

# *Leading Ladies*

---

By Nancy Honey

*Interviews by Hattie Garlick*

**Helen Browning:** *Organic Farmer and chief executive Soil Association*

- 1986** Began her career in farming at Eastbrook Farm, turning it into the organic farm that she still farms today as well as running the local pub and its restaurant
- 1998** Appointed chair of the Soil Association and awarded an OBE for her services to organic farming
- 2004** Became director of food and farming, Soil Association
- 2005-2009** Chaired the England Animal Health and Welfare Implementation Group
- 2009** Appointed external affairs director of the National Trust
- 2011** Made director of the Soil Association
- Today** She is also chair of the Food Ethics Council, since 2002

**Growing up, I had five, maiden great-aunts who were farmers.** My grandfather was one of eleven – two boys and nine girls. Five of the girls didn't marry and lived together after the war.

**I found them amazingly inspirational.** They all lived on a farm in the Malvern Hills. They were diverse as a gang, they were all very different people. But they seemed to have a whale of a time in a period when most women were expected to sit at home doing the crocheting.

**These women were going to market, going hunting, drinking whisky...** They made their own cheese and butter, milked their own cows. It looked to me, growing up, like a much more independent and fun life than conventional women of the time were having. I loved their sense of humour and their spirit. I looked at them and thought, *that's not a bad life to lead.*

**When I did go into farming, I had three challenges.** One: I was female. Two: I was quite young. I was only twenty-four when I took over the management of the farm. And three: I had these 'organic tendencies'. The three together meant that I was under scrutiny!

**I often joked that our neighbouring farmers started to get very long necks as they drove past our fields.** The hedges had been small and clipped and I let them grow up, so they had to crane their necks to try and see what this mad woman was up to.

**A part of my ambition was driven by the urge to prove myself capable in the face of all that.** Growing up, I wanted to prove a woman could run a successful farming enterprise in her own right.

**There was also a great desire in me to be financially independent:** I did not want to be beholden to a man for money.

**When I first started farming, it felt like women were very, very rare on the ground.** But there has been a change. I see more women coming into farming now, or having a much more equal relationship with their partner in running the farm.

**Historically, the farmer's wife was actually very instrumental in running the business.** But they never got the credit for it. They might be doing the books or rearing the calves, a lot of the time they were doing a lot more than that. But it was still the bloke who had his name over the door.

**It's a really attractive career for a woman in lots of ways.** When I was thinking about what I was going to do with my life and realised that there was an opportunity to farm, the fact that you can have your independence, you don't have to make those choices in quite such stark way between family and running a business, made it really attractive.

**I think women are instinctively drawn towards organic farming, too.** More organic farmers are women - that's been a very marked trend over the last few decades. In conventional farming there have been far fewer.

**Women look further in front.** It's a ghastly sweeping statement but if you look at the developing world, most farmers are women. But as soon as you start getting the big toys and machines involved, it starts to become a much more male industry. I think women are much more instinctively in tune with the idea of farming with nature rather than against it.

**Women are, on the whole, more environmentally aware** and more aware of the health issues around food and farming. That sense of adapting natural processes to take what we need but not disturb more than we have to is something that, on the whole, appeals to the female side of us, whether we're men or women.

**Nutrition, as a science, has been pretty slow off the block.** As farmers, we know, for example, how important pre-maternal and maternal nutrition is because we see it every day in the animals we rear. If you don't look after the baby in the womb, you're creating a problem before you even start. So much of brain development occurs in-utero. But it seems scientists have really overlooked nutrition as one of the fundamental building blocks of health. We've been focused so much on finding ways to prevent disease instead of thinking: *how do we promote health?* And that's really what the Soil Association is all about.

**Women have the edge here, actually.** Because we have, traditionally, been the child carers, we see that if you feed a child Coke and a Big Mac they crawl up the walls and, if you can get them eating sensible food, we see just how much better they perform and behave. It's practical, day-to-day experience that might not be replicable in trials to give us the science that people think they need at a policy level.

**Women have often circumnavigated traditional structures in order to succeed.** Even where it hasn't been necessary to take a different route in

order to get past the boys and to the top, they often bring something new to the table that has been missing over the last few centuries. So it's partly cause, and partly effect, the way that that happens.

**That's why it's important, for instance, to have not just one, but a decent number of women on a board.** Because women are diverse too – it's not like we're all the same and one woman will represent all of our values.

**It's just having that slightly less testosterone fuelled approach to life,** that desire to collaborate and work for the greater good rather than the individual ego. It's a generalisation again, of course, but adding that dynamic to the table is always a positive thing.

**There are always things to fuel ambition.** Maybe if lack of equality is no longer a driving force for young women, it allows us to focus on even more important things. There are plenty of things to feel outrage about today. They should get you off your butt and give you a cause to motivate and inspire you.

**I got over the feeling that I had to prove something quite quickly.** Because when I actually got into the farming world, while I might have been an object of interest and gossip sometimes, I didn't meet outright prejudice or discrimination at all. Occasionally there were patronising attitudes but really nothing that bad.

**I do find that if women just get on and do it, on the whole the world just says,** "Oh, okay, that's unusual but that's great."

**For me, it seems that if you just wear your strength, then people let you get on with it.** Just take it, it's there, and then get on with the things that matter. So although the desire to prove myself as a woman was quite a spur for me at the start, once I'd assumed my role, I let that go and I don't often refer to it or go back to it except when I'm reminiscing.

**You have to be a feminist if being a feminist means believing in the role of women as equals around the table.**

**I don't think the feminist cause is quite as urgent as it was.** I think we have won many battles. I think that there probably still are pockets of life where there is still overt discrimination, but most of it is more subtle than that now. There is nothing really stopping you, now, if you decide you want to do something. There are still some issues around how easy that would be – particularly around childcare.

**But women have to make choices sometimes.** And find ways of working with men that provide those equal opportunities. I think the space exists to do that now, though. I think the doors are open, it's up to us to walk through them.

**Maybe that's overly premised on my personal experience though.** I haven't found any doors slamming in my face. The bank manager hasn't

turned me down because I'm a woman, people at markets haven't snarled at me.

**Sometimes I think it's been the opposite:** I think people are looking for women to get involved in things.

**At the Soil Association, our public membership is more female than male.** Our farmer membership is more male than female because that represents the gender balance still in farming.

**Women have always, historically, been bigger supporters of environmental causes** and of supporting things around health and nutrition, which is a big part of what the Soil Association is about.

**I think I bridge that gap between real, practical farming experience and sharing the concerns of women about looking after the next generation,** and that's quite helpful in understanding the balance within the organisation itself - getting both the practical and policy ends right.

**I felt I crossed the bridge from being seen as 'that woman farmer' to just being respected as 'a farmer' quite a long time ago.** I was still the only woman in lots of agricultural board meetings, but it didn't feel like an issue.

**I spent a lot of time in Northern sheep markets, for example, and I found them all absolutely charming.** I never got the impression that they thought, *Oh that Helen Browning, what's a woman doing here?* They were all delightful and still are. I still go up there and buy sheep every year. I'm always made to feel really welcome.

**I don't feel very chippy about my place in the world,** I don't think I could justify stamping my foot about these issues because people have actually treated me really nicely and really respectfully.