

❄ Interview with David Graham (Chair of the Vegan-Organic Network)

Back in 1996 David Graham and his wife Jane, together with David Stringer, debated the possibility of conventional farmers converting to a vegan organic system of growing - that is farming without any animal inputs. As a result, following extensive consultation with other vegans, David and Jane - pictured here with great grandson Ronnie - founded VON (Vegan-Organic Network), although in the early days it went under the more unwieldy name of VOHAN (Vegan-Organic Horticulture-Agriculture Network).

VON now have members in many countries as well as the UK, and they publish a regular magazine *Growing Green International*. Their websites www.veganorganic.net and www.stockfreeorganic.net carry news, information sheets, articles from earlier magazines, and much more. And they've published a book *Growing Green - Organic Techniques for a Sustainable Future* (by Jenny Hall and Iain Tolhurst), and two DVDs *Introduction to Stockfree Organics* and *Grow Your Own*.

David Graham himself has a long history of involvement in all kinds of radical activity. Back in 1955 he spent a year in prison as a conscientious objector (conscription was then still in force), and it was around this time that he became vegetarian. Soon after his spell in prison he hitch-hiked to India and worked with Vinoba Bhave's Land Reform movement, and with the Gandhian movement. Jane was also a guest in Holloway Women's Prison following her occupation of the American Embassy in protest at the war in Vietnam.

David and Jane have lived in Manchester since 1968 and they became vegan in the early 1980s, recognising the ethical inconsistencies of vegetarianism. But, as David once wrote, he sees veganism as "only a part of an holistic outlook which embraces ecology, non-violence, and respect for all beings".

During his Manchester years David has been involved in the direct action wing of the peace movement, Free Schools, the Campaign against Corporal Punishment, the Grapevine Vegetarian Cafe, anti racism, and many other forms of community activity. See for example his very comprehensive 2004 article *Radical Alternative Manchester* in *Vegan Views* 103 (available in the archive section of the V.V. website), where David wrote that "Manchester gained a reputation as one of the strongest centres of anarchist community politics".



You said once that VON "has set itself an enormous task, which is changing the structure of how food is produced". What motivated you all to start VON back in 1996? And how would you assess the progress you've made since that time?

Much of our energies over the past 60 years have been spent demonstrating against nuclear weapons, and war, and the continuing cultural, political and economic exploitation of people worldwide. We formed VON because of the growing awareness that these issues were, to a great extent, being subsumed by the ecological movement.

Putting it crudely we were in the process, by our consumerist lifestyle, of destroying the earth. We considered that the ethical and political basis and the practice of veganism embraced the ideals of co-operation and non-violence. That is why we started the Vegan-Organic Network.

Progress! It depends what you mean. If you mean on a worldwide scale it is depressing. We don't need to spell this out to *Vegan Views* readers. But of course you mean VON. We started VON from our house, with a second-hand duplicator and computer to produce our magazine, *The Vegan Organic Horticultural-Agricultural Network*, VOHAN - now VON. We were aware of one stockfree / vegan organic farm, that of Iain Tolhurst's in Berkshire. In order to drum up support I met with potential supporters up and down the country asking for their ideas and help. They, about 350 of them, formed the foundation of VON.

I think we can claim some progress. Many farmers and growers are now aware of VON and its promotion of stockfree methods. VON now has about 20 affiliated farms in this

country, and 20 overseas - mainly North America. We are in the process of working with five UK farms that have agreed to be education and development centres and become central to the Network. Another of our main tasks is to encourage other growers to adopt the stockfree organic method.

But there remains something of an interesting, and at times frustrating, problem for us. This is because many vegans appear not to understand that the food they consume is grown using slaughterhouse by-products such as fish, blood, bone and animal manure. Vegans need to make this connection and support our campaign for change so that vegan-grown food becomes more widely available. This would also increase our membership considerably.

There is no doubt that our publication of the Stockfree Organic Standards in 2000, with the Soil Association agreeing in 2004 to undertake the farm inspection on our behalf, helped put us on to the farming map. Due to the recession, however, many growers find the inspection costs prohibitive. So, whilst still adhering to the Standards, we have organised peer group, farmer to farmer, inspections at a fraction of the Soil Association's £500 - £600 charge. This project is overseen by growers and representatives from other groups; a pilot scheme is under way to test its viability.

Over the past 15 years VON has attracted dedicated, talented and committed volunteers. This has enabled us to progress and bring our work more into the public domain. Yes - a long way to go, but without this help we would have no chance.

Stockfree or vegan organic? Are those words to some extent interchangeable, or are there times when 'stockfree' is preferred?

'Vegan organic' is our preferred term, but when we hold meetings with farmers and growers we need to communicate without tapping into possible prior prejudice, and then watch the barriers go up. All growers will talk about methodology such as stockfree organic. By the way, we introduced 'stockfree' as a more positive term than the usual 'stockless' when we published the Standards. 'Stockfree' is now widely used by horticulturists.

Our journal *Growing Green International*, and its contributors, use both terms.



What exactly are the 'VON standards' and why were they introduced?

For the very first time the consumer will have a guarantee that the food they are buying is produced according to vegan principles. Nowhere else in the world has this been done. The development and introduction of the Stockfree Organic Standards (initially called the Vegan Organic Standards) has been a huge task. Consultation with many VON members, in different countries, took place over two years. We had to contend with strongly-held and often opposing opinions. In the end the hard work and perseverance of certain VON members, notably Jenny Hall and Iain Tolhurst, resulted in this significant achievement for the vegan movement.

What do these Standards do? They regulate the techniques that are used to grow food. They lay down the conditions that must exist on agricultural or horticultural holdings / market gardens. Like all such standards they do not, and cannot, dictate the way the producer (the farmer or market gardener) lives, even if the producer lives on or adjacent to the holding, as most farmers do. There cannot possibly be a requirement that the producer has a vegan lifestyle, or does not eat meat in the privacy of their own home. The inspectors, whose job it is to enforce the standards, have no authority to intrude into the private life of the producer.

The Standards are further elaborated upon in *Growing Green - Stockfree Organic Techniques for a Sustainable Future*, compiled by Jenny Hall and Iain Tolhurst, and on the *Growing Green DVD*, with Iain Tolhurst demonstrating the stockfree organic methods on his farm. We strongly recommend this book and DVD to all vegans. Dave of Darlington's challenging and thought-provoking collection of essays in *Growing Sustainability* will further enable vegans to engage sceptics who say that you can't maintain soil fertility without animal manure and by-products.

Vegans are often asked "what do you eat?", we should expand our answer to include "and do you know how food is grown?". The first, rather inane, query does ask for it! You could add that adoption of the Standards results in a reduction of the one thousand million farm animals that are killed for food every year.

Some years ago VON prioritised acquiring an education, research and demonstration centre to put stockfree farming more prominently in the public domain. What happened to that idea?

Good question! About ten years ago we received an excited call from Kathleen Jannaway, the inspirational founder of the *Movement for Compassionate Living* (MCL), saying they had been left a legacy of, I think, £80,000. The MCL meeting agreed that, rather than give small amounts to worthy causes, it would be better to invest in a project that had some permanency. VON proposed a research, demonstration

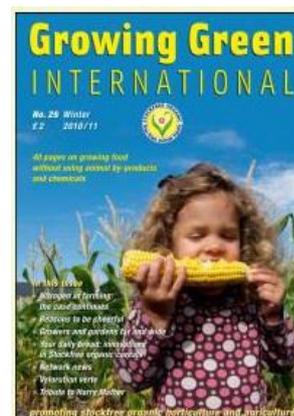
and education centre to promote veganism, non-violence in farming, and a co-operative model of working together, to which all projects could aspire and become part of a network. We envisaged VON as an international transitional movement, working with a wide range of organisations for peace and justice. This is still our ultimate aim, and Kathleen fully endorsed this ideal.

What happened is that £70,000 was generously allocated to us by MCL. This was quite simply insufficient. We looked at properties with land, from Scotland to Sussex, that required restoration. It took us some time to realise that we needed more like £700,000 than £70,000 for a centre. Therefore we proposed a Network of Stockfree Farmers and Growers, as the next best and practical way to promote stockfree, vegan organic growing, with the public, consumers, environmentalists, farmers, etc, to be invited to open days and meetings at the projects.

The interest from the £70,000 has been used by VON to provide bursaries for those qualifying for financial help, to study stockfree organic methods at Schumacher College in Devon, and Glyndwr University in North Wales. The Glyndwr course is now discontinued, but we are sponsoring two students at Schumacher College. We have now provided 14 bursaries - all those sponsored are actively involved with farming and allied work. Because of the low (almost no) interest from the principle sum, the remaining bursary fund is being rapidly depleted. So we would be delighted if anyone would like to help sponsor further students. [See contact details at end of interview.]

VON has always had quite an international outlook, and your magazine *Growing Green* usually carries articles and reports from around the world. Is that something you purposely encouraged, and which countries have been the most responsive?

Well, the magazine's title speaks for itself – *Growing Green International*. There are currently 20 vegan organic farms in North America. Victoria Farm in Florida is the first farm in North America to become certified through our Standards. *Quality Certification Services* in North America were requested to evaluate Victoria Farm using VON's Standards. There are affiliated farms in Sri Lanka, France, New Zealand, and Tamil Nadu in India.



What might VON be able to achieve in the future, what are your hopes?

My hopes are that VON will act as a catalyst in promoting non-violent agriculture, and make a positive contribution to a more humane and just social order, both for human and non-human animals. Animal farming, setting aside the cruelty and waste of resources, is responsible for about 20 per cent of global warming. Unless we're successful I'm not sure there will be a future.

I have a bulging file of reports like *Livestock's Long Shadow* that gave rise to headlines in *The Times* and other papers like "Climate Chief - give up meat to save the planet", backed up with facts and figures. How quickly they fade from the headlines! Nonetheless we need to make use of this science and try to make our work available to a wider audience. The EU should be our first objective - we do have some sympathetic EU MPs. For some time - we have been contemplating a *Journal of Stockfree Organic Farming and Growing* to promote our work internationally. It's a question of

both resources and personnel. VON needs positive help to embark on this venture.

Ideally we need our own Centre demonstrating all aspects of veganism as well as vegan farming. A Centre of Excellence, one that challenges consumerism and traditional economics and shows another way of living. Is it too much to propose that all the vegan and similar organisations get together to see if this is feasible? What do you think?

In your *Radical Manchester* article in *Vegan Views* in 2004 you wrote that "Perhaps the biggest contradiction is with our colleagues committed to non-violence, but who allow others to do the mass killing of animals for them". That's quite interesting, don't you think that it's hard for most of us to actively embrace a multitude of different causes? It may be easier to concentrate on one or two, and sort of turn a blind eye to others. And veganism is, after all, something which demands a fair amount of effort and single-mindedness.

I'm sure that many V.V. subscribers will have been on anti-war marches and demonstrations where, at the end, many of the other protesters pile into the nearest McDonald's, or similar establishment, for their meat burgers. Also, that when confronted with what we would consider their inconsistency between their theory and practice they often become defensive and angry. I do understand that there are many involved with non-violence and anti-war organisations who are not vegans, and who are committed to working against injustice. And that there is the problem that vegans may appear to be *holier than thou*. But if *another world is possible*, a world of compassion and love, then this can only come about through a radical cultural change. Fundamental to this change there must be an awareness that when we support war and killing animals, this is carried out by proxy, on our behalf.

Yes, being vegan demands dedication, single-mindedness, and often courage, and that we enjoy our lives!

You've travelled a long and interesting radical road. Can you tell us a little about one or two of the other projects you've been involved in, perhaps ones which you feel were particularly positive or worthwhile?

Possibly organising safe houses for American deserters from the Vietnam war, in collaboration with Peace News. They had to report to the police every 24 hours. During this period we had to hide them, then transport them initially to Sweden, then the Irish Republic, and then Canada.

Our group the *Community Research Action Group* (CRAG) was formed in 1968 - an innocuous cover name for assorted radicals. It had the ambitious aim of transforming Chorlton (where we live in Manchester) into a co-operative community based on the Kibbutz, Gramdan, and other self-sustaining community models. To achieve this aim we formed an infrastructure comprising among other self-regulating groups: a free school, tenants action group, free university, school students union, gypsy support group, bookshop and vegetarian café, Biafra support group, to name but a few projects.

When East Pakistan (now Bangladesh) fought in 1971 to be independent of West Pakistan, areas of East Pakistan were cut off from food and medical supplies. The war situation was so dire that despite this desperate need Oxfam and other relief organisations considered it too dangerous to send in supplies and risk the lives of their staff. CRAG, through a sub-group called *Operation Omega*, organised fundraising to buy trucks and supplies in India, and transport them to the suffering villages in East Pakistan. The successful fundraising enabled us to carry out our plan. Volunteers delivered the food and

medicine. Some were fired on, and some were caught and arrested by the West Pakistan army. We organised a massive demonstration in Manchester demanding their release. They were eventually set free but not before much anxiety and soul searching by our group. One good outcome though - when we ate in Bangladeshi restaurants they refused to charge us for our meals, and rather doubtfully regarded us as heroes!



The "*Let Us Speak*" photo above shows part of the free speech campaign in 1972 organised by CRAG together with Manchester Students Union Community Action - I'm reading from the UN declaration of the rights of assembly, etc. I was arrested together with 20 others, and at the trial I was fined but refused to pay - I heard nothing more. These demos were every Wednesday for months. In the end the council gave in, and the Peace Gardens by the Town Hall were ceded to us to assemble and speak.

On a less dramatic note - I must say that I was pleased when imprisoned earlier that I initiated a campaign to change the dreadful conditions in the brush workshop. The dust inflamed our lungs and resulted in awful colds and phlegm. Passive resistance from the prisoners brought about air extractors and a feeling of self-esteem.

Here's another good tale! Members of the *Direct Action Committee Against Nuclear War* were arrested at Marham USAF nuclear base for obstructing the runway. We were incarcerated in Norwich Prison. The Governor, being sympathetic, did not lock any of the cells - and allowed us to have meetings. Those who wished had access to the church whenever they wanted. Who knows when and where we have allies! This was over the Christmas period; I and the others who were arrested with me received hundreds of cards. I was also sent a box of expensive Cuban cigars that I distributed to the old lags, who were delighted to celebrate in style!

We had two miners staying with us during the 1984/5 strike when they organised union meetings on the Trafford industrial estate. On one occasion we hosted 80 miners who did a *Support the Miners* blitz in Manchester. They were given overnight hospitality with Chorlton people. Fearing that not enough people would come forward we asked those offering B&B to take as many miners as they could. In the event people arriving at our house for *their miner* were seriously disappointed that they had all been taken.

Chorlton vegans played a miners team from Bold colliery as

a fundraiser. The ref was from Man Utd and linesmen from I think Man City. It was hilarious! The vegans refused to kick off until a suitable ball was found as the ball on the pitch was leather - also they wore lightweight vegan trainers. It was clear that the miners thought the vegans would be a pushover. The miners lost 6-4 to a vegan team made up of mountaineers, marathon cyclists, fitness freaks, and yachtsmen and women.

VON was extremely pleased that Harry Mather, a generous supporter of VON from its outset, agreed to be its patron. His ideals that he so conscientiously practised during his life remain a touchstone for us all, and his son David was in at the beginning, helping to set up the VON office in 1996.

I know that V.V. supporters are likely to be committed to many worthy causes. May I seriously ask you to add another, that's VON, to your list. We do need you. My thanks.

The Vegan-Organic Network researches and promotes vegan organic methods of agriculture and horticulture. They produce a large informative magazine *Growing Green International* twice a year, with articles and news from vegan-organic growers worldwide. Membership £20 a year or £16 low income.

Further info from VON at Anandavan, 58 High Lane, Chorlton, Manchester M21 9DZ (tel: 0161 860 4869).

VON websites: www.veganorganic.net and www.stockfreeorganic.net

David Graham can also be contacted at david.graham330@googlemail.com

This is one of several Vegan Views interviews over the period 2011-2013. The others are freely available on the home page of the Vegan Views website www.veganviews.org.uk (mostly in pdf form).

Jack Norris & Ginny Messina (vegan dietitians) V.V.127
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