

Chris Marshall, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op
Farm Community Interdependence

Jeremy Smith: I'm sitting here with Chris Marshall, who is a long-standing member of the Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farm Co-op. Chris has been an ordinary shareholder of the Co-op. He has been a member of the Co-op committee. He has chaired the Co-op committee. He's edited the Co-op newsletter. He's been a member of the Tablehurst Farm management team. And he is currently involved with the development of the Tablehurst strategy plan. So I think we can say without fear of contradiction that Chris knows the farms very well indeed. So welcome, Chris. Thank you very much for coming. How did you first come across the farms, and how did you start to become involved?

Chris Marshall: I moved to Forest Row with my family, two young children, in 1993. And when the first fundraising for Tablehurst was being initiated, we heard about it. I knew nothing about Tablehurst, nothing about any of the things it was associated with at all at the time. But we heard about it because it was in the general air in Forest Row.

But we just watched it from a distance with some interest, but didn't get involved at that point. And something like a year or 18 months later, I can't remember exactly, there was an open day on the farm. And there's been a few since, but it was one of the very early ones. Might even have been the first. And we just went along.

And there was something about that event that touched us all. My wife and I came away just talking about how it didn't feel quite like any other kind of country fair or any other similar event we'd been to, because it felt like it was just there as a gift to the community.

And I came away thinking, that's a special place. And this is 15-minutes'

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walk from my house. And so couple of months later, there was an AGM [Annual General Meeting] and I went along. So that's how I first got hooked into Tablehurst Farm.

Jeremy Smith: Were you a shareholder at that point?

Chris Marshall: No, no. We went, I mean, the AGMs were always... always have been open to the public, and we went along as just members of the public. I think it was following the AGM that I then became a shareholder. I think it was that way around. And also volunteered to join the Co-op committee.

Jeremy Smith: So how did you experience being a member of the Co-op committee in relation the work of the farmers?

Chris Marshall: It was a time I'd say when, in the early days I was on the Co-op committee, there was only the one farm. Because although there was an intention from the start that Plaw Hatch Farm would eventually be part of the cooperative, in the late 90s it wasn't. It was still owned by St Anthony's Trust, both land and business. And it was in fact later during my time as chair of the committee that Plaw Hatch became part of the Co-op. But in those early days, we were focused on the relationship between the community and the one farm.

Jeremy Smith: And what year did Plaw Hatch come into the Co-op?

Chris Marshall: 2001.

Jeremy Smith: 2001. So, you've really been involved with both farms

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quite intimately since 2001?

Chris Marshall: A fair while, yeah.

Jeremy Smith: So for you, what is it about the farms that makes you want to be involved?

Chris Marshall: Well, there's a lot of things, but if I bring it down to a single word, it's community. I think it's an embodiment of what I believe community should be. And for me, what that means — it means loads of things, but what it means above all — is interdependence. It's people depending on one another. Too many people in the modern world want to be independent of everybody, and able to run their lives in a little box. And Tablehurst allows you to both support other people and depend upon them. And that's a good thing.

Jeremy Smith: And how is it that Tablehurst has managed to do this and so many other places haven't?

Chris Marshall: Well, I think there's a lot of reasons for that. Probably prominent: first of all, it started with a community. Which — I wasn't part of it, so I can only speak from the outside — but my sense is it was really a community of Emerson College alumni and people connected with the college who had known the farm when it was part of the college. And when the farm looked like it might be sold by Emerson, they couldn't bear it. It couldn't just go into ordinary commercial farming, and they wanted to save it.

So when the fundraising was done and the farm was brought into

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community ownership, that was done by an existing community of people who already cared. So it was founded by a community. Not just by a farmer.

Peter [Brown] was already there, and absolutely instrumental and has been ever since in everything that has happened. But he didn't do it alone. There was a community supporting him from before day one, if you like. And I think that was crucial. And then the second aspect of it, which also relates to Peter, is that he and those working with him in the very early days really believed that community mattered.

And it's not been a farm where we can be propped up by a bit of help from the community. The idea of building a community has been part of Peter's vision and the vision of many others who worked with and on the farm for two decades. And so it's been right in the heart of the thing, it hasn't been bolted on the side as, you know, "That'd be a nice to have." It's been a farm and a community together, all the way from the beginning.

Jeremy Smith: Yes. Now we've got a slightly complex ownership situation for the farms, inasmuch as the land and the buildings that both farms operate on are owned by a local charity, St Anthony's Trust. The farm businesses themselves are owned by the Co-op, which is an industrial and provident society.

And the farm managers are responsible for running the farm, but they're answerable to both the trust and the Co-op. How have you experienced that ownership situation over the years, and what are the benefits and what if any are the disadvantages?

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Chris Marshall: I think the separation of business ownership from land ownership has some merits. Particularly in terms of land security, because businesses are always fragile. And the land is not at risk, should the business ever go under. And that's a good thing in itself.

I think it's important to recognize that the relationships are quite different. The farm managers are answerable to St Anthony's Trust merely as landlord. So that's a very different relationship, whereas they're answerable to the Co-op as shareholder.

So they're quite different relationships, and I suppose I've often had a sense that I'm in a bit of a minority in finding this ownership structure perfectly manageable and quite effective, and I don't have many problems with it. But it is a bit complicated, and a lot of people don't get it.

Jeremy Smith: Do you think it's a model that could be replicated elsewhere?

Chris Marshall: I think it can. Not necessarily identically, because there are new legal forms that have been invented since Tablehurst was formed, which might be more appropriate.

Jeremy Smith: Like a community benefit society?

Chris Marshall: Those sort of things. And I'm not sure of the legal details, but there are new forms of legal entity, which could serve in the place of an industrial and provident society, I think. But the split structure has some merits, because to have a land-holding trust that tries to hold land for a very, very long time and allows the possibility of a business coming and going makes some sense to me. And I think the separation isn't all bad.

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I think it's an important thing about Tablehurst to recognize that the land Tablehurst Farms is not by any means all owned by St Anthony's Trust. About half of it is. And the other half is owned by myriad other land owners in the area.

So it's actually very broken up, and not all quite as secure as we might hope. And that's not an ideal state of affairs. But Tablehurst has wanted to expand its operation beyond the capacity of the land that St Anthony's owned. And that's how it's done it.

Jeremy Smith: And, both Plaw Hatch and Tablehurst are farmed using biodynamic as the method, with a strong ethos that this is how it should be done. Do you think that it would be possible for somebody to start a community farm that didn't have that sort of idealistic approach?

Chris Marshall: I think it would. I think it would be a matter of being clear what you were trying to do. I think you can build a very strong community initiative around any good, strong idea. And biodynamic farming is such a good, strong idea. I suppose a degree of idealism helps. But I think what really helps is a common vision. And biodynamics does provide that. It means that the people working are all working towards a common idea. And that helps.

I don't think it's absolutely essential for community farming to farm by a particular method. You just have to have a set of ideas that are shared, strongly shared.

Jeremy Smith: Yes. And given your experience over all these years, what would you say were the main challenges facing the two farms today?

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Chris Marshall: Oh. The main challenges? The simplest answer, I suppose, is one that's sustained throughout the history, which is: capital. They both arrived in the Co-op severely undercapitalized, with rundown buildings and not enough money.

And they've both been struggling over the years to raise sufficient funds through business activity to invest in the site, invest in the buildings. And they're slowly but surely getting to a stronger place. But it's a very, very long, hard, uphill struggle to fund the capital needs of the farm activities.

Jeremy Smith: Yes, because they... the profit on sales is not sufficient to enable the farms to invest in very much new infrastructure.

Chris Marshall: No. Exactly.

Jeremy Smith: So how should the farms seek to capitalize themselves?

Chris Marshall: I have mixed views about this. I think the current method is working, albeit slowly. They are better invested, better capitalized than they were, so they're moving in the right direction. It's not that they're stagnant. They are improving. Tablehurst I'd say is ahead of Plaw Hatch, just because it's been on the journey a bit longer. But they're improving rather than getting worse.

And there's always been an element of gift money in the mix, as well as the profit coming from the farms. And I think that might need to continue. But I don't have a clear model. I don't think that there's an instant, obvious route to more funds. And borrowing the money, whether it's borrowed from commercial sources or more friendly sources, still creates debt, and

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then that has to be serviced. And so it's... it's difficult. And I don't have any very obvious answers to offer, I don't think, on that one.

Jeremy Smith: Do you think that for a community farm like Tablehurst or like Plaw Hatch, there should be a limit to the growth of the farm because we know that the growth in demand is continuing, and it's increasing, and turnover is going up year after year. But there's a limit to the amount of produce that the land can manage. There's a limit to the number of animals that can be produced. What sort of balance should we be aiming for?

Chris Marshall: Well, I think there's two dimensions to this question. The first — and I can only give kind of generic answers, because I'm not a farmer — but the first limit is that it's essential that the land is farmed sustainably, and not pressed too hard, and not exhausted. So that means that the farmers have got to clearly make a judgment as to how much yield they can healthily get out of any particular piece of land. And that applies, whatever land they have. So then you come to the second part of the question, which is should you try to acquire more land and expand and expand?

And I feel there that it's a matter of judgment about what size of farm still has the feeling of being one community. And if I look at Tablehurst, which is currently running at I think about 500 acres and is scattered all over Forest Row, now a little bit down in Groombridge, but mostly scattered over Forest Row, and is employing I suppose about 20 people most of the time and sometimes a few more. That's already quite a big and complicated operation.

My instinct is: not loads bigger, for this type of community farm. Because

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then you start to lose that feeling of connection with individuals if it gets to be too many people. But that doesn't mean no more growth, it just means not twice as big or four times as big.

Jeremy Smith: Yes. Yes. You've used the word 'community' several times in our conversation. What do you understand by the word in the context of the farms, and does it have the same meaning today as it did when you first became involved?

Chris Marshall: I think before I answer the question about what it means to me, I think I'd say that I don't think it means the same thing to everybody who uses it in regard to the farms. I think different people have different relationships, and that actually that's fine.

I don't know that it's changed dramatically over the years, except that the people who engage with the farm have become much larger in number, and therefore their types of engagement are probably more diverse. For me, it's — I come back to the word I used right at the beginning about interdependence — it's about the farm getting some benefit from my participation in it. And me getting some benefit from being engaged with it. And the benefit I get, and I feel very strongly about this, that it isn't a financial benefit. I don't put some effort in and get a promise of some vegetables.

It's not a transaction. I give what I give, and what I get back is that the farm is still there. And that enhances my life, in the way I think it enhances the lives of many, many people in and around this area. And that's all I want. And that's a fair thing.

Jeremy Smith: Chris, I think that's been a wonderful point at which to

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end this conversation. Thank you very much.

Chris Marshall: It's a pleasure.

Jeremy Smith: It's been fascinating, and very informative. Thank you.