**WALTER JAMES, FOURTH LORD NORTHBOURNE, ‘INVENTOR OF ORGANIC FARMING’**

1. Walter James (1896-1982), the fourth Lord Northbourne, is credited with the creation of the term ‘organic farming’ in his seminal 1940 work *Look to the Land*.[[1]](#footnote-1) Eighty years on, his ideas still have freshness and immediacy. Relevant sentences jump off almost every page – he is concerned with many things such as the effects of deforestation and flooding, the importance of renewing the land with organic matter, the danger of using chemicals, the challenge facing the farmer when he must choose between concentrating on marketing or on production, and the question of whether Britain could or ought to be self-supporting in food.

2.Northbourne studied agricultural science at Oxford in the years after the First World War, and continued and developed his interest in farming subsequently. During the 1920s and 1930s he explored and put into effect the ‘bio-dynamic farming’ practices advocated by the anthroposophical movement founded by Rudolf Steiner in Switzerland. When in 1932 he succeeded to the title of Lord Northbourne on the death of his father, he took responsibility for the management of the Betteshanger Estate near Deal. (Q17557759) In July 1939, working with his European colleague, Dr Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, Northbourne arranged the Betteshanger Summer School and Conference on Bio-Dynamic Farming which welcomed delegates from the UK and Europe.[[2]](#footnote-2) Less than eight weeks later, Britain was at war, and Lord Northbourne’s concern that the nation’s need for food would mean the over-use of chemicals became a very real one. During the war he chaired the County War Agriculture Committee for Kent, whose objective was to boost food production (Paull, 2014, 44). This would inevitably have meant that he was obliged to go against his principles: legislation required the ploughing of grassland for food production.

*3.\_Look to the Land\_* has been an immensely influential book: Paull tells that ‘[h]is agricultural ideas promptly were taken up internationally’, H.J. Massingham in \_*The Natural Order\_* (1943) describes \_*Look to the Land\_* as ‘a biological classic’ while Eva Balfour quotes liberally from it in \_*The Living Soil\_* (1943) which led to the founding of the Soil Association[[3]](#footnote-3).

4.A modest man, he was an Oxford blue, rowing in the 1920 and 1921 University Boat Races, and won a silver medal in the rowing eights at the 1920 Olympics. In 1925 he was appointed a Governor of Wye College, the former School of Agriculture within the University of London, becoming its Chairman in 1945. Lord Northbourne was a fine artist, and was largely responsible for the design of the walled gardens at [Northbourne Court]( <https://www.parksandgardens.org/places/northbourne-court>) (Q2455830) He would regularly worship at the small church at Betteshanger which had been largely rebuilt by his great-grandfather, with its fine interior and four windows by Charles Kempe, and where the Betteshanger School choir provided a high standard of choral music.

Article by Diana Hirst

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Para 2. https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Betteshanger\_House,\_Northbourne\_Geograph-3389049-by-Stephen-Richards.jpg

Para 4. <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Betteshanger_Church_-_geograph.org.uk_-_303684.jpg>; <https://www.kentchurches.info/church.asp?p=Betteshanger>

1. Northbourne, Lord. *Look to the Land* (1940). Sophia Perennis, 2003;Paull, John. ‘Lord Northbourne, the man who invented organic farming, a biography’. *Journal of Organic Systems,* 9(1), 2014 <https://orgprints.org/26547/12/26547.pdf> [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Paull, John. ‘The Betteshanger Summer School: Missing Link between Biodynamic Agriculture and Organic Farming’. *Journal of Organic Systems* 6 (2) 2011, 13-26. <https://orgprints.org/19511/>

   <https://northbourneblog.wordpress.com/> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Paull 42; 36; 35. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)