Regenerative Agriculture Mentoring Project

Final Report

By Cherry Taylor, lead volunteer for the project

March 2025

Introduction:

Objectives:

There have been five main aims for this project:

1) To move three Monmouthshire farms to regenerative agriculture through a mentoring programme
2) To move at least one farm from soy-based feed to alternatives
3) To audit the carbon footprint and biodiversity changes during this process
4) To share the stories of these farms with other Monmouthshire farmers to inform and inspire
5) To build momentum behind the new "Talk Farm Regen Monmouthshire" group

Almost all of these objectives have been achieved, with the exception of number three (see "Project challenges" below).

A total of 1,404 acres of Monmouthshire countryside:

The three farms in this mentoring scheme include:

- Lower House Farm - a council tenanted farm, calf rearing and sheep, on 114 acres
- Square Farm - an organic and mixed family-run farm with 190 acres
- Llanover - a large estate, mainly pasture and arable, of 1,100 acres

About regenerative agriculture:

Regenerative agriculture focusses on improving soil health and follows five key principles:

1. Maintain living roots in the soil
2. Keep the soil covered

3. Diversity of plants
4. Include grazing livestock
5. Minimal soil disturbance (physical & chemical)

On average, regen experts say it takes 5-7 years to transition to regen. This will depend on the starting point and how degraded a farm's soil is.

Project methodology:

This mentoring scheme was made available to three farms in Monmouthshire with peer-to-peer teaching from Ben Taylor-Davies, (aka Regen Ben), a world-renowned regen ag expert (pictured below at Groundswell 2024).

Along with support from ACE Monmouth volunteers, the mentoring package included six 1:1 sessions per farm with Ben, starting with a look at the basics, including soil testing and a baseline evaluation of agricultural practices. The project also delivered tours of Ben's farm, Townsend Farm, to see regenerative agriculture in practice, help with scoping business plans, support on planning applications, as well as in-depth discussions about regen farming practices and soil health.

Summary of on-farm activity (done, doing, planned):

1. Soil testing (chemical & biological)
2. Herbal leys
3. No till and shallow ploughing
4. Pigs for weed control
5. Johnson-Su & Bokashi composting system
6. Reduced inputs (e.g. pesticides, fertilisers etc)
7. Soya feed alternatives (addressing tropical deforestation)
8. Wildfarmed regen wheat-growing community Wildfarmed | Transforming Lunches and Landscapes
9. New business ventures (e.g. farm shops, flower farm, on-farm events etc)
10. New product lines through collaboration
11. New social media accounts / websites
12. Community invited on farm (e.g. open days and farm tours)
13. New public footpaths
14. Groundswell attendance
15. Relationship-building with ACE Monmouth community
16. Ecological survey (flora)

With thanks to the funders:

Funding for this project has been gratefully received from:

- Wye Valley National Landscapes (WVNL) Sustainable Development Fund (SDF)
- Monmouthshire Food Partnership (MFP) and Monmouthshire County Council (MCC) UK Share Prosperity Fund
- The Coop Carbon Innovation Fund through Size of Wales
- Action on Climate Emergency (ACE) Monmouth through a Monmouth Town Council (MTC) Partnership Agreement

Lower House Farm

Background:

Laura Pollock and Matt Brooks are tenant farmers at Lower House Farm Lower House Farm, Llanvair Discoed, near Chepstow, where their primary source of income is through calf rearing and sheep. They had been on the farm less than a year of a 5-year tenancy period when they applied for the mentoring project.

What's been achieved:

Ben kicked off the mentoring with chemical soil analysis and discussed the results at length with Matt and Laura. Coupled with an in-field spade analysis, it showed the farm had very good soil. Ben was of the opinion that it would support good arable crops.

Laura and Matt were keen to diversify their farm activities and in 2024 they expanded considerably the variety of animals they have on the farm. The livestock now includes rheas to defend the poultry from foxes, as well as cattle, sheep, chickens, horses, goats, alpacas, ducks and pigs. These are all part of the overall plan to encourage the public onto the farm through events.

Indeed, they carried out numerous seasonal events in 2024, including a dog show, Spring on the Farm and the Pumpkin Patch with “Maisie’s Amazing Maise Maze”. They also have a similar calendar of seasonal events lined up for 2025.

They are focussing on encouraging more people to buy direct from the farm through the sale of hot food at events and meat direct from the farm. Indeed, they attended the Monmouth Show and the Abergavenny Food Festival in 2024, among other events, selling produce from the farm direct to the public. They have also applied for planning permission to open a farm shop.

The creation of the Pumpkin Patch was part of a pumpkin-growing trial in collaboration with and support from Farming Connect. This was herbicide free, so they had some weed control issues, but still produced a good yield overall and the pumpkins sold well, as did the event tickets. Interestingly, the pumpkin field when sampled after the harvest had some of the most biologically active soil on the farm (see below), despite it being ploughed at the start of the season prior to planting / sowing the maize and pumpkin crops.

Since the harvest, they are trialling ‘pigs as ploughs’ over winter to help prepare the ground for spring planting, as oppose to spraying with glyphosate. Indeed, at the start of the project, they primarily used manure as fertiliser, rather than bagged nitrogen, and they did not routinely use other pesticides, other than minor spot weeding with a knapsack. They would occasionally apply antibiotics, fly spray and wormer to their animals. Now their use of animal treatments has reduced as they have become aware of the impact of these products on their soil biology, treating animals only when absolutely necessary.

In terms of the soy in their animal feed, they have now successfully removed this from their cattle and pigs’ diets. They have found a locally grown suitable feed that they can give to nearly all their animals. This has reduced the protein content slightly, but does not seem to have impacted performance and growth rates so far. They will continue to monitor this aspect. They also trialled a new chicken feed containing organic soy bulked with wheat, but to justify this increased cost, they are considering the sale of ‘deforestation-free’ branded eggs as an additional source of income. They also hope to set up a chicken tractor operation in the future, where the chickens follow other livestock around the farm using a portable chicken house.

In the future, they will explore growing their own feed on the land, e.g. planting spring barley for forage animals that can be fed over winter when the animals are housed due to wet ground.

They have also set up a veg patch and invited a local community group to grow produce on it. Laura is also working with a friend setting out in flower farming and an area has been dedicated to growing flowers and sunflowers, creating "Lower House Flowers".

Laura kindly joined ACE volunteers and Rob Whittall from Square Farm to talk at the Haberdashers / ACE / Size of Wales "Monmouth Feast" event in June 2024. She is also willing to give talks locally to her and to MCC's Climate Community Champions. To request a talk from Laura, email lowerhouse.farm@outlook.com.

Farm-specific challenges:

Transitioning to regenerative practices takes time and often requires infrastructure changes on the farm. Being tenant farmers on such a short-term lease means making long-term plans and significant changes is almost impossible. This lack of certainty has been a significant barrier to implementing changes at Lower House Farm.

The cost of soy-free animal feed for the chickens has also been a limiting factor, as these are £5+ per bag more than the cheaper soy and palm-based feeds. However, on this farm, chicken eggs are not a major source of income, and their small operation does not warrant this extra investment at this time. But they continue to explore other options of feeding them, especially outside of the egg-laying season.

Lower House Farm applied for planning permission for a new farm shop at the start of the project, but hit numerous barriers. This, coupled with the short-term tenancy agreement, has held back their diversification plans, in spite of their ideal edge-of-village location.

Square Farm

Background:

Rob Whittle and his son Ryan run Square Farm, a certified organic farm in Mitchell Troy, near Monmouth Square Farm. This is a small mixed Welsh family farm with a wide range of animals and crops produced. They have a thriving farm shop selling their produce, which is visited by many people from Monmouth town and the surrounding villages. In 2024, individual customers numbered 3,000. Despite converting to organic in 2008, Rob was interested to learn about regenerative practices, and admits he did not know anything about regen when he applied for the project.

What's been achieved:

Ben collected soil samples for chemical analysis and reported back at length with the Square Farm team. Like many farms in the Wye Valley area, the soils are magnesium rich, which means they can 'tighten up'. Adding gypsum opens up the soil structure again – it flocculates it. Ben explored the possibility of using recycled plasterboard on this organic farm, but this option was not permitted under the Soil Association rules. Instead, mined gypsum (2-5 tonne an acre put on top) will be added to one field as an experiment after the seed is drilled in spring 2025.

Square Farm's rotation plan was explored, and it seems activity to date has been largely governed by available subsidies. Ben pointed out that chasing subsidies is not always aligned with improving the soil and sustainable farming. Indeed, some of the existing schemes in Wales are hugely detrimental to the environment and rivers. For example, turnips for sheep winter grazing which leads to a considerable amount of bare soil and potential run off into the rivers, even with margins left as they do at Square Farm under an "environmental" equivalent of the scheme.

As there has been and is still so much uncertainty over the Sustainable Farming Scheme (SFS), it is very hard for Square Farm to plan what to grow and how to evolve the farm further towards improving its soil. Nevertheless, a target rough plan was established: grass / herbal ley, which gets shallow ploughed if it is no longer performing well (typically after four years), followed by turnips (subsidy led, to feed the sheep and cattle, then pigs for weed control), followed by Spring cereals (x2 years), then back to grass / herbal ley. Repeat. The turnips are not an environmentally friendly crop and if the subsidies change, this could be changed too. If it were possible to plant something else with the turnips under the scheme, that would hugely improve the environmental impact.

Rob had already put down a herbal ley prior to the project, but did not realise this was a regenerative farming practice. Nevertheless, he says his sheep in particular have never looked so good on it. He hopes in the future to find a suitable mix of constituent plants in his herbal ley that is most appropriate for HIS land, rather than using a generic seed mix.

In regen farming, one of the main principals is minimal soil disturbance. Regen practitioners' approach is to direct-drill seed into the soil, rather than plough and drill. But to prepare the ground they spray the weeds off with Glyphosate, rather than ploughing them in. As an organic farm, Square Farm would not be permitted or want to use such chemicals, so it is left with the need to plough the weeds in. However, two solutions were proposed by Ben to minimise the damage this activity does to the soil: plough more shallowly (about 4 inches) and add Johnson-Su compost extract to the seed before drilling to give the soil biology a boost. Rob has since created his own Johnson-Su compost bin which should be ready to start using in 18 months from its creation. But there are still challenges with respect to access to appropriate machinery to implement all of these changes.

Rob has attended a regen grazing workshop and plans to explore the possibility of mob grazing their livestock. During the project, Rob also learned about Biochar at an organic growers' event, which is reported to be very beneficial to soil microbes as an addition, and he has since begun experimenting with creating his own.

Rob has not used soy-based animal feed on his farm, opting instead to use grain grown on the farm as an alternative protein source. Rob invited the Lower House Farm and Size of Wales teams to visit the farm in August 2024 to share his knowledge and experience of feeding their animals this way.

While initially reticent about opening up Square Farm land to the public (which was one of Ben's suggestions), after a visit to Groundswell (see below), Rob is now keen to start farm tours inviting both the public and other farmers to see what they are doing in terms of organic farming and where regen ag fits in. The first visit is earmarked for June 8th 2025 as part of Open Farm Sunday. ACE volunteers will aim to support this. Rob's vision for this event is that they will run farm tours during the day, have stalls showcasing local producers who stock the shop and activities for children, etc. ACE volunteers will also set up a soil biology microscope station for people to look at the soil life of Square Farm.

Rob has also been encouraged in this new direction by how well received his talk was at the Haberdashers / ACE / Size of Wales "Monmouth Feast" event on 30th June 2024, where he shared some anecdotes about his farming life and the history of Square Farm, including tales of how the chemical industry and government subsidies encouraged farmers to move towards chemical farming. The talk was a milestone in terms of building bridges between farmers and 'environmentalists' in the Monmouth area.

Since this event, Rob has given a talk to an ACE Monmouth audience of 40+ people at The Bridges Community Centre in Monmouth (November 2024) and another talk aimed specifically at farmers at The Livestock Centre, Raglan on Feb 13th 2025 attended by 25 farmers. To request a talk from Rob, email ryan@squarefarmshop.co.uk.

The regen project also had a stall at the Haberdashers / ACE Monmouth event, which Rob 'manned' for a day, talking to the event goers about regen and organic farming. Rob also manned the farming project-themed ACE stall at the

ACE Monmouth Seed Swap in February 2025 where he demonstrated and talked about the biochar he had created.

Also inspired by things encountered at Groundswell, Rob has invited a flower farmer to take on the polytunnels on his land. However, at the time of writing, he is struggling to find one who will commit. The flowers could be sold at the shop and locally.

Rob and Ryan produced regen wheat flour for the end-of-project party event (see below) and attendees made pasta and later, fresh wholewheat bread, which was outstanding. The flour might become a new product line in the Square Farm shop, which can be sold as a frozen product.

Finally, Rob went to the Marches Food and Farming Convergence event in October 2024 and whilst there, offered to host at his farm the next convergence event, which is now scheduled for 3-4 October 2025. The ACE Monmouth community will be involved in this event Home | MRFFC. This event could have very positive economic implications for Monmouth town and the surrounding area.

Farm-specific challenges:

One of the main issues for the Square Farm team is access to appropriate farm equipment to adjust their ploughing operation. New equipment would cost upwards of £80K, but second-hand equipment could provide a solution. The other issue holding back the development of Square Farm's shop is significant delays in the planning application which remains unresolved now at the end of the project, which is over three years since the application was first submitted.

Llanover Farm

Background:

The Llanover Estate incorporates a 1,600 acre farm Llanover Farm. The land is managed by Tom Jones, who has a team of three farmers and multiple support staff. The River Usk runs through the farmland, which straddles Bannau Brycheiniog (formerly the Brecon Beacons National Park) near Abergavenny. It is an historic estate that has had a mixed history of land use. However, with a desire to farm more regeneratively for the longevity of the asset, it was decided to implement a more environmental focus for the in-hand farming enterprise.

What's been achieved:

Soil tests and inspections with Ben found that the land was hugely varied in terms of soil quality, ranging from the very best worm counts to a 'degraded, soggy pan', depending on how the former tenant farmers had used the land.

The timing of this project was very fortuitous for Llanover where the team were just in the process of compiling a significant business plan to present to the Board in March 2024. At the start of the project, they had a draft plan in place. After three sessions in late 2023 with Ben, the whole farm team, including the agronomist and board of trustees, the initial draft plan was completely changed and rewritten.

They integrated all aspects of the farm, across cattle, sheep and crops. The new plan is intended to cover at least the next three years, but Ben suggests these changes will impact the way the farm is managed for the next three generations.

Following the workshops, they implemented some changes immediately, such as changing the seed orders to include specific herbal leys and changing the specifics of stocking rates for cattle and sheep, which have since been implemented.

They grew in 2024 a crop of beans and oats for animal feed under an environmental scheme using organic principles, and they plan to do a blended cereal crop using different varieties. They have also joined the Wildfarmed community, bringing their wheat as flour and bread to the consumer in Waitrose and M&S stores.

With new herbal leys in place, they are going to explore chopping them, rather than spraying them. Indeed, their overall use of pesticides was relatively high at the start of the project compared to the other farms, where they used herbicide and molluscicide, as well as animal treatments. Tom reported at the end of the project that the use of all of these has been reduced, and it is hoped that in 10 years' time their soil will be sufficiently recovered to enable them to farm without the use of any such inputs. Selective breeding will also enable fewer inputs and animal treatments.

On a former dairy farm on the estate, there is an old lagoon which they are exploring how to make use of for bokashi fermenting techniques. A visit to Ben's farm to look at his system helped formulate their ideas on this, and it is being considered.

They now employ someone on the team who monitors and looks after the wildlife on the estate.

Like the other farms, they also see the social side as massively important and are implementing lots of heritage trails with Bannau Brycheiniog. They also have a planned podcast series with local schools.

To find out more, contact the team on farms@llanover.com

Other project activities:

Soil Biology Sampling

As part of the project, three soil biology samples per farm were taken by ACE volunteers in autumn 2024, and sent to Eurofins for analysis. Ben went through these results in detail with the farms and ACE volunteers. Ben says none of the mentee farms in the project have terrible soil, but that there is room for improvement on all. The results showed that Square Farm's permanent pasture and Lower House Farm's pumpkin field had the most abundant and diverse soil biology, but that all the other samples taken showed room for improvement. More information on this is available in a separate report here.

Biodiversity Surveys

Dr Steph Tyler of Monmouthshire Meadows Group (MMG) visited all three farms on several occasions in 2023 and 2024 to record the flora present. She has produced reports for each farm. It is hoped this might be repeated at a later date to look for increased plant diversity as the soil changes and improves.

Groundswell 2024:

Groundswell is an industry event specifically for everything regen – by farmers for farmers. It started nine years ago with just a few farmers, and in 2024 it attracted 8,000 people. WVNL offered tickets at a reduced rate to the three mentee farms, and ACE Monmouth covered the rest of the ticket cost. All three farms sent someone along to the event in 2024, where Ben presents every year. Rob met flower farms, spoke on stage with Ben and came away inspired with many new ideas. Laura was struck by how interested people were to find out new things and learn from each other, noting the massive community spirit and desire by everyone to make positive change. Charlie Taylor from Llanover was inspired by the innovative and experimental nature of regen.

Visits to Ben's Townsend Farm

Ben has been exceptionally generous with his expertise and time, delivering above and beyond his contracted commitment for this project. The following trips to Townsend Farm, near Ross on Wye, took place over the last few years.

1) Initial farm tour to announce the mentoring scheme to farmers – May 2023
2) Joint ACE and Friends of the River Wye farm tour – June 2023
3) All three mentee farms visiting Bens for a private farm tour – Oct 2023
4) Video creation with Ben about regen Intro to Regen Ben Video and soy in animal feed Soy Feed Video – Dec 2023
5) Llanover visited to see Ben's Bokashi system – Summer 2024
6) Final end of project party – Nov 2024

During the end of project gathering on 7th November, all three mentee farms brought some regen produce to share with the 15 people who attended. Llanover brought lamb and Lower House Farm brought pumpkin soup. Square Farm brought wheat they had grown (with peas in a herbal ley). After another farm tour, Ben, Rob and Ryan milled this wheat and everyone made pasta together.

New Group: Talk Farm Regen Monmouthshire

Scott Millar, an ACE volunteer and farmer involved in the project, set up a new regen Facebook group, called "Talk Farm Regen Monmouthshire", which currently has 342 members (March 25).

Associated with this group, MFP ran multiple soil health related events through the winter of 2023 /2024 specifically for farmers. The following events were organised by Scott Millar and Jake Dowling with funding from MFP (number of attendees in the right-hand column):

03 Oct 2023	Intro to Regenerative Agriculture	45
23 Oct 2023	Weatherproof Farming with Niels Corfield	21
14 Nov 2023	Principles of Rotational Grazing webinar	16
08 Dec 2023	Exploring Cover Crops farm walk and talk	19
11 Jan 2024	Carbon Auditing in Herefordshire & Monmouthshire	21
24 Jan 2024	Weatherproof Farming with Niels Corfield	19

These events were hosted at various farms across the region, and will doubtless have contributed significantly to increasing the awareness and understanding of regenerative agriculture.

An earlier farm visit took place in June 2023 to Juliette Holt-Wilson's Trefoil organic Farm which boasts beautiful species-rich pastures.

Video production and photography:

Towards the end of the project in October 2024, ACE volunteers organised the production of a video by Mud and Thunder of all three farms in the mentoring project, with each describing their regen journey to date. This is being shared widely in April 2025. Regen Project Video

In addition, in December 2023, Ben kindly agreed to be interviewed on camera to answer questions about various issues relating to the project, including what regen involved, aspirations for each farm in the scheme and soy in animal feed. Intro to Regen Ben Video

Size of Wales used this footage to create a video specifically about the issue of soy in animal feed and Ben's views on it. Soy Feed Video

In addition, Richard Stanton, a highly regarded professional photographer who specialises in agriculture, was commissioned to get media-worthy images from each farm. Press coverage.

Six Inches of Soil Screening:

In early 2024, three people on the Talk Farm Regen group suggested a screening of Six Inches of Soil (a UK-produced regen ag documentary) might be hosted in Monmouthshire somewhere. The ACE officers were happy to support this and in April 2024, a screening included a panel discussion with Ben and Nicole Masters (a world- renowned regen expert and author), among others. Food served was all produced locally and was either regen or organic. Ben supplied a hog roast from his farm, in exchange for a contribution to a farming charity. £350 was donated to DPJ foundation (a mental health charity for specifically for farmers). 130 people attendees (mostly from Monmouthshire) with a good mix of farmers and non-farmers, plus three MCC councillors. There was also an unmanned regen ag stall set up by ACE at this event detailing the project.

Financial Audit:

Sarah Read, a financial practitioner and ACE Treasurer, offered all three mentee farms a financial audit, but to date, none has taken up the offer. Another ACE volunteer and farmer, Ann Eggleton, did a review of available off-the-shelf chicken feeds with and without soy.

Reporting at events:

The project has been represented at the following events, either by speakers or with display boards:

1) Climate Community Champions 2023 -ACE volunteers introduced the project to other community groups in the region
2) ACE Monmouth Festival 2023 - a Regen ag stall in the Food Zone was manned by Scott Millar and Juliet Holt-Wilson
3) Wales Climate Week 2023 – Size of Wales, MFP and ACE Monmouth talked about the project
4) MCC Local Nature Partnership meeting – Cherry Taylor described project
5) Oxford Real Food and Farming Conference 2024 – Marianne Elliott of MFP talked about the project
6) Friends of the River Wye "Restore the River" event 2024 – Cherry Taylor gave a brief overview of the project, with over 500 people in attendance
7) Abergavenny Friends of the Earth meeting 2024 – Cherry presented the project to the community group, focussing on nearby Llanover
8) Numerous ACE Monmouth monthly community meetings – regular updates given to the community
9) ACE Monmouth Christmas party 2023 & 2024 – A display was present, attended by policy makers, the ACE community and the general public
10) Six Inches of Soil 2024 (see above)
11) ACE Monmouth and Haberdashers "Monmouth Feast" 2024 - 250 attendees (including officials from MTC, MCC and Welsh Government)
12) Marches Real Food and Farming Convergence 2024 – Details of the project were on display and Rob Whittall attended the event
13) Rob's talk to the ACE community at Bridges (Nov 24) – 40 from Monmouth area, which included some of Square Farm's customers, ACE and Transition members, and some farmers.
14) ACE Monmouth Seed Swap (Feb 25) - Rob manned the ACE stall which focussed on the project; he bought his biochar – roughly 350 people attended from the local Monmouth community, and some local farmers
15) Rob's talk at the Farmers market (Feb 25) – attended by 25 farmers

The Ripple Effect:

One of the knock-on effects of this project is the establishment of a new regen farm cluster centred in the countryside between Monmouth and Abergavenny, with Chris Taylor of Down to Earth Agronomy involved, who will mentor the farms. This is another initiative of the MFP.

Another knock-on effect was the start of an ACE Monmouth biodiversity audit group, where 10 volunteers will be trained by Gwent Wildlife Trust and survey, amongst other local areas, regen farms. Two farms in a new cluster at Oldlands (Dingestow Court) Old Lands - Rewilding Farming have invited the ACE volunteers to conduct audits on their farms.

Other county councils are about to implement a similar mentoring project following the model of this one.

Finding common ground:

This project has bought together a very wide variety of people, including those from community groups, local non-government organisations (NGO), various funding organisations, farming organisations and farmers. It has been a project that has involved significant collaboration across many different organisations.

Indeed, the project could not have been achieved without lots of face-to-face contact between ACE volunteers and the farmers involved, which has gradually built good relationships with lots of trust and mutual respect. The farms have felt supported by ACE volunteers, but also by the organisations providing funding for the project. ACE volunteers are extremely grateful to all the farmers that have been involved in this project.

Initially, ACE volunteers were not going to be present during the mentoring sessions with Ben, but it quickly became apparent that it was going to be necessary in order to fully appreciate and capture the changes that were being discussed and proposed. In the end, Cherry Taylor attended most of the sessions at Lower House Farm and Square Farm.

There is a strong culture in farming and ACE Monmouth volunteers have gradually become familiar with this and worked in a way that suited the farmers involved. This has been fundamental to how the outputs and aims of the project have been achieved. Spending time with the farmers in this project

has been invaluable to help the non-farmers involved appreciate fully the challenges they face and how farming really works now and how they have arrived at where they are.

In summary, the project has successfully brought together farmers, consumers and environmentalists. It was never imagined at the start of the project that a room full of environmentalists, consumers and farmers would be able to discuss the various implications of glyphosate versus ploughing without negative consequences (which occurred at Rob's talk in Nov 24).

Anecdotally, the attitude of eco groups in the Monmouth area have changed considerably towards farming and farmers, with much improved mutual respect and understanding as a direct result of this project. There are also signs that farmers in the area are becoming more aware of and receptive to farming methods that are kinder to the environment and appreciating more the importance of soil to the future of their farm incomes, as well as to the environment.

Project challenges:

Initially, the plan was to carry out benchmarking activities (e.g. carbon footprint, biodiversity, yields and inputs) and implement changes over the course of 12 months. However, the typical duration for a farm to transition fully to regenerative agriculture in a profitable manner is around 5-7 years. This time allows the soil to heal and recover and makes sure the farm is not put under any financial pressure as a direct result of the transition. However, this meant benchmarking during a 12-month mentoring project was not possible.

When advertising the mentoring scheme initially to farmers, it became apparent that not many farmers in the Monmouthshire area really knew what regen ag was, and in hindsight, the same was true of ACE volunteers and the funders.

Current legislation caused barriers during the project, including issues with the local MCC planning department for two of the farms, the short 5-year MCC tenancy agreements, environmentally damaging subsidy schemes from the Welsh Government and uncertainty on subsidies making farm planning difficult.

In terms of managing this project, the lead volunteer (Cherry Taylor) perhaps should have widened the core team at the start of the project, but whilst trust was being established between Ben, the farms and ACE Monmouth, in hindsight this probably wouldn't have been possible. By the time the relationships started to work really well, the project was well underway and Cherry was reluctant to jeopardise that by bringing in lots of new people. However, the ACE team has now been expanded in the latter part of 2024, and is gathered on an ACE WhatsApp group. Click this link to join. This has been established specifically to support Square Farm for community-focussed activities going forward, which is Monmouth's closest mentee farm. Members of the Square Farm team are also on this group, as well as other farmers, which is another good example of the collaboration this project has brought about.

Conclusion:

As a result of this project, many more Monmouthshire people, including farmers, are now aware of regen farming than were at the start. Hopefully, some farmers will also be considering adopting it, and consumers keen to seek out regen produce to buy. As importantly, consumers and environmentalists are also more aware of the challenges farmers face.

Further reading:

- "Dirt to Soil" by Gabe Brown (a great introduction to regen)
- "Rooted" by Sarah Langford
- "For the Love of Soil" by Nicole Masters
- "English Pastoral" by James Rebanks
- "Soil" by Matthew Evans

Contacts:

- **ACE Monmouth:** for enquiries about the project, contact farmers@acemonmouth.org.
  To join the ACE Monmouth mailing list, click here
- **Lower House Farm:** To request a talk from Laura, email lowerhouse.farm@outlook.com
- **Square Farm:** To request a talk from Rob, email ryan@squarefarmshop.co.uk
- **Llanover:** For any enquiries, email farms@llanover.com
- **Size of Wales:** to get involved with Size of Wales and their work on Deforestation-free Wales, contact nicholajames@sizeofwales.org.uk

- **Wye Valley National Landscapes:** for more information about their involvement in Square Farm activity, email community@wyevalleyaonb.org.uk
- **Monmouthshire Food Partnership:** for more information about their involvement in this and other regen ag projects, contact ElaineBlanchard@monmouthshire.gov.uk
- **Regen Ben:** To find out about mentoring and consultancy services from Ben Taylor Davies, email bentd76@gmail.com

Links to:

- Ben's report
- Soil Biology report
- Steph Tyler's reports
- Intro to Regen Ben Video
- Soy Feed Video
- Regen Project Video
- Press coverage

With thanks to the funders: