



# Stroud Common Wealth

## Community Farm Land Trust Project

### Case Study

## Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farm Ltd

Forest Row, East Sussex

#### Summary

This is a community supported agriculture (CSA) venture in Forest Row, East Sussex. It owns two farm businesses with 700 acres about three miles apart, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms, and shows how a community can come together to secure the future of local enterprise and farm land.

#### History

Tablehurst Farm is a 260-acre mixed biodynamic farm. Until the mid-1990s Emerson College Trust ran it as a commercial business where biodynamic techniques were taught. As farm profits declined, the College decided to sell the farm in 1994. As a charity, it was obliged by law to obtain the market price. It seemed likely that the farm would be lost to the biodynamic movement and sold for intensive agriculture.

However, in 1995 local people set up a co-op, raised £150,000 in the community in cash and pledges, and acquired the assets of the farm business. The land remained in the ownership of the Emerson College Trust.

The money raised to buy the farm business also funded improvements to the milking parlour and chicken houses. A large pond was reinstated with the help of an environmental grant, and a new irrigation lake was funded with farm surpluses and a donation from a local resident. Renovation of the farm shop cost £15,000, and new processing equipment a further £7,000. Some co-op members have donated their professional services to the farm.

In January 2001 the co-op bought the nearby 200-acre Plaw Hatch Farm business from St Anthony's Trust, a registered charity, with £62,000 raised in the local community. The farmland and buildings remained in the ownership of the Trust.

#### Ownership structure

The two farm businesses are owned by one co-op, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farm Ltd, which is registered as an Industrial and Provident Society with around 400 shareholders. Tablehurst Farm Ltd and Old Plaw Hatch Farm Ltd run the farms as separate businesses. Each employs farmers and gardeners to work the land.

Emerson College Trust transferred the ownership of Tablehurst Farm to St Anthony's Trust in December 2004. This structure is designed to:

- Protect the land in perpetuity for community farming.
- Disperse ownership as widely as possible in the local community.
- Prevent a single unfriendly individual taking control of the business, the charities and the co-op.
- Sell most produce locally.
- Create a cohesive community of support and interest around the farm.

Co-op members are not directly involved in running the business. While each farm has a management team that includes co-op members, day-to-day farming decisions are left to the farmers who are committed to the community farm ethos. Between 10 and 12 co-op members are elected to the management committee, which meets quarterly to deal with issues such as fund raising and the production of newsletters.

The annual general meeting apart, members come together to discuss important issues relating to the farms. Earlier this year, for example, a meeting revisited the underlying objectives of the Co-op to 'sense-check' that activities were still in tune with those objectives.

### **Finance and Activities**

The farms have a combined annual turnover of over about £1M. Tablehurst Farm is predominantly a meat and poultry business, with beef, pork, lamb, chicken and eggs the main products. Turkeys and geese are raised for seasonal sale. Meat animals travel about 30 miles to the nearest abattoir for slaughter and are returned to the farm for butchering by a full-time butcher, who also prepares a wide range of sausages and burgers to complement the cuts of meat.

Poultry is slaughtered and prepared on the farm where eggs are cleaned and graded before sale. Nearly all the meat and poultry is sold direct from the farm shop to local people, (with a full time butcher processing the meat.) Wheat from Tablehurst is milled on the farm and sold to a bakery in the village.

An orchard was planted in 2000 by a couple that work two and a half days a week on the farm in exchange for board and lodging and rental of land. When the trees fruit, the couple will pay 10 per cent of the gross income to the farm.

At Plaw Hatch, dairy products include raw milk, a hard and a soft cheese, cream, plain and fruit yoghurt and several yoghurt derivatives. Dairy products are sold direct to local people through the farm shop and the milk round. In addition, pasteurised milk is sold to local educational institutions and some dairy products are sold on to other local retail outlets. The vegetable garden, which includes open plots and polytunnels, produces a wide range of fresh vegetables for the farm shop. Laying hens have recently been introduced to the farm, adding eggs to the range of farm produce on sale at the shop.

Training is a key activity. Apprentices work at Tablehurst in return for board and lodgings, a weekly allowance of £25, and weekly lectures on biodynamic farming by guest speakers. The farm receives a local authority allowance for three adults with learning difficulties who live and work alongside the farm staff.

The farms' doors are open to the wider community. An annual harvest barn dance attracts more than 300 people, and regular open days, volunteer workdays, farm walks and school visits are organised. Study groups are held on biodynamic farming and related topics.

Shop customers are encouraged to visit the animals and look around the farms, and a regular newsletter is posted to about 500 people and distributed at the farms and in the local villages.

### **Benefits**

These include:

#### Sustainable community enterprise

Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch farms are a highly successful and sustainable CSA enterprise, where the proof of the pudding really can be seen in the eating. Unable to meet local demand for its produce, the co-op is renting a further 200 acres of land locally.

#### Mutuality and community focal point

Co-op Chairman Chris Marshall observes:

'Our Co-op has many characteristics of which its members can be justly proud. It has become a real community focal point. As a result, and through the various activities we organise, we are creating a local population who both habitually buy their food from local sources and have some real understanding of the realities of farming.'

#### Engagement with farming

'We believe this direct engagement with agriculture – lost almost completely over the last 50 years – is essential if a wider public are to be persuaded of the benefits of sustainable agriculture and local food.'

#### Access to land for the public

Whilst there are formal rights of way, there is public access to the farm, and events draw people into visit

#### Lessons

The key to the success is the 500 acres of land, held by St Anthony's Trust, (which are) locked in for the benefit of the community and made available rent-free to the co-op. Any surpluses made by the farms is ploughed back into the development of the farms.

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