

Ten minutes with Rowan Dumper-Pollard

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!

What is your job role at the ORC?

[Business and Markets Researcher](#)

How long have you worked at the ORC?

I started at the beginning of 2021

Where are you from/ where are you based?

I grew up on our family farm in mid-Devon in a very rural part of the country. When I was a child our nearest bus stop had one service which ran to Exeter just once a week. I am now based in Bristol which is a really inspiring place to be right now if you're studying food and farming. There are so many great initiatives and shops, and also the Going for [Gold Bristol Sustainable Food City](#) campaign is picking up a lot of momentum at the moment.



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

So, back at the farm in Devon, my mother has a herd of goats, as well as a few pigs, sheep, geese, ducks, chickens, and an amazing veg garden. This has always been something that I love being a part of – even today. Besides working on the farm in Devon, I have worked as a labourer on a few other farms in the area and also when travelling in Canada. I find it is a kind of work that is extremely rewarding, and I am constantly looking for excuses to go back to Devon and help out.

The farm in Devon has always been run on organic principles so the idea of farming in a way that gives back to the land you are on is central to my understanding of ideal agricultural practice and the direction of the sector. I find it funny today how much I've taken for granted the way my parents have worked the land – I am always emailing home about a new idea I've discovered at ORC, only to find it is something they have been doing for years!

My route to becoming a Business and Markets researcher at ORC involved studying a BA in Politics and Sociology at the University of Sussex, followed by an MRes in Sustainable Futures at the University of Bristol. My work is extremely driven by trying to find ways of making food supply chains more favourable to smaller food producers, to in turn strengthen more sustainable local economies. Small (and sustainable) producers have to work extremely hard with no breaks and often for a loss, despite making delicious, high-quality food. In my relatively short lifespan, I have watched countless small farms and rural businesses forced into closure (including our own) and my research is highly motivated by trying to reverse this. I was fortunate that the skills I had learnt during my degrees and my research interests aligned with what ORC needed for the role I currently occupy and the projects I was brought in to help with.

What does your job role entail?

I benefit from being part of a dynamic and highly versatile part of the research team at ORC as well as from the knowledge and experience of my supervisor [Dr Stefano Orsini](#). As a team we often lead or assist with socio-economic project work that can span many research areas and often overlaps with the work of other parts of our organisation. In a standard day I could be doing anything from writing and editing reports, to directly speaking with and interviewing farmers.

What are you working on at the moment?

Currently I am working on quite a number of different projects, as well as helping to develop bids for funding future research. The most significant project I am working on is the EU-funded project [AGROMIX](#). The project is led by the [Centre for Agroecology, Water and Resilience](#) at Coventry University with a consortium of partners from universities and research institutes all across Europe, with the aim to build resilience in mixed farm and agroforestry systems. The research will feed into policy, as well as knowledge exchange, to stimulate the wider adoption of the many proven sustainable practices from these two agricultural approaches by different European farming communities.

This is a great project for ORC because it really allows us to work to our strengths and deliver quality research in multiple interconnected areas. For example, we have an expert team including our senior agroforestry researcher [Colin Tosh](#), and our head of research [Will Simonson](#), carrying out field research on six mixed farm and agroforestry sites in the UK. Whilst at the same time, Stefano and I in the business and markets team, are leading a work package that will research a number of potential opportunities for mixed farming and agroforestry. Our knowledge exchange manager (and experienced agroecologist) [Katie Bliss](#) will also be heavily involved in ensuring that findings from this project reach farmers and have a real impact on the ground. So in this sense the project will show what we are capable of, despite being a relatively small organisation.

What do you enjoy about working at the ORC?

Although I have not been at ORC for that long, I can already tell that this is a highly motivated and switched-on organisation to be a part of. Everyone here works very hard to deliver the best quality research possible, so it is a really inspiring working environment (even though I have yet to be allowed to meet most of my colleagues face-to-face due to covid!). The strengths of the organisation definitely lie in its versatility and range of expertise, as well as maintaining an openness to innovation and ideas from farmers and other experts. This is what makes ORC, and the work I get to do there, unique as the research is holistic and also inclusive – with food and farming practitioners at the centre of everything we do.

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

It is of course hard to choose, but I would probably say the [Organic Farm Management Handbook](#) (last edition 2017). For a long time this was the only source of information on the costs and performance of organic farming. It is an incredibly important resource as it sheds a lot of light on the practicalities of a sector that has not received the same support and investment as conventional, specialist farming. Without tools such as this, the risks for farmers looking to switch to more sustainable practices are high as they will often have to engage in volatile markets of which we know little about.

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

Despite a vast number of setbacks in the industry over the last five years, I am optimistic about our ability as a country to transition towards a sustainable farming sector that delivers healthy, sustainable food that is accessible for all. Key to this is maintaining and increasing diversity at all stages of our food and farming system. Diversity of crops and habitats at farm level can increase resilience to disease and extreme weather, increase biodiversity, extend growing seasons, increase skilled employment opportunities, and job satisfaction. A diverse range of products and routes to market can increase national food security as well as decrease our reliance on global, industrial food supply chains. And finally, it is important to ensure the diversity of people who are able to access sustainable, healthy food so that no communities are left behind in this transition. ORC is one of the few research centres in the UK capable of covering such a wide range of issues simultaneously and will certainly have a major role to play looking forward.

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

Keep an eye out for the Business and Markets Team podcast this month! We hope to give you more of an insight into our work as a team, as well as tackle some key issues with special guest and managing director of Organic Arable – Andrew Trump. You can listen to ORC's latest podcasts [here](#).