

## Summary

The Community Supported Agriculture scheme farms around 700 acres on two farms, 3 miles apart; they are Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch. For 20 years, 500 acres of this land has been farmed bio-dynamically and the remaining 200 acres, which have recently been rented, are undergoing conversion to bio-dynamic status. The farms have an annual turnover in excess of £1m.

A co-operative (Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms) owns the two farm businesses, with shares owned largely by the local community. There are nearly 600 shareholders, who have contributed over £200,000 in share capital. Approximately two-thirds of the farmland is rented from St Anthony's Trust (a charitable trust established, among other purposes, to support the education and training of biodynamic farmers). The remaining land is rented from a number of local landlords, including Michael Hall Steiner Waldorf School. The CSA aims to re-establish the connection between the process of food production and the people who consume the food, creating support for sustainable farming practices into the future.

## Tablehurst Farm

Tablehurst Farm runs an extremely successful farm shop, employing two butchers to cut and process the meat: lamb, pork, beef, chickens, and turkeys and geese at Christmas. A variety of on-site activities add value to the products. There is also a small care home on the farm, whose residents play a full part in the life of the farm. The farm employs 12 full time staff, comprising farmers, butchers, cooks, shop staff, house parents and assistants. In addition, there are at least two apprentices on the farm, plus voluntary helpers.

## Plaw Hatch Farm

Plaw Hatch Farm comprises a dairy herd and a vegetable enterprise, with all the produce being sold through its shop. This includes a full range of dairy produce. The farm employs 8 full time staff, comprising a farmer, gardener, farm and garden workers, shop and dairy managers and assistants. There are also apprentices.

Students undertaking the biodynamic agriculture training at Emerson College also do their practical work on the farms, while some also undertake their placements on the farms.

## History

Tablehurst Farm land and business were previously both owned and run by Emerson College Trust, a charitable trust. This Steiner teacher-training college used the farm for teaching biodynamic agriculture. The trust employed a farm manager and operated as a commercial enterprise. As profits from agriculture declined, the college found it increasingly difficult to farm it economically.

Plaw Hatch Farm was bequeathed to St. Anthony's Trust, a charitable trust, in around 1980, for the community. It was subsequently farmed commercially, with both land and business owned by St Anthony's Trust.

Although farming and land-owning are not legitimate objectives for a charity, both these trusts have education as an objective which works well here as a lot of farmer education takes place on the farms, but it does mean that the underlying objectives of the trusts are not aligned with all the objectives of the co-op.

By the mid 1990s, both farms were in trouble. Neither could pay their way commercially, and despite the fact that they were both owned by local charities with something of a community focus, community engagement with the farms was in practice very limited.

In 1994, Emerson College decided that it should dispose of Tablehurst Farm. As a charity, it was obliged by charity law to obtain the market price for the farm. It seemed likely that the farm would be lost to the bio-dynamic movement and sold for intensive agriculture. However, a group of individuals in the local community saw a possibility of saving Tablehurst for the community, and

even converting it into a community-owned farm. Over a short period, cash and pledges were raised to the sum of £150,000, enough to acquire the assets of the farm business and put it on a sound commercial footing.

## **Organisation**

Tablehurst Farm Ltd was set up as an Industrial Provident Society (IPS) in 1995. An IPS is a legal entity like a limited company, but with different rules of governance. For example, each shareholder has only one vote at general meetings, regardless of the number of shares held, thereby being a good way of dispersing ownership. This IPS is known informally as the co-op.

The structure was created as follows:

- Tablehurst Farm land still owned by Emerson College Trust.
- Tablehurst Farm Limited, a new limited company, created to operate the farm.
- The Co-op, an Industrial Provident Society, created as the sole owners of Tablehurst Farm Limited.
- About 100 individuals became initial shareholders in the Co-op, and hence the owners of the Tablehurst Farm business.

When the Co-op was set up, the objective of its founders was to acquire Plaw Hatch Farm as well. However, for a number of reasons, not least financial resources, the acquisition of Plaw Hatch Farm had to be put off. By the end of 2000, the timing seemed right for this move. The owner, St. Anthony's Trust, believed that the farm would be a more successful community enterprise under this new ownership, and was thus supportive. They were, however, subject to the same constraints of charity law as Emerson College, so had to sell the business at a market price.

In January 2001, a second fund-raising effort was made, and £65,000 was raised through the issue of co-op shares. This enabled the acquisition of the existing limited company business of Plaw Hatch and put it on a sounder commercial footing. The farm land remained under the ownership of St. Anthony's Trust.

The final objective in terms of ownership structure was to arrange for the land at both farms to be under the ownership of a single land-owning trust. This would provide better focus and longer-term stability for the community farm enterprise. Keeping land ownership in trust makes it less likely that the farms would be lost completely even if one or other of the businesses failed. Arrangements were therefore made for the land at Tablehurst Farm to be transferred from Emerson College Trust to St. Anthony's Trust. This happened in 2005, meaning that the final ownership structure has (probably!) been reached:

- One IPS, owning two farm businesses
- One charitable trust, owning the land and buildings at the two farms (noting here that Tablehurst Farm Ltd does rent other land that is not owned by St Anthony's Trust)

## **Membership**

Shares in the co-op cost £100 each, are not tradable and do not yield dividends or benefits of any kind. For instance, there is no arrangement for shareholders to receive farm produce either free of charge or at a discount. The only benefit of share ownership is the sense of participation in a valued community enterprise. In Forest Row, this has been sufficient to generate sustained interest in, and commitment to, the community farm initiative.

Membership is very mixed, although members are generally older. There are no plans to restrict membership size.

Shares entitle members to vote and thereby influence the co-operatives activities. Between 10 and 12 members are elected to the management committee. It meets quarterly to deal with issues such as fund raising and the production of newsletters. Although the co-op members own the farms, most are not directly involved in the management of the businesses. Each farm has a management team which includes co-op representation (some of whom are appointed to Non-

Executive Directorships of the businesses). The management teams are responsible to the co-op, and set the strategic direction of each of the farms. Day-to-day farming decisions are left to the farmers, with the wider co-op only becoming involved in important questions of principle which could be seen to affect the broader objectives. It helps a great deal that the farmers are very committed to the community farm ethos.

This ownership structure is designed to:

Protect the land in perpetuity for community farming

- Disperse ownership as widely as possible in the local community so that there is no possibility that a single unfriendly individual can secure control of the business, the charities and the co-op
- Sell the majority of produce locally
- Create a cohesive community of support and interest around the farm

## Finance

The establishment of the original co-op raised £150,000, which secured the future of Tablehurst Farm business, purchased the assets from the college and made improvements to the infrastructure. The farm received an environmental grant to reinstate a large pond, and an irrigation lake was paid for half by farm finances and half by a local resident. Further recent expansion (a new shop, small abattoir and large general purpose barn) has been funded through a Defra rural development grant and a substantial loan from Triodos Bank. The local community has also raised sufficient funds to convert a former vegetable store into a new farm house and additional accommodation for three apprentices. At Plaw Hatch, the original £65,000 of working capital secured the business for the co-op, with St Anthony's Trust investing additional capital in enlarging the shop, improving the dairy processing and relocating the farm entrance to improve visitor safety.

## Future plans

In order to further connections between food production and the consumer and increase support for sustainable farming practices, the farms' objectives are to:

- Establish a viable commercial business at both farms.
- Ensure farms remain in community ownership indefinitely in the future – long term farming rather than increased commercial gain beyond levels of sustaining the farms
- Farm to the highest standards of sustainable, organic agriculture
- Produce outstanding food
- Retail all produce locally, to benefit the local community and show that food can be local
- Train young farmers in their farming ethos
- Reconnect people with the land so that they understand the process of food production

In addition, the community is currently developing a new initiative, named Learning on the Land, which aims to convert a barn at Tablehurst into residential accommodation and classrooms so that school children can spend a week at the farm getting to understand more fully about farming and where their food is produced.

People sometimes ask "what do I get for my money?" It is a fair question and one with many answers. Here are three:

**The legal answer.** You become a shareholder in the Co-operative and hence legally joint owner of the two farm enterprises.

**The financial answer.** Basically, there are no financial benefits for shareholders. The shares are not tradeable and any profits will be reinvested in the farms, so there won't be any dividends. Buying a share is an investment but not (in the conventional sense) a financial one.

**The real answer.** Here I have to respond personally, though numerous conversations convince me that others feel similarly. I have been a shareholder in the Co-op for over ten years, and for a modest financial contribution, I have obtained both the enormous satisfaction of joining others in making our community farms possible, and the inestimable benefit of being part of a wonderful, purposeful local initiative which is striving to produce real food in the right way. Please do consider joining me (and the 500 others) if you can.

Chris Marshall