



Champagne corks and contemplation

WELL, what a week it was! It started on the morning of April 25, as I picked up the paper at the local newsagent in Camden Town and read: 'A Johnson in Number 10!' Although I'd known something was in the wind, I had no idea that my third son, Jo, MP for Orpington, was about to be appointed by the Prime Minister to head the 10, Downing Street Policy Unit.

When an actor meets a tractor, the actor always loses

If Champagne corks popped that day in the Johnson household, the following evening, in the Long Room at Lords, there was a positive fusillade as Charles and Judy Collingwood (better known perhaps as Brian and Shula to the millions who follow *The Archers* on BBC Radio 4) jointly celebrated their 70th birthdays. The high point came when the Collingwoods entertained the assembled company (which included cricket-loving former Prime Minister Sir John Major and his wife, Norma) with the story of their life, told in rhyming couplets. Sample: 'When an actor meets a tractor, the actor always loses!'

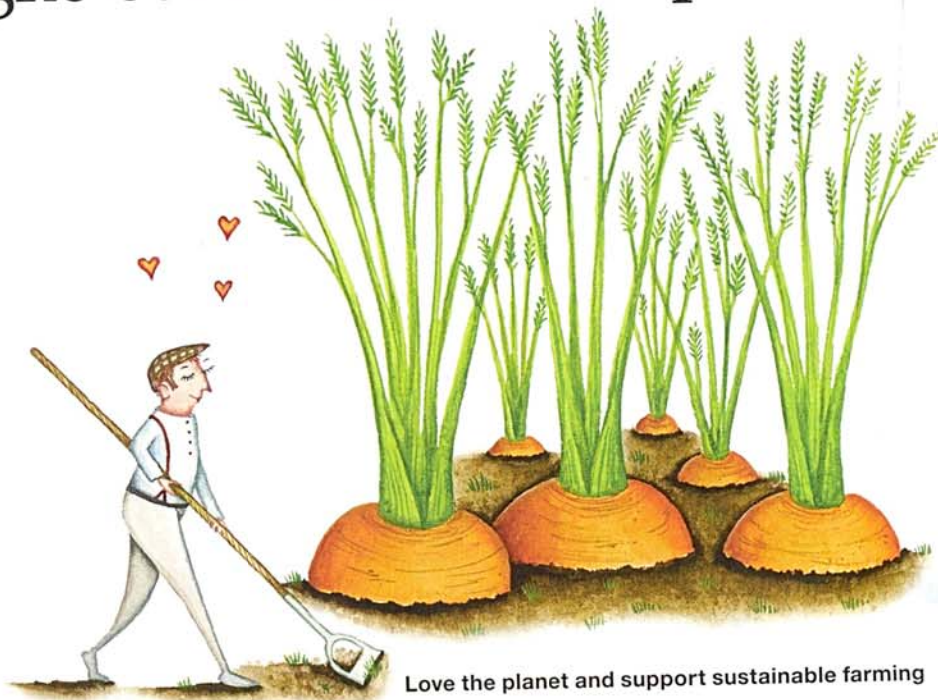
Illustration: Clare Mackie; London: News Pictures/Rea Features

We left London early on Tuesday morning for a 9.30am start in Gloucestershire. Patrick Holden, former director of the Soil Association, has set up a new organisation, the Sustainable Food Trust, to promote more sustainable food systems (www.sustainablefoodtrust.org). Mr Holden is also a long-time adviser to The Prince of Wales on sustainability issues. In that capacity, he'd invited some 20 friends and associates to visit the Duchy Home Farm near Tetbury.

We gathered for coffee and a first discussion. Mr Holden told us: 'The Prince is a visionary. All over the world, he is admired, perhaps more than for anything else, for his work in promoting sustainable agriculture.'

David Wilson, who has managed the farm for the past 28 years, led us on a guided tour. The Home Farm extends to 1,100 acres and they farm another 800 acres, so this is a sizeable chunk of land. Mr Wilson didn't disguise the fact that these are difficult times for farmers. They are perhaps especially difficult for organic farmers, as consumers may be reluctant to pay a premium.

But even though life may be difficult for organic farmers in the immediate future, I came away from that morning convinced that men like Prince Charles, Mr Holden and Mr Wilson will be proved right. Environmental and health considerations (including obesity), allied to animal-welfare concerns, will, I believe, convince more and more producers and consumers to go down the organic/sustainable farming route. What matters now is to drive this message home at the political level, including—crucially—in Brussels.



Love the planet and support sustainable farming

We spent the afternoon being shown round the gardens at Highgrove. We could easily have spent two days there. More than 30 years of thinking has gone into these gardens. For this kind of vision, you probably need solitude or at least a good dose of it.

Mr Holden showed us the millennium sanctuary. When it was opened, it was blessed by Richard Chartres, the Bishop of London. Above the lintel is the inscription: 'Lighten our darkness, we beseech thee, O Lord.' His Highness, we learned, spends time alone here every day when he's at Highgrove.

We arrived late that day at our farm on Exmoor. We've been here since 1951 and our farm track, two miles of it running beside the River Exe, is as bumpy as it ever was. I pour money into it each year, but the rains come and wash the repairs away. The plus side is that, during that last stretch at least, I'm forced to slow down. I have time to think. Not particularly profound thoughts, I admit. I don't think I'm in the Prince Charles league, but I do my best.

When *Newsnight* rang early on Wednesday morning to ask

whether I could 'pop back up' to London to talk about whether there were too many Etonians in the Coalition leadership (including my newly appointed son), I replied: 'I have nothing against OEs, as long as they're the best men for the job, but I can't face going down the long bumpy track again just after I've arrived.'

But we did go down to Winsford to vote in the—as it turned out—dramatic local elections on May 2, so my week ended, as it had begun, on a political note.

Talking of Winsford, Chris How, our village builder, recently won an LABC award for the best barn conversion in west Somerset. He's turned two of our old cowsheds into a wonderful holiday home that sleeps eight. If you want to do your bit for the local economy and enjoy some idyllic isolation at the end of a two-mile track, look for Ref: F66 at www.helpfulholidays.com

Stanley Johnson's latest book *Where the Wild Things Were: travels of a conservationist* is published by Stacey International

Next week: Kit Hesketh Harvey