

# Ten minutes with Katie Bliss

Would you like to get to know the ORC staff, learn more about what they are working on at the moment and find out what inspired them to pursue a career in organic research?

To help celebrate our 40th anniversary year and throughout 2021 we will be releasing short 'ten minutes with' interviews to let you do just that!

The second is with Katie Bliss, Researcher - Agroecology and Knowledge Exchange, and can be read below.

## **What is your job role at the ORC?**

Researcher - Agroecology and Knowledge Exchange

## **How long have you worked at the ORC?**

I started at the ORC in September 2016

## **Where are you from/ where are you based?**

I grew up on an arable farm in the East Anglian Fens, where we have been working towards an agroecological approach, collaborating with other local farmers to integrate leys and livestock into the rotation. I live in Falmouth, Cornwall where I am part of our local food coop and working with others to establish a community growing project.

## **What is your background, how did you get involved in the organic industry?**

I became passionate about agriculture at a young age, spending my summers helping with harvest and autumns on the potato harvester! I loved the wild places on the farm in particular the seasonal wetlands on the Nene washes, a SSSI. However, I became increasingly aware of the environmental impact of farming and was concerned about my Dad and us being exposed to chemicals and the impact this may be having on wildlife and the environment. I went on to study agriculture, environmental studies and later agroecology.

Prior to working with the ORC I worked internationally with small scale farmers in Nepal, Cambodia, Nicaragua and Guatemala – using participatory methods to identify appropriate agricultural technologies and support farmers to share knowledge on agroecological practices. I learnt a lot from working with these farmers and how they managed their farming systems. In Nicaragua, I was working with [Bioversity International](#) in cacao agroforestry systems where farmers were managing very diverse systems, many with over 80 crop species and many were working to enhance beneficial interactions between them to provide a number of benefits including pest control and reducing soil erosion. On my return I was keen to build both on the learnings from these farmers and the participatory ways of working with them to UK agriculture.

## What does your job role entail?

My role centres around agroecology; the application of ecological principles to agricultural systems and practices. My core focus is on crop diversity – enabling beneficial interactions at a rotation, field and crop scale to enhance the efficiency and resilience of farming systems.

As part of the [DiverIMPACT](#) project I work with two case studies exploring crop diversity – one focusing on the production of pulses and other novel crops in collaboration with farmers and processors in the [Hodmedod](#) network and the other working with a group of [growers looking to enhance diversity in protected cropping](#). Within this project we are looking at factors to enable crop diversification across the socio-technical system from seed to consumption.

I have a particular interest in intercropping and polycultures and have worked with a group of farmers in the Innovative Farmers Field Lab [Intercropping in Arable Systems](#) experimenting with a range of plant teams. You can view some of the [results here](#).

I also work with the [Agricology](#) project, where we aim to support all farmers to transition to agroecological farming systems. I really enjoy hosting discussions with farmers and researchers sharing their experiences with putting agroecology into practice at events and in podcasts.

## What are you working on at the moment?

I am really excited to be working with a great group of growers in the DiverIMPACT project. We are exploring a number of elements of increasing diversity in polytunnels including increasing the number of flowering plants to attract beneficial insects and the potential role of caliente mustard for biofumigation. It is a great opportunity for the growers to share their experiences and bring in specialist researchers to support. With the Hodmedod case study we are working with the [Dark Mountain project](#) to gather the stories of crop diversification from farmers across the network.

We are also just analysing results of study looking at some social impacts of crop diversification – on elements such as workload, job satisfaction and labour organisation. In order to identify areas for support.

With Agricology we are just wrapping up an ELMS Test and Trial on videos and podcast (in collaboration with the University of Reading) where we have been looking at the potential for audiovisual knowledge exchange in the transition to ELMS and post-covid world.

I am also just starting to work on an intercropping podcast – to share some practical experiences from farmers who are trying it out. We hope to publish on Agricology in April.

## What do you enjoy about working at the ORC?

I really enjoy working with farmers, learning from them, sharing ideas and seeking to focus research on their interests and needs. I enjoy being part of a friendly group of passionate researchers and having the potential to pursue more innovative research areas. I also really enjoy being part of a wider community of passionate people in the Agricology community and the wider European research network.

## **What do you think the ORC's biggest achievement over the last 40 years has been?**

ORC has been pioneering farmer led applied research in agroecological farming practices such as intercropping, agroforestry and soil health for the last 40 years. In particular, I think some of our biggest achievements relate to the work of our dear friend the late Martin Wolfe. Martin was exploring innovative ideas around crop diversity including agroforestry and composite cross populations over 20 years ago. In the past some of these ideas may have been considered a little radical but it feels like these concepts are now making a big impact on the wider sector.

## **What do you see as the future of farming and what role does the ORC play in this?**

With radical changes happening in the agricultural sector I believe our role is to support all farmers and growers to transition to agroecological farming systems which enhance resilience, resource efficiency and sustainability. Advancing learning in how we can best apply agroecological practices, led by the questions raised by farmers.

## **Is there anything exciting we should keep our eyes out for over the next couple of months?**

As part of the A Team project we are developing a series of videos on different agroforestry practices and themes in collaboration with the Woodland Trust and GWCT. Also look out for the intercropping podcast!

Later on in the year, COVID restrictions allowing, we hope to arrange a workshop with people from across the food and farming system to explore the potential for enhancing crop diversity in order to build on learnings from the DiverIMPACT project.

