.

Recently however, something has begun to shift in our relationship with the natural world. Amid the loneliness of the lockdowns, people experienced an upwelling of love for their local nature and now the public is demanding efforts to restore nature to its former vibrancy.

The Agriculture Act 2020, first conceived by Michael Gove, marks a turning point, setting in motion a new Environmental Land Management scheme (known as ELM) created on the premise of public money for public good. ELM will reward farmers in our more productive landscapes for adopting sounder practices, such as no longer ploughing the soil (min-till) and working with rather than against nature in the control of pests (integrated pest management). Moving towards such regenerative approaches

is the only way to secure the future of food production in these areas. Farmers will also be paid to re-establish wildlife habitat on their land, such as field margins, fat hedgerows, ponds and streams. And at its most ambitious end, the new scheme will provide funding for dramatic restoration projects across whole landscapes, such as former wetlands or moors. This kind of rewilding of landscapes has certainly captured the public imagination.

Naysayers tell us that prioritising nature in our remoter landscapes will hit food production and rural employment. These arguments are wrong. Turning the least productive fifth of our farmland towards nature recovery would lead to less than a three per cent reduction in food production (National Food Strategy, 2021). Intensive sheep farming in our overgrazed uplands may even be net-negative in terms of food production, if you take into account winter feed, and the harm inflicted on the hydrology of more productive farms downstream.

Moreover, farming does not cease in wilder landscapes. Wilder farming or 'silvopasture', the traditional grazing of native cattle through semi-open woodland mosaics, may be a more apt term than rewilding. In fact, rural employment increases by 50 per cent on average in such places (Rewilding Britain, 2021).

The real issues when it comes to food security are crops grown to feed machines, as 'bioenergy', or to farm animals confined on highly inefficient intensive livestock units and, worst of all, the 9.5 million tonnes of food in the UK each year that is simply wasted.

England's radical rethink of farm payments is the greatest win for nature we've ever known in this country, and a world first. \$700 billion is handed out globally in farm subsidies each year. As countries grapple with the mighty challenge of how to restore nature, the eyes of the world are on us to get this right.



There are two camps of regen, which shows that in any movement there are always tribes of people,' explains chef and restaurateur Thomasina Miers. 'There is the group of people who are focused on rewilding, and really ramping up intensive agriculture and food production in other areas. And the second camp is trying to harness technology and

developments in engineering, and using ancient wisdom, to farm in harmony in nature.' It's a clash that was best exemplified in the recent debate on Radio 4's *Start the Week* programme (bbc.co.uk/sounds), which saw Sarah Langford and George Monbiot go head-to-head on the future of farming in Britain. Monbiot's latest book, *Regenesis: Feeding the World without Devouring the Planet* (Penguin, £20), asserts that farming is the greatest cause of environmental destruction, and that protein and fat should be lab-grown.



George Monbiot

On the other hand, Langford's book, *Rooted* (Viking, £16.99), sees regenerative farms as key to sequestering carbon and rejuvenating biodiversity. They both agree, however, that the problem is Big Farmer – agri-business that's all about profit, not planet. As Monbiot points out, four companies control 90 per cent of the global grain trade. Destructive farming practices are big business. The sticking point is what to do about it. The answer seems to be rewilding areas that aren't agriculturally productive and following a regenerative ethos elsewhere. Thomasina is clear what her stance is: 'Not separating nature from mankind, but working with it. For me that is definitely the most interesting side, because I don't see how the former works when our soil is depleting at a chronic rate. 95 per cent of our food is currently produced in our soil. If you can't fix the soil, I don't see how you can possibly help to feed future generations.'



Sarah Langford

Supermodel Arizona is using her influence to transform the fashion industry from within



FARMING FASHION'S FUTURE

Just like food, we should all be supporting regenerative fashion. After all, clothes come from the soil too, says Arizona Muse. By *Lucy Cleland*

Arizona Muse is the poster girl for regenerative fashion, practising what she oh-so-beautifully preaches more compellingly than any other person in the industry right now, and positioning herself as a positive interface between fashion and farming. It is the disconnect between the two that has allowed us – as consumers – to gloss over the social and environmental impact fashion causes: 'Everything we need is grown in soil, even our clothes,' says Arizona (apart from what's made synthetically in factories, she adds, which we should all be moving away from anyway). And unless those natural fibres are grown in a regenerative way, just like our food crops, they have a negative environmental impact.

BECOMING AN ACTIVIST

Arizona, who as a model has a seat at fashion's high table, had become aware of 'just how shocking, how bad, how deeply wrong and unjust the garment workers industry was, mostly on women and children, and how the environmental degradation of the fashion industry was intense at every single step of the supply chain.' This realisation encouraged her to take her first steps towards becoming an activist.

BRINGING TOGETHER FASHION & FARMING

Arizona's zeal for connecting the two industries – for farming, that means growing natural fibres in a way

that also protects and enhances biodiversity; for fashion, it's brands buying those fibres to make truly sustainable clothing – led her to set up her own foundation, called DIRT.

'I started DIRT to raise awareness about biodynamic farming [see glossary, p82] and how it can provide a solution for the fashion industry.

'Farmers work so hard all year long, but the only work they get paid for is the crop produced. But [when they're farming regeneratively], they're also increasing biodiversity and water retention and absorption in the soil. They're improving the quality of life for themselves and their communities by providing richly nutritious food or fibres. They're being responsible with animals. There are so many public good services that farmers are providing for us that just aren't valued in monetary terms. It's nuts.'

HOW TO SPEND IT

Her advice to us as consumers is to spend our money wisely – and do our research – and always read the label. 'Knowing that your money is either going to a business that's causing harm or one that's having a positive impact,' she says. 'If you're so lucky to be someone who actually has money in your pocket right now, it's your responsibility to spend it with the good businesses.'

To find out more, visit dirt.charity

ARIZONA'S STYLE PICKS



STELLA MCCARTNEY
Queen of planet-first fashion, Stella's latest innovations include the world's first luxury handbag made from mycelium. Bag, £1,995. stellamccartney.com



MOTHER OF PEARL
Mother of Pearl's commitment to sustainability, transparency and the lowest environmental impact possible makes it stand out. Dress, £395. motherofpearl.co.uk



OLISTIC THE LABEL
French brand Olistic's collections are created from 100 per cent natural and organic fibres, and made in Portugal. Blazer, €850. olisticthebluel.com



GOLDSIGN
Goldsign produces small batches of its jeans, made in the brand's Los Angeles studio and constructed to last a lifetime. It also makes other wardrobe essentials. Jeans, £421. net-a-porter.com

TIME TO DIG IN

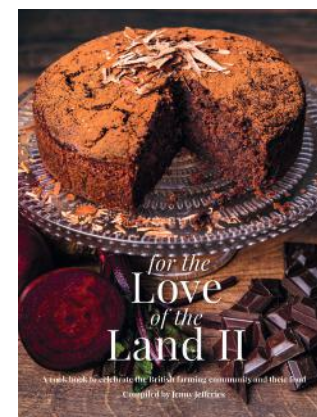
Don't be a spectator. Here's how you can get inspired and involved with the regenerative movement

READ



🌱 **Unearthed, by Claire Ratinon**
After feeling cut off from the natural world, Claire moved to the countryside and began to reconnect with it – through the process of growing vegetables. A beautiful work of nature-writing, memoir and storytelling. *Chatto & Windus, £16.99*

🌱 **Finding the Mother Tree, by Suzanne Simard**
The author was working as a forest ranger when she uncovered a groundbreaking secret: trees can talk to each other through an immense web of underground fungi, at the centre of which are the Mother Trees, which sustain the whole forest. Her findings were initially ridiculed, but are now supported by data. This is her story. *Penguin, £10.99*



🌱 **For The Love of the Land II, by Jenny Jeffries**
A cookbook that celebrates the British farming community, with recipes from 40 of the UK's most innovative farms like Riverford and Yeo Valley, and Michelin-starred restaurant L'Enclume. *Meze, £22*

LISTEN



🌱 **Conscious Chatter**
Hosted by Kestrel Jenkins, Conscious Chatter asks questions about where our clothes are made, what they are made of and who made them. Listen to episode #264 on fashion's greenwashing problem. consciouschatter.com

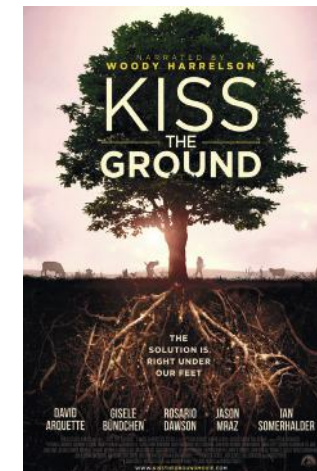
🌱 **Start the Week: A Revolution in Food and Farming**
Sarah Langford and George Monbiot go head-to-head on the future of farming in this episode of Start the Week on BBC Sounds. bbc.co.uk

🌱 **Farm Gate**
This podcast from FAI Farms, a company that aims to deliver a higher welfare and regenerative food system, is focused on practical solutions for climate and food security. Listen to episode #67 on the politics of protein. faifarms.com/podcasts



🌱 **Farmerama Radio**
An award-winning podcast sharing the international voices behind regenerative farming. Listen to episode #75 - 'Biology first' regen, Black British farmers and the miller-to-baker relationship. farmerama.co

WATCH



🌱 **Kiss The Ground**
Narrated by Woody Harrelson and featuring a raft of glittery Hollywood names, this definitive 2020 documentary makes the case that, in saving the soil you can save the planet. kissthegroundmovie.com

🌱 **In Our Hands**
Made in collaboration with the Land Workers Alliance, this film is about the small-scale British farmers and growers seeking to escape the industrial food system, for a healthier future for both people and planet. inourhands.film

🌱 **Bristol Bites Back Better**
Named a Gold Sustainable Food City, Bristol is leading the way when it comes to eating greener. In this series of shorts, we meet the Bristolians growing their own food and supporting local producers. goingforgoldbristol.co.uk



🌱 **Six Inches of Soil**
An upcoming documentary that showcases the story of British farmers transforming the way they produce food – to heal the soil, benefit our health and provide for their communities. Donate to help fund it at sixinchesofsoil.org

BUY



🌱 **Pipers Farm**
An enterprise that now encompasses a collection of 40 small family farms, Pipers supplies regenerative, grass-fed meat. pipersfarm.com

🌱 **Aweside Farm**
Sinead & Adam run Aweside Farm, growing edible flowers, herbs and vegetables and transforming an ex-arable field into an ecologically thriving smallholding in East Sussex. awesidefarm.co.uk

🌱 **Hodmedod's**
Hodmedod's works with British farms to source a range of top-quality ingredients and delicious foods, from beans to baked goods – order a loaf of Wakelyn's bread, made from wheat from the bakery's organic agroforestry farm. hodmedods.co.uk



🌱 **Natoora**
Natoora works directly with UK farmers and independent producers to source seasonal fruit and vegetables, store cupboard essentials, and sustainably produced dairy and charcuterie. natoora.com ■