

Wester Lawrenceton Farm

Summary

A loan scheme, where members lend against the value of organic dairy cows, with the interest paid in cheese.

History

The Rodways came to Wester Lawrenceton Farm in 1997, and the cow share scheme began soon after. The Rodways had previous experience of community projects and had heard about CSA from the USA. They were chatting about how to raise capital for buying a herd with a neighbour who said "I wouldn't mind owning a leg of a cow" and the idea emerged from there.

Organisation

The whole farm is a Company Limited by Guarantee, owned and controlled by (and employing) the farmers. Members lend money against the value of the herd. They have no voting rights and members are paid interest at a set rate in cheese. The Rodways are currently drawing up a legal agreement for the cow sharing scheme. Lenders are encouraged to participate in the work and life of the farm. The Rodways would like to develop a group (or an individual) to take over the scheme's organisation. One drawback of the scheme so far has been that, until responsibility is devolved, it adds to the workload. However, the farmers consider it to be a good scheme and a core group of members has emerged, from which offers to take on the work voluntarily have already come.

This legal set-up provides a useful structure that allows people's money to be invested in the herd. Some extra work that falls to the Rodways is generated by the scheme but it has nevertheless increased the capital available to them.

Finance

21 people have lent money to the farm, in units of £500. Lenders do not own individual animals but collectively their loans are equal to the value of the herd. They are paid interest at a set rate of 8% per year. The interest is paid in cheese, valued at £10/kg, which is more than the wholesale price but less than the retail price. They receive 4kg of cheese per year per £500 loan, which they usually come and collect in large quantities. They can have their loan repaid at a few months notice but in practice most people regard the investment as part of a long term relationship with the farm. Six months notice is required to leave the scheme, preferably having found a replacement.

For legal reasons, these cow shares cannot be advertised or offered direct to the general public; instead they must be offered only to specific individuals who have shown an interest.

Activities

The social, cultural and educational aspect of the CSA is important to the farm. Although one aim of the scheme was to improve the farm's finances, another was to address social issues. The farmers believe in the need to reconnect with the rest of society and to educate the public about farming (some do not realise that cows need to have calves in order to produce milk).

There are newsletters and events on the farm about 3 times per year (either festivals or an open day). Most years there is a meeting of cow sharers too. Keeping people involved requires more effort than, for example, box schemes where members visit the farm each week. Holding events is one way in which to sustain people's connections with the farm. This is important because, while some cow sharers visit the farm to pick up their cheese regularly, others collect it infrequently, just before Christmas, for instance.

Festivals are usually celebrated annually, attended by about 50 people (more at Christmas). They draw on ancient Celtic, pagan and Christian traditions at St Bride's day, Christmas Eve and Harvest time. On St Bride's day, families join in with singing, weaving reeds, making blessings and walking the boundaries of the farm. There is a resident artist who helps with events such as a fire

sculpture. Everyone shares in traditional farmhouse food and children enjoy eating festive, wholesome dishes as part of the celebration.

On Christmas Eve, carols are sung in the cowshed and to the sheep in the fields, after which mulled wine and mince pies are available. This event is very popular and is held in the early evening so that children can join in. It is seen as a way to remind children of Jesus's birth and get away from the materialism of Christmas. Pam Rodway commented that CSAs and similar schemes allow people to see what the origins of celebration were; that they are both practical (based on food production) and spiritual. They also benefit the farmers, providing support and validation of their work and breaking the isolation of farming.

Participants also learn about the Ayrshire breed, lactation, calving and other farm issues. They give names to the cows and the herd currently includes Rhubarb, Custard and Crumble. There are work days where groups of people tackle jobs such as clearing ragwort, path building and fence repairs.

The farmer says "I came to farming from the outside and now I love to show people how food is produced".

More people would like to lend money to the scheme but places are limited and people are chosen who will participate in the life of the farm. They are a wide range of mostly local people who knew the farm or had heard of the initiative through word of mouth. The area is home to people with traditional values as well as people associated with an alternative community. Wester Lawrenceton is next door to another CSA (Earthshare), with whom they have a co-operative relationship and some people are members of both schemes.

Future

The Rodways are happy with the scheme and how it has worked and have no plans to change how it operates or its size. The farm is considering introducing other traditional breeds and expects to continue with the current CSA arrangements.