

# THE POISON SEED

## MATHRY'S SUCCESSFUL CAMPAIGN IN 2001 AGAINST GM CROP TRIALS

### A Brief History

**10/4/01** BBC News reports GM trial T25 maize crop to be planted in Mathry (West Pembrokeshire) by Aventis and Toddingtons Ltd., landowners of Castle Cenlas Farm, Mathry. Jill Chambers, partner of ex-Tory MP Tony Marlowe, says this is part of the scientific advance in agriculture. There is no notification in the local press. Local organic farmers are immediately alarmed that their Organic status could be compromised. There are 80 organic farms in Pembs., more than in any other part of Wales, several within a five-mile radius of Mathry. Together with other concerned local people they phone the local press to announce a public meeting and put up posters all over North Pembs.

**11/4/01** Petitions and anti-GM posters are organised by FoE and other groups all over Pembs. Alreadyt apparent that there is massive public support for keeping Pembs GM-free.

**16/4/01** Easter Monday. Public meeting in Mathry attended by about 250 people. TV, radio and press in attendance. Four speakers, including one from FoE. Dismay and rage that the Welsh Assembly had not been consulted in the light of its vote last year to keep Wales GM free, and fury that Mathry Community Council has not been consulted at all (although an obligation to consult locally over a 6 week period is placed on the trial organisers by the licensing directive). The meeting approves a "Mathry Resolution Against GMOs" unanimously. Supporters urged to send email protests to Carwyn Jones (Welsh Assembly Rural Affairs Minister), the GM Strategy Group, Tony Blair, local MPs and AMs. £250 raised which is used for keeping people in touch: setting up website; stamps, paper, envelopes for newsletter. Decided that the campaign should have no leadership and no committee. Instead, action Groups are formed, covering bright ideas; scientific research; political links and lobbying; demonstrations and non-violent action; and website. The structure is a loose affiliation of independent people to avoid entanglement with new anti-terrorist legislation and to promote self-motivation. The action groups were left to plan and execute their own ideas, publicity, newsletter and email information lists, mobile phone networks.

**17/4/01** Waiting for the support of the CCW, County Council, National Park, Wildlife Trust, RSPB, Farmers Union of Wales etc. This takes time and a lot of lobbying, but gradually "official" support for our position appears.

**19/4/01** Delegation to Welsh Assembly in Cardiff presents petitions and statement calling on WA to use legal means to halt trials. Also, AMs are asked to make representations in Westminster to reverse legislation permitting commercial sowing, in light of ban by Germany; non implementation of EU directive by France and Austria; scientific evidence of likely dangers of horizontal gene transfer; loss of livelihood by organic farmers, market gardeners and beekeepers; public resistance to GM foods. Labour MP Jackie Lawrence is present and promises to raise questions in Westminster and begins to get informed of the full legal and scientific facts. Welsh Assembly's GM Strategy Group looks at what legal avenues can be pursued, due to report in a week (27/4/01)

**21/4/01** March of about 300 people to Castle Cenlas to release yellow balloons simulating wind blown pollen. In the crowd are Jemima (a local heroine who helped to defeat the French in the invasion of 1797) and the daughters of Rebecca (symbolic reminder of the Rebecca Riots against toll gate injustices in 1835).

**23/4/01** First newsletter distributed. CCW announces support for the trials, and refuses to get involved in any scientific work related to the field trial sites. This causes much anger among protestors and Assembly members.

**24/4/01** We discover that the field trials site is part of an area notified as a candidate SAC and SSSI (designation largely because it is an otter habitat). Drainage from the field will contaminate the Upper Western Cleddau with glufosinate ammonium herbicide. This herbicide is very toxic and dangerous for aquatic life, and does not have a commercial license. We ask CCW and Environment Agency to intervene and try to halt the field trials, but they refuse.

**25/4/01** Landowners invite organic farmers and other key protestors to a private meeting at Castle Cenlas. In attendance, Meurig Raymond (the contractor), Huw Jones (Welsh Assembly civil servant), Graham Davies (DETR civil servant) and Judith Jordan from Aventis. Also various farmers who support the field trials. We are given the chance to ask questions and state our case. Afterwards, landowners say they will give due consideration to the points we have raised. Great media interest in the meeting.

**26/4/01** Two computers crash and strange things happen on telephones and faxes. Fun and games with the police and the media -- Aventis later confirm in writing that they have "security consultants" working in the area to protect their interests!

**27/4/01** GM Strategy Group say Welsh Assembly has no power to do anything.

**28/4/01** This is confirmed by a Statement by Rural Affairs Minister Carwyn Jones

**30/4/01** Panic as tractors appear on the site -- but after a general alert it transpires that they are only ploughing. Spy network attempts to find whereabouts of seed.

**2/5/01** Farmers and lawyers meet to find possible grounds for an injunction. Barrister from Cardiff offers to act for reduced fee, local solicitor (from farming family) acts for expenses only.

Vigil around the clock starts to ensure that the whole community is alerted if tractors and seed drills appear on the trial site. Telephone links with supporters able to come immediately. A lot of media coverage. Local residents come forward to offer support, act as lookouts, give information as to where the seed might be. Plans are put in place for peaceful pickets etc if tractors and seed drills appear. Police cars patrol regularly; the police are kept informed of actions planned. Second newsletter published.

**3/5/01** Delegation to see Environment Minister in London, organised by our MP. In attendance, organic farmers, beekeeper, Chairman of Community Council, campaign spokesmen. Michael Meacher finds out that his own civil servants have not passed on to him crucial letters and have not insisted on correct consultation procedures and notification periods. Meacher asks for a delay and for proper consultation, but is snubbed later in the same day by SCIMAC and Aventis who say they will carry on regardless.

All this week various local individuals visit and phone Tony Marlow and Jill Chambers (landowners) to talk with them and plead for the trials to be abandoned. They stick to the Aventis line that the new technology is beneficial and safe, opposition is not local and is not from farmers, GM crops are all round us anyway, the commercial planting is legal already and people don't know the facts. It becomes clear in conversation that they are not very well informed -- and probably only interested in the money.

**4/5/01** Farmers meeting convened with organic and conventional farmers, to discuss the evidence of GM damage to the environment and health. Professor Brian Goodwin and Dr Mae-Wan Ho in attendance.

The weather is warm and dry. We know that the seeds could go in at any moment. Enough volunteers for a 24 hour non-stop vigil for as long as it takes. Supporters number about 500 by now.

**5/5/01** am, Technical seminar in St Davids led by Mae-Wan Ho for local scientists and specialists

**5/5/01** pm, Professor Goodwin and Dr Mae Wan Ho explain the scientific dangers at a public meeting in Letterston, attended by about 250 people. Our AM. Mp and MEP are present, and the political temperature starts to rise!

**6/5/01** Fund raising and fun Rally in Mathry. Stalls, barbeque, auction etc-- amazing atmosphere and public support... £2000 raised. Offer of £2500 from FUW towards farmer's legal costs.

**6/5/01** On the same day, volunteers work with Mae-Wan Ho and Brian Goodwin to declare Chardon-LL plantings as illegal. Press release and big media interest

**7/5/01** Bank Holiday Monday. Marathon bike ride across Pembs by <sup>3</sup>Rebecca and her sisters<sup>2</sup> (local folk heroes). Tractor rally < about 30 local farmers, both conventional and organic, come out in support and drive a convoy of tractors past Castle Cenlas farm. Tractors and cyclists all meet on the village green in Mathry, to great public acclaim and media interest.

**8/5/01** Word leaks that Toddingtons were unable to implement their plan to plant last weekend because of problems in finding a contractor with the right seed drill. Also it comes to light that the NFU has major investments in Monsanto; and various committee members such as Lord Sainsbury (Chair of GM Strategy Committee) have money invested in GM companies.

**8/5/01** am Meeting between representatives of the campaign group and Carwyn Jones at the Welsh Assembly. Our MP and AM in attendance. Last-ditch attempt to force the Assembly to take decisive action. The Minister still says he can do nothing.

**8/5/01** Early evening, Toddingtons suddenly issue a press release saying they are pulling out of the field trials! They cite distress caused to local residents by misinformation; blame the Government for not promoting a positive image of GM technology; and point out they were legally entitled to plant commercially anyway. Euphoria all over Pembrokeshire. Within an hour, everybody knows!

**9/5/01** Press announcement by NFU boss Ben Gill claims intimidation and threats had been used by protesters, and claimed that there had been attacks on landowners. Way over the top, and if he had bothered to ring the police he might have obtained a more reliable impression of the campaign.

**9/5/01** The police rang up to thank all involved for the courteous, peaceful and good humoured way in which the protest had been conducted.

## **WHY DID WE SUCCEED?**

There is a very strong community spirit in Pembrokeshire, many very active supporters are from families local for generations with family members in a variety of professions, eg our solicitor is from a farming family. There is a tradition of protest which has been successful in the past, eg the original Rebecca Rioters who protested against highway tolls in the 19th C; the recent campaign which stopped the burning of Orimulsion fuel at pembroke Power Station; and the successful campaign to prevent nuclear waste storage at Trecwn mine depot. The fact that the wishes of the Welsh Assembly and Welsh people were being totally disregarded by Westminster caused great resentment locally.

People here are highly protective of our unpolluted environment. Organic farmers are a strong and numerous lobby since their livelihood is at risk. They persuaded

many conventional farmers to support them. Instead of centralised leadership there was networking to involve people, put them in touch with others, and give them encouragement to carry out their own ideas. Most energy from the centre went into keeping people informed. Speed and ease of communication improves all the time (eg we relied heavily on our mobile phones, website and emails) so support kept on increasing.

We have a determined body of academics able to trawl all the scientific reports and legal directives for conflicts, procedures not properly carried out, facts people in high places would prefer not to know...We were determined to keep within the law and not to antagonise the police.

Also we had some powerful symbols, which the media loved: small children with painted faces carrying yellow balloons, Jemima and her army of elderly female warriors, Rebecca and her daughters, the otter as a symbol of a special environment, marathon bike ride, and a large tractor convoy. All very visual and colourful -- perfect for TV. Also, one of the chief characters in the saga was Tony Marlow, a very colourful ex-Tory MP already well known to the media.

Nearly all the groups involved planned "theatrical" things which underpinned the serious negotiating and lobbying going on at another level. The mutual support mechanism was fantastic. A lot of us lived on adrenalin for more than 3 weeks. In the end the three families involved in Toddingtons Ltd could not handle the concerted pressure from the community in which they have to live.

**Judy Bruce, Moira Charles, Leon Downey, Wyn Evans, Jane James, Brian John, Tom Latter, Des Llewelyn, Gill Rowlands, Gerald Miles, Ian Panton, Van der Spoel, Chris Samra Tibbetts, Gareth Waters.**