



## Pioneering a local grain economy in Devon: Grown in Totnes

*Decentralisation continues to be discussed as the main mechanism to counter the commoditisation of the grain market and find a route to market for alternative, diverse and varied crops. At ORC we have been working to get genetically diverse 'heterogeneous material' such as ORC Wakelyns Population to market via changes to the seed legislation. We have also developed several case studies on innovative approaches to diversifying food systems in projects such as Diversifood<sup>1</sup> and Diverimpacts<sup>2</sup>. Now, as the UK Grain Lab<sup>3</sup> continues to blossom (see ORC Bulletin 125 for an introduction), there are examples of local grain economies making use of different crops and varieties emerging across the country. A pioneering initiative working in this area was Grown in Totnes. In this article **Charlotte Bickler** looks back at the lessons learnt so far and future opportunities for decentralised grain economies with **Holly Tiffen** of Grown in Totnes.*

### CB: What motivated you and the Grown in Totnes (GinT) team to begin this project?

HT: I had been working with Transition Town Totnes (TTT) to increase the amount of local food in the area and link up the different players in the local food scene and I was struck by the narrowness of the local food offering – mainly meat and dairy. From a land use and energy perspective these are inefficient ways of feeding the human population. We formed the Crop Gaps group and researched into the plant-based sources of protein grown in the local area. I am vegetarian, and a big part of my reasoning for this has been environmental; however this research led me to realise that my sources of protein weren't coming from the local area, or even Europe; most were coming from places like the US and China. We interviewed a number of local farmers to find out what they had grown historically on the farm and what infrastructure used to exist for processing and marketing their produce. From these contacts we found farmers willing to grow crops for us for local human consumption.



*Holly Tiffen in John Lett's heritage population wheat.*

interest in the small-scale grain and pulse scene. By being both at the forefront of this wave and creative in our approach we helped spread knowledge and interest amongst growers and bakers. The community-based nature of TTT meant that a large part of our activities involved engaging the community; we ran tours of the processing facilities, hosted practical and fun events, worked with other businesses in the local community, engaged volunteers both local and overseas in our activities. We were very successful at engaging the support and participation of locals. We ran a crowd funding campaign that raised funds for all of our processing equipment and consistently involved the community in the development of the project. We came up against many challenges and in hindsight were hugely ambitious with our vision. However I don't feel I would have changed this vision. The Transition movement is about being experimental, imaginative, trialling new things and coming up with solutions to today's problems. I feel that our experimental nature helped to make it that bit easier for others involved in the resurgence of small-scale grain and pulse growers and processors, as witnessed by the growth in participants attending the UK Grain Lab.



*Holly and intern Lena Stolle milling at Grown in Totnes*

### CB: What was the main aim that you hoped to achieve?

HT: We wanted to reconnect people with grains and pulses and the story of where these staple crops come from to illustrate a different way to the centralised commodification of these crops. We wanted to empower farmers and encourage a new end market for their harvest and in the process address the disengagement of farmers with where their crops end up, so helping to address their powerlessness in global food pricing. We set about offering a fair price to farmers and growing, processing and selling grain and pulse products that hadn't travelled more than 30 miles from Totnes.

### CB: Do you feel that you were successful in this?

HT: I feel that our timing was perfect, there was a lot of knowledge when we started out held by a very few people, we received a tremendous amount of support from people like John Letts (archaeobotanist and founder of Heritage Harvest). We were riding on the cusp of a wave of revived

### CB: Do you have a favourite product that you produce?

HT: Pea flour! In the first year we hand-sieved peas from a local organic farmer's fodder harvest of wheat and peas (grown in combination), to separate the two crops. We invited the community to help us and called it 'The Split Pea Party!' When we put the peas through our mill the processing unit was filled with the sweet summery smell! They make the best savoury pancakes, which I regularly serve to guests staying at my B&B for breakfast!



*Grown in Totnes products*

Photo: Nicola Lang

Photos: Holly Tiffen/Grown in Totnes



My other favourite is the Heritage Population Wheat, a mixture of many different lines of old varieties developed by John Letts. Standing in that field of wheat just before harvest and seeing the variety of colours, sizes and shapes and heights, was like being a child again – many of the varieties were taller than me! It was a beautiful sight and it was fascinating to see how well the plants did despite the drought that we had here in Devon last year, particularly when we compared it to the Wakelyns Population, which has more modern parents, grown a mile down the road. The greater height of the plant corresponded to its deeper roots, which were able to penetrate down to the water table level. I am really proud that we have grown Heritage grains and been able to demonstrate the important role of bringing diversity into crop production in order to create resilience against unpredictable climatic conditions.

### **CB: What are the three most important lessons that you've learnt from your experience so far?**

HT:

1. The importance of working in collaboration with other like-minded spirits and gathering a team around me that had a broad range of differing skills. The GinT team was a strong supportive network for each other when we faced challenges, and bouncing ideas around with each other was an invaluable source of creative solutions.
2. That I can't know what I don't know, and I can't assume that the other party knows all that I don't know, even if I perceive this to be their area of expertise. The solution is to acknowledge my limitations, to ask lots of questions even when they feel naïve, and not to assume that the other party knows my requirements; clarify what both parties' responsibilities will be and then have a written agreement between both parties and keep checking that everything is in place.
3. To trust the power of the community to support the project:
  - When there were seemingly insurmountable tasks to overcome we engaged the community in specific tasks, making them both informative and fun; invariably we fed them as well and in return their many hands would make light weight of the work.
  - We had a strong local network of farmers, chefs, bakers, independent shops, breweries and tradesmen that we were able to support and call upon. This strong local network supports each individual business to be more viable and competitive against the large corporations, and is one of the key advantages that the small-scale has over the large-scale.

### **CB: What challenges remain? What are the next steps?**

HT: We have passed the equipment and knowledge over to a local collaboration of two farmers (who previously grew for us) and a baker. Their challenges will be many of the same that we encountered; including dealing with contractors and trying to ensure that harvest happens at the most opportune time, or finding a way to circumnavigate the need to use them by investing into purchasing their own equipment, having appropriate vermin proof storage, getting the crop dried and cleaned appropriately immediately after harvest. Without the necessary infrastructure it will be difficult for the partnership to make the enterprise financially viable and grow; however they have many of the key ingredients, namely land, technical expertise and practical skills as well as the end

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market and community support.

We have learnt so much through this process over the last seven years and we want to document our learnings so that others can benefit from our successes and mistakes. We have recently received funding from the Halleria Trust and Esmée Fairbairn to develop an online toolkit that will enable the user to hone in on the topics that are of interest to them and visit case studies (including GinT) to learn how other enterprises have dealt with the different aspects of growing, storing, milling, selling and baking grains and pulses. If you would like to feature in the toolkit or would like us to present the toolkit at a future event then please contact me at [holly@transitiontowntotnes.org](mailto:holly@transitiontowntotnes.org)

*As part of the CERERE project Holly is travelling to the Cereal Diversity festival in Denmark to share her experiences from the UK with Andrew Whitley from Scotland the Bread. ORCs Abel Villa, Bruce Pearce and Dominic Amos will be presenting on approaches to growing and testing alternative wheats, organisation and cooperation through the whole value chain and the new Organic Regulation. Look out for a report in the next Bulletin.*



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### **Links**

1. <http://www.diversifood.eu/publications/booklets-and-reports/>
2. <https://www.diverimpacts.net/case-studies/case-study-15-uk.html>
3. <https://www.ukgrainlab.com/>
4. <https://www.liveseed.eu/resources/publications/>

## **UK Grain Lab update**

The 2018 UK Grain Lab event was hosted by Kimberley Bell at the Small Food Bakery in Nottingham. Since then a great many seed breeders, farmers, millers, bakers and researchers have all been beavering away at building production and demand.

More farmers are participating in on-farm crop trials by drilling their own seed, including rare varieties, in strips in their own fields. Each strip will yield around one tonne of grain, which is sufficient for millers and bakers to do some realistic processing tests, including all-important taste tests. Farmers have sourced seed ranging from modern German E Wheats to British Isles heritage varieties such as Hen Gymro. In November Hen Gymro will be celebrating the centenary of its first collection by TJ Jenkin of the Welsh Plant Breeding Centre in Aberystwyth in 1919. The Welsh Grain Forum, with Andy Forbes of Brockwell Bake and the National Trust farm at Llanerchaeron are planning a celebratory event.

A *Bread as a Commons* workshop was held at Fred Price's Gotherney Farm in Somerset in May. Tomaso Ferrando of Bristol University and Kimberley Bell brought together people involved in all aspects of the new grain economy now being built across the UK. Over two days the group shared meals and experiences, and discussed what makes good food, how to make more of it and how to help others get involved. People are putting their heads together, their hands together and are looking forward to a rich harvest, whatever the weather!

**Steven Jacobs, OF&G**