



Stroud Common Wealth Community Farm Land Trust Project

Case Study

Fordhall Farm

Market Drayton, Shropshire

Summary

Fordhall Farm shows how enterprising young farmers can engage with the community, mutualise the land and put it into trusteeship using the Industrial and Provident Society structure, raise the purchase capital from members and balance community access rights with farming needs. Ben and Charlotte Hollins were given a Schumacher Award in October 2006

Fordhall is a 128-acre organic farm bordering Market Drayton, Shropshire. The Hollins family has farmed it as tenants for three generations. Charlotte and Ben Hollins launched The Fordhall Project in 2004 to save the farm. Fordhall Community Land Initiative (FCLI) was formed in February 2005 by a large group of supporters to buy the farm, secure it for community access and to keep the Hollins farming. The landowner agreed to sell the farm for £800,000 to FCLI by July 1st 2006.

FCLI was incorporated as an Industrial and Provident Society (IPS) for the benefit of the community, and the Farm Appeal was launched on September 28th 2005. The purchase money was raised by July 2006, with extensive national and local media coverage. Over 7500 people bought £50 shares, raising £600,000, with £100,000 interest free loans and a £100,000 loan from Triodos Bank

FCLI, having secured the farm, is leasing it to the Hollins, as Fordhall Farm Ltd. FCLI will continue to ensure permanently affordable access for farmers both for now and the future. It will develop viable educational, heritage, environmental, nature trail and social activities with the community for social, economic and cultural benefits.

History

Arthur Hollins (1915- 2005) started as a tenant farmer at Fordhall in 1929 when his father died. Famous as an organic farming pioneer, he pioneered a year round free range outdoor grazing or foggage system, so that cattle can graze year round on resilient pastures for high quality meat on low input methods. Latterly, the farm became run down, and the farm tenancy was lost. However, his children Charlotte and Ben wanted to continue farming saw the potential for saving the farm through The Fordhall Project, which they started in 2004.

On February 3rd 2005, 26 people, including a wide variety of stakeholders, agreed that the most desirable future for Fordhall Farm was for a community farm buyout, in partnership with the Shropshire Wildlife Trust for Nature Conservation and other bodies. This would then lease the land to Fordhall Farm Ltd (the company Charlotte and Ben have created to run the business under) and other bodies using the land. The aim was to save Fordhall Farm, so that the 128 acres of species rich farmland could be developed for heritage, for example the old iron age fort, for access via footpaths, for wildlife via the extensive water meadows of the River Tern, for farming, education, social events and for land based businesses.

Sophie Hopkins joined the project as the project manager, a post, which was later, funded by Leader Plus. An interim management board for FCLI was formed, an office set up, and the appeal launched at Market Drayton Arts Centre with over 100 people on 28th September-with national press and TV coverage.

Public engagement was built through social events- one fair attracted 2000 visitors. There were guided tours of the Nature Trail, the Farm Shop, and volunteer weekends to improve fences and the land. Press coverage was excellent, with the Saving Fordhall website giving comprehensive coverage, a Share Prospectus, Story of the Farm and a continual blog update of news-as well as regular emails, and Newsletters available on line and by post.

The press skills of FCLI and a supportive national press were vital to success. Daily Telegraph readers reckoned they raised over £300,000 and The Guardian over £100,000 in shares. Having raised £800,000 for the community buy out by 1st July 2006, FCLI now faces the challenge of achieving viability, through the farm lease income, through shares, and a set of viable projects such as a bunkhouse, tea room and grant aided educational, health and environmental projects.

Structure

The farmers, i.e. Charlotte and Ben Hollins as Fordhall Farm Ltd, lease the farm from FCLI for £8,000 p.a. The lease is a Farm Tenancy, and community rights of access are governed by a secondary agreement. (See website)

FCLI is incorporated as a Society for the Benefit of the Community (IPS), and owns the land. There are over 7500 individual members who join by buying a £50 share. Shares do not increase in value, i.e. are par value, and do not yield financial dividends. One member has one vote, no matter how many shares they own. Shares can be sold back to FCLI. Shareholder /members get free membership of Friends of Fordhall for a year, and thereafter an annual subscription entitles the Friend to a regular newsletter, information about events, and volunteer opportunities Members can also make loans of up to £20,000, with institutional members able to loan larger amounts.

The FCLI Board is elected from members at the AGM, and has an institutional Board member from Shropshire Wildlife Trust, The Taste of the Town and the Stafford Soil Association Group. FCLI objects are:

1. To advance education and provide facilities for recreation and other leisure time occupation in the interests of social welfare for the inhabitants of Market Drayton and the wider community, in organic farming methods, conservation, biodiversity, health, access, country life, heritage, wildlife and related subjects with the object of improving the conditions of life for the said inhabitants.

2. To ensure farmland is managed sustainably for community benefit with the appropriate management for access, and to research sustainable farming through community land trusteeship, public involvement and other methods.

These objects were carefully developed with the FCLI Board, and with the second object including 'community land trusteeship' and with no member financial gain, HM Customs and Excise/Inland Revenue gave FCLI gift aidable status. So any gift to FCLI is tax deductible and gift aidable, thus making it a charity at law, exempt from the Charity Commission, but registered with the FSA.

Finance and Technical Assistance

FCLI gets facilitation, coaching technical assistance, fund raising and legal incorporation support from Greg Pilley and Marin Large of the CFLT Action Research Project. Helen Barber of Cooperatives UK drew up the IPS Rules, funded by CFLTARP. Fordhall Farm Ltd is exploring finance for implementing its Farm Business Plan, such as identifying sources of grant finance available for farm business development and for capital investment. Educational, environmental, health, social and cultural projects under the Fordhall IPS umbrella, will securing charitable and grant funding now the land is secured. FCLI will draw up a business plan.

Benefits

The benefits offered by FCLI include access via the Nature Trail to the Norman Motte and Bailey site, to the farm and to the beautiful water meadows of the River Tern. It is valued as a bio diverse farm with rich herbage and wildlife in the middle of 'a monocultural farm desert'. *The Taste of the Town* (a Market Drayton organisation that promotes local food) values Fordhall as a local food producer, an outlet and a friendly, well located venue for food and social events. Local people like the benefit of Fordhall Farm continuing to be accessible to young farmers, and to the community.

Future benefits that FCLI intends to offer are wide-ranging such as:

1. Promoting healthy living and eating through education
2. Offering work experience to a variety of volunteers, school students and students, those with special learning needs and those undergoing rehabilitation as is individually appropriate
3. Enhancing the landscape through environmental improvements
4. Preserving biodiversity and wildlife
5. Acting as a 'green lung' for Market Drayton
6. Workspace for land based social enterprises and businesses-job creation
7. Social and cultural space for meetings, events, courses etc
8. Reconnecting farming with local people through access and inclusion-
9. Permissive trails and paths for education and recreation
10. Successful model of permanently affordable access to farmland for farmers and communities that others can learn from
11. Community capacity building and greater social cohesion
12. A valuable and enjoyable resource for all

Lessons Learned

1. Early on in the project planning process, it is vital to identify the different needs, interests and objectives of the different bodies concerned to guide the choice of structure and land use agreements. (See FCLI Rules, Farm Business Tenancy Agreement, Land Use Agreement)
2. Even though Fordhall was a tenant farmer led process, there needs to be clarity about the differences between community interest and the farmers' interest, so that the farm land can be held in trust for perpetuity and funds secured for the buy out (See Fordhall Organisational Structure: A Discussion Paper, April 2005) There is otherwise the danger that a community asset may become privatised. Clear legal and lease agreements are needed to underpin relationships both for now and the future
3. The IPS for Community Benefit structure was excellent at capturing individual engagement because it offered a variety of ways of formally being involved, from shareholding, making loans, and carrying out tasks such as serving on the Board and working groups such as fundraising, working weekends, office and social events. This structure offers a real sense of mutual, cooperative ownership and democratic governance.
4. The careful design and facilitation of community building events is vital, from the original February 2005 stakeholder conference to the launch. Even though each event has task outcomes, it is vital that they build involvement and community, so people are appreciated, included, engaged and can say 'this is our farm'.
5. Excellent media coverage was vital for building the image and appeal of Fordhall- and then attracting people to buy shares. The countdown to 1st July built momentum and suspense, which the media liked. However, also significant were the excellent web site and press skills of FCLI, the fact that it was a good story, consistently positive thinking, plus early celebrate endorsement (e.g. Prunella Scales of CPRE, Sting, Patrick Holden of the Soil Association etc)
6. An overarching narrative was created, 'the Fordhall story', that people from all over the world could enter. This story drew people in imaginatively, through the themes of organic family farming, preserving the English countryside, Arthur Hollins as a pioneer, and the young Hollins farmers as part of the future of sustainable, mixed farming and rural communities. The value of reconnecting the community with farming and practical green issues was important. (See The Story of Fordhall)
7. Building relationships through good communication as a key. 'Meeting new people and answering their questions is important-you never know where things will lead.' Openness, a personal approach, accessibility, positivity, determination, humour, enthusiasm, belief that FCLI would succeed, going round giving talks to a wide variety of groups, all helped.
8. One significant learning point is that many people found the concept of community farmland trusteeship difficult to grasp. They didn't understand that when they bought a share they would be co-owners, being new to the co-operative, mutual approach. Many supported the Fordhall community buyout to, 'save the land from developers', 'keep family farming going', 'preserve the countryside', rather than the abstract notion of 'land trusteeship.' So the learning is that land trusteeship is a mutual, value based vehicle, but not an end in itself.
9. The Fordhall Farm buyout would have been very hard without the internet- which was a superb information vehicle coupled with press coverage. Over two thirds of FCLI members have email, which means huge cost savings on paper, administration and mail outs,

10. Leadership, vision and values: there was very clear leadership and vision from the youthful pioneer team, which was then developed and shared with widening circles of FCLI members and the Board. The next key challenge is to channel this pioneer energy into developing a viable, well led and managed FCLI to serve its members and the community.
11. Making good use of available resources and skills offered: 'When you start with nothing, you see the importance of making use of every bit of help and available resource'. FCLI was good at taking advice appropriately, and acting on relevant advice-though often this had to be weighed up, given that 'many people give advice on what they know, not what you need. Good listening, appreciation help. You never know, it could be useful in the future.'
12. Early on, CFLT Action Research input into examples of successful CFLT farms elsewhere, group process design and facilitation, technical assistance were crucial to building FCLI confidence to get started-hence the need for a DIY CFLT Action Pack
13. There were no grants available from DEFRA or the statutory sector for community land buyouts, unlike Scotland, even though statutory bodies eventually wanted to help. There was only one small grant for land purchase from one charitable Trust.

Future Developments

Now the farm is secured, land use, management and business plans will be finalised with the lease with Fordhall Farm Ltd agreed by the end of September 2006. FCLI is developing a business plan of viable activities that will secure its future as a community farm land trust. Plans are being made for a bunkhouse for volunteers, educational, wildlife, and environmental activities.

Further Information

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Reference: Hollins, Arthur, *The Farmer, The Plough and The Devil*, Fordhall Farm, 1993

Useful Documents Available from Fordhall website

1. Fordhall Community Land Initiative Memorandum and Articles of Association
2. Fordhall Community Land Initiative A4Leaflet and Membership Application Form: Reconnecting people with Farming
3. FCLI Prospectus (8 page colour overview of FCLI with photos)
4. Press articles
5. Agreements on land use and lease between FCLI and Fordhall Farm Ltd
6. Example of Share Form
7. The Story of Fordhall
8. Friends of Fordhall Newsletters
9. FCLI Loan Agreement for giving interest free loans
10. FCLI Business Plan