

Jeremy Smith: My name is Jeremy Smith. I am a member of the Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms Co-op. And I'm very pleased to be able to be talking with Peter Brown, who is the original farmer at Tablehurst Community Farm in Forest Row, East Sussex, in the United Kingdom. Welcome, Peter.

Peter Brown: Hiya.

Jeremy Smith: And Peter, today I'd like to start by asking you, when you first became involved with the project to get involved with Tablehurst Farm, what for you were the main motivations?

Peter Brown: Well, I came with a very strong desire to not just farm, but to be involved with a community farm. And what I mean by that is that, well, conventionally one has the farmer, what can be a farmer owns his own farm or he's a tenant farmer. And that is the norm.

And he basically has a lot of say over how he farms. And he can farm badly or he can farm well. But I very much like to take the view that all of us here are basically stewards of the land. And that's not just the farmers, but actually it's the whole population in any country, as far as I'm concerned. Because, well, the question is: What are our rights? Have we a right to fresh air? Have we a right to land or at least a right to food? You know, what as human beings do we have as a right? And that is a question for society. And we put our government in place to decide that. But for very many of us, they don't always go along the way we would want them to go.

So, basically I feel it's not just the farmers alone that are responsible for any piece of land, but it should be a bigger responsibility, or he should be

chosen to farm on behalf of a group of people. And I had farmed for many years, not just as a farmer, but I farmed in South Africa for 15 years. I went out when I was 21. And there, it was within a community. And, so, there the community had a say. But in a way, we were still isolated from people around. And we were very much producing food for the community, as well as for others.

And, so, I was very keen to get involved in a farm where people around the farm in the local village and the local town could also be involved, in a way. And I'd seen something similar in Germany. So, it was very much this impulse to investigate that further. Because I feel it's actually really important.

Jeremy Smith: And what was the situation here in the mid-1990s when you first became involved?

Peter Brown: Ah, well, I mean, every farm has its specific situation. And actually, I'd been going around looking over the whole country of where would there be a situation where we could create community-supported agriculture or a community farm.

And there was a particular situation here at Tablehurst Farm and in Forest Row, where Emerson College owned this farm. And a lot of the students participated, in one degree or another, insofar it was the view of the college that anybody who's studying should — even if they're not studying agriculture — should be able to help harvest potatoes or get in touch with the land.

But the fact was that the farm had been making a loss on and off for many years. The college was not in a situation where they

could subsidize it. And, so they were looking to a solution, and for a new farm manager. The farm previous manager had been here for 25 years. And I was approached.

And, so, I basically said yes, I would be interested, but on condition that the college would be open to it becoming a community farm, which in effect meant that I had to prove that I had some money behind me to make the farm viable and that it was a big enough group of people that would be able to give the needed support.

I didn't come with money. I came with no money. I'd been living in a situation which didn't allow me to save. And, so, it was quite a challenge because we had to find money and we had to find people. And it basically progressed from there. I shared my ideas, and when I say "I," I came with my wife, who was also very committed to this whole idea. And we soon found people who became enthusiastic about the concept, for different reasons.

And it moved forward. We did, you know manage to raise basically £150,000. And we got a considerable group of people when we started the new business or... or cooperative, and it just has grown from there.

Jeremy Smith: Who were the main players at that time? Who was involved with the move to get the farm into community ownership?

Peter Brown: Well, first of all there was Emerson College and its staff. And they had to be behind the concept and behind in principle. And in actual, well, further, basically, they agreed that if we got this thing up and running that they would donate the farm, they were they were a charitable

trust, to another charity, who would then hold it on behalf of the community. So, that's the actual land.

And when I look back, it was amazing, but they actually committed to the livestock and the machinery that was there. The machinery, I have to say, was quite depleted at that time. But we could borrow a certain amount against that. And, so, if it didn't succeed, they were going to lose that anyway. And, so, I took a big step in faith, actually. So, that was the one side.

And then, there was various individuals who we approached who became very enthusiastic. Because there was going to be a consequence if this didn't happen. I mean, the college was even considering having to sell the farm. So it would have affected quite a few people and not... there wasn't a farm shop at that time, but the potential for the produce... produce, which had been grown biodynamically for 25 years. So, people could see that that would be a big loss.

Jeremy Smith: So, the fact that the farm had been farmed biodynamically for the past quarter of a century was quite a factor in enthrusing people to bring it into community ownership so that could continue?

Peter Brown: Yes. And I think the fact that it was a kind of crisis in that sense does spur people to get involved and to take action. And the thing is that if it was my farm, or I'd put in some money, how would one get...

I mean, would you give money if it was my farm? People don't want to do that, because they know that I could sell it or I could walk away. Whereas, if it is held by a group of people that feel responsible for a piece of land,

Peter Brown, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op
FULL EPISODE: 20 Years of Community Farming

they feel much more inclined to put the work in, put the effort in, to give freely, particularly if on top of that they can have a bit of a say in on the direction it goes, which is very much why we chose a cooperative. So that, you know, however many shares in the company one owned, everybody only had one say.

Jeremy Smith: Yeah. So, we have a fairly complicated ownership situation. We've got the land and the buildings owned by St Anthony's Trust, which is the local charity you mentioned. We have the farm business owned by the Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms Co-op. And then, we have Plaw Hatch Farm run by its own board of directors and management team. And we have Tablehurst Farm run by its own board of directors and management team. How does this work out in practice?

Peter Brown: Well, first one should say that we didn't go out with that specific plan. We had to look at the specific circumstances here. So, the initial plan was to have the land in a charitable trust. And the charitable trust are holding it on behalf of the community.

So, should the cooperative fail, the farm is still owned. They don't bring that down with it; another farmer could be found. But more importantly, I think we would have just gone... we wouldn't have had a board of directors and companies involved with the cooperative. But that came about because Plaw Hatch was there. And Plaw Hatch is three miles away. It's another biodynamic farm.

And they had been owned by St Anthony's for quite a long time already. But the business was also owned. And, of course, a group of charitable trustees don't have endless amounts of time where they can engage with

a farm and the community. So, the farmer at the time, which was Andrew Carnegie at Plaw Hatch, he was very keen to bring Plaw Hatch into this so that they could also benefit from community interaction with the farm, which he felt was important.

And because of that specific situation, we found the best way was that each farm had its own company, but the shares of both companies would all be owned by this cooperative. And if I was starting again, I might well do that differently. Because you have to imagine, we now have two large, complex, beautiful farms. And for members of the public to try and encompass in their consciousness both farms and the complexities of both is quite a big thing.

So, that's how it's evolved. And we didn't know it was going to be all so successful. But one might well find a different way. So, I think at the core of it, one has to look at what are the principles? Why community involvement? Why... you know, this was just one way we found. But there are different... different ways.

Jeremy Smith: Do you think it would be possible for a farm that's farmed using conventional agricultural techniques to engender the same kind of enthusiasm in its community?

Peter Brown: Wow. It's all possible. But you basically have to ask why would the community get involved in the first place? Why would the farmer want the community to get involved? And it might be that he's just looking at it from a financial point of view. But if that's the case, I don't think it's very likely to succeed.

Or it could be other reasons. And I think that it has to be on this base, that

you're wanting to get a relationship between a farmer/gardener and a community of people or customers, it can be, it doesn't have to be customers, where there's a relationship of trust but will both benefit. And so, I think many community farms, and I believe in America, you know, there's thousands of them. It's come about because you've got a group of people that want to have good food, which might mean not genetically modified. It might mean that they want organic or biodynamic. And so, they work together with a gardener or farmer to establish that. And their involvement helps the farmer to do that. But it's not that they are necessarily going to subsidize him in the sense that he can make more profit.

So, how it usually happens — and that's not the case on our farm, but the concept is beautiful — where you have a group of people want the produce, they pay for, say, a box being delivered a week up front, so that the farmer or gardener knows how many customers he has. And he has his money up front. But he can't suddenly put the price up. So, that is going to work irrespective of what the price of vegetables or the price of lamb is through the season.

So, he's never going to make a massive profit. But he's also going to know what he's made and have an income, even if there's a complete flop with his potatoes because of a drought or disease. He doesn't just carry that risk himself. He's carrying it with others. Because there just won't be potatoes and they'll have to buy elsewhere. And, of course, the customers are not going to come back next year if they're not happy with the produce and so on.

So, basically, what I'm saying is that I think it's much easier if it's clear to the customer that there's something specifically good about the produce

that they're wanting to put them into that relationship. And I suspect that being at least organic, or at least, say in America, non-GMO or whatever, would be what would stimulate that to come about.

Jeremy Smith: You mentioned earlier that if you were starting again, you wouldn't necessarily do it the same way as has been the case with Tablehurst. What would you advise a young farmer or group of farmers who are setting out today to establish a community farm?

Peter Brown: Gosh. Well, I mean, clearly you need a group of people and the locality that either want the produce or want to get involved. And you need the farmer who sees that it's going to be beneficial for that to happen. Now, that can either be out of ideological reasons, that he, the farmer, can understand that you know, that it's not just his responsibility how the land is farmed. That he's happy to have people,, not run the farm but get involved in one level or another and develop the farm. It might be because he hasn't got all the capabilities himself and he'd welcome some financial expertise, he'd welcome somebody saying, "Oh, wouldn't it be wonderful to put up a windmill to generate electricity?" And they're going to put the money in and help the whole farm develop."

And, so, it's really a group of people which includes the farmers and the growers and the customers who are saying, "Well, how can we best take this piece of land forward for the good of the whole community, for the good of all of us, not just for the profit of the farm or the profit for me personally?" But they have to be a little bit, not just looking out for themselves, but interested in benefiting everybody.

Jeremy Smith: So, it's a genuinely altruistic act on behalf of everyone.

Peter Brown: I think it is, to some degree or other. But, of course, you know, the customer might well want good food as part of that. So, that's what they get back, you know. It might be that they want to be able to bring the children onto a farm and experience the animals and experience a real working farm, not just onto a kind of petting farm. It might be, you know, a number of reasons where they will get a benefit indirectly.

Jeremy Smith: So, in your experience, what are the challenges that face farmers on a community-owned farm? And are they different from the solo farmer, as it were?

Peter Brown: Yeah. Well, many farmers have instinctive concern that they're going to be interfered with in how they farm. And, they're concerned about the freedom being taken away. And I think that's partly a question of how it's set up. But I've never experienced that. What I've experienced is a group of people that get involved, say we have a management group or whatever around the farm, where you can bounce off ideas, where you get enthusiasm, where you get help.

Which basically it's an enabling body which enables one to put into place things that one wouldn't have managed by oneself. And that's very fulfilling. But it does mean that you get interrupted in your work more, that there will be more involvement with people. You have to, within your heart and within your head, keep that balanced and not resent that. Otherwise it isn't going to work.

But that rarely happens in my experience, although that's not common, perhaps. But it's also out of fears, but I think it's creating that balance where you can have involvement of people, because, I mean, after all,

many farmers are basically lonely. I've never had that problem. And this may be a bit extreme. And, you know, you can have too much involvement where you can't get on with your work anymore. So, it's a matter of together as a group working out how one does that. I hope my answers aren't too long and convoluted.

Jeremy Smith: I think they're excellent. I was going to go on to ask you: We've mentioned the word "community" quite often. What do you understand by that word and the context of the farms? And does it have the same meaning today as it did when you first got involved?

Peter Brown: Okay. Well, there's different ways one can apply that name. So, what I'm talking about and what we were talking about is that you've got a mini community of a marriage, or of a group of people, of any different size. And, so, we're thinking in terms of a farm or a garden which is a group of people that feel responsible for that, on one level or another, and that farm should have an identity or an individuality or a vision or a mission. It should be clear to that group of people what they're supporting. That's really important. And so, I think in terms of those people that can say yes to that ideal that's been worked towards, that they are that community of people.

And it might have other communities within it and there's a bigger community. But not everybody gets involved. And they don't want to. And it wouldn't be right. But those who out of freedom come and in our case, they pay only £100 to become a member of the cooperative. And then, they've kind of said, "Yes, we support the concept and ideal." And, that is a lot of strength.

And if there's big decisions to be made about the farm, they have their say. Now, this has been going since '96, so it's nearly 20 years of the cooperative formed. And we've never actually had to go and say, "Look, we've made a massive loss. How are we going to cover it?" But theoretically, that would be their decision. Are they all going to fork out £100 each to cover that loss? Or are they going to say, "Well, no, you have to find another way"? Or, you know? The farmer is doing his best, and the group around. But there are those questions that could easily happen. And that is basically their responsibility.

Jeremy Smith: As Tablehurst becomes more and more successful, which seems to be the case, the turnover is going up every year, more and more people are wanting to enjoy Tablehurst produce, is there a limit to the growth that a farm should aspire to? And if so, what then happens?

Peter Brown: Yes, well, just to temper what you said about us being so successful, it's true we've got a massive turnover and we have, you know, over 20 people employed and so on and so on. But of course, we're not making massive profits. But that is because of other reasons. And that, you know, there's no farms, unless they've gone down an extremely industrial route, which are making big profits.

And, so, that comes into this whole picture of what a community farm is all about. I don't think any farm should just keep growing. I think the important thing on any farm is that the team that are farming it have to be able to cover it with their consciousness. Now, it might be like with Tablehurst, where you have some people who are more responsible for the cattle or for the sheep or for different enterprises within it. But it must still be that the group all together can have a basic overview of the whole

thing.

Otherwise, it loses its identity and one should rather split that off into smaller entities. And, so, there's definitely a limit. But every farm is individual there. Anywhere any farm you know, it depends on the climate. It depends on if there's a village nearby. It depends on a number of things. But no, definitely it shouldn't just keep growing. But I can't say it must stay at this size or that size because that would have to be decided by that particular group.

Jeremy Smith: Yes. I suppose another issue for the farm is how does it get access to capital? Because as you mentioned, we've got a large turnover. But the profit on sales is not sufficient to allow us to invest in lots of new infrastructure or new machinery. So, what sort of access to capital should community farms be seeking? Should it be loans from well-wishers on low interest? Or should there be some other way of raising these funds?

Peter Brown: Okay. Well, I think there's no one and only way. I think, again, each situation is different. But there is a basic problem with agriculture generally, which is that it's difficult to make it viable. Basically, that is tied into this issue that most agriculture is seen as an industry, and it tends towards industrialization of its farming, so, I think in terms of not conventional organic, but the industrialization of agriculture.

Which usually means trying to do things in a conventional... in a sense that lots of poisons and artificials and specialization is taking place. And the trouble is, when you use these chemicals, when you use artificial fertilizers, that it has consequences.

And it has consequences for the environment. It has consequences in the food quality. It has consequences on the thinking of the farmer, because he no longer sees his farm as a balanced whole, which is the aim of a biodynamic farm; but rather, he has to look at it, "Well, what crop or produce is going bring the most money?" You concentrate on that, and you use the chemicals and that to enable it to happen. And the one, you know, well, Patrick Holden with the Sustainable...

Jeremy Smith: Food Trust?

Peter Brown: ...Food Trust, of course, is very aware of that and has put a lot of focus onto what he calls true cost accounting where you have to factor in what they call externalities. And I think this is very important to take note of because if a farmer puts on his artificial fertilizers and his pesticides and herbicides for a crop of wheat or whatever, and the ground water is therefore polluted, and therefore the water company that is pumping out from the borehole has got these pollutants in it, they have to clean that at their cost, which they then pass onto the customer, so basically the community.

Now, if the farmer had to pay for that, because he's the one polluting it, that would put the... you know, his food would cost more. And that's what should really be happening. Because, in a sense, he's being subsidized. He doesn't have to cover that cost.

Many farms now, you know, he gets a subsidy to put in a beetle bank or something to help the birds, which is being paid by the taxpayer to try and create a balance within nature, which wouldn't be an issue if he wasn't farming in that way. So, if we were farming biodynamically, we do have some weeds in our crops. But we also have the bees. And we have a

massive diversity because the fertility has to come out of the farm. So, you've got a whole rotation of different crops. And then, wildlife flourishes.

So, you could say the taxpayer is paying for a subsidy to help the environment, which is, it's a subsidy for the farmer to enable him to use his chemicals. And one could go on. One could talk about the processed food. One could talk about the quality of the food that's grown in such a way.

Even then, he's struggling. But the organic farm has to prove that they're not using the chemicals. They have to pay for that. They have to have an inspection every year. So, the biodynamic organic food is more expensive, as it appears. But when you look in the bigger picture, it's not more expensive. So, I have to say that that is underlying all of this issue of where does a farmer get his capital from to develop his farm.

Okay. So, I've cleared that up and as to why, you know, we have to keep our prices as low as we can, which means that we're not making a big profit. There's different ways that one can develop the farm. And what we did at the beginning is we actually asked for gift money. Because it was just not at all clear if we were going to make the farm viable.

But thanks to that and thanks to the input of the community not just in money, but in helping develop a plan and helping us do it, we got to the point where we became viable. Now, we have put up buildings and that's happened here in two ways. One is, like the farmers' housing. We've actually had to put out an appeal for gift money because the farm business couldn't put up the buildings.

Things like developing the shop and other farm buildings, we have gone

another route. But that is because we have to pay our rent. And, so, we pay our rent to our landlords, to the Trust, who are happy to develop the farm, because the worth of their property goes up. And, so, they've taken out a loan from the bank to enable those farms to enable us to put up those buildings. So, we are effectively the business is still paying it, but via the rent.

The danger in loans is that you're putting a noose around your neck, and you have to pay it off. But sometimes there's no alternative, and particularly if it's not a bank that's doing that, but there's individuals in the community that are prepared to risk, and not ask for the highest interest rates, that can, of course, greatly help things develop.

But as a community and as a farm team, you have to be sure that you're not going let those people down and that you see that if all things go well that it might should be possible. So, it's a dilemma. It's a dilemma. There's no simple answer. And I don't know all the answers. I love this concept, which is so difficult to bring about.

But if you've got 100 people and they're all prepared to not pay £1,000 but prepared to, if it goes wrong, pay up that £1,000, then you've got a large amount of money that can be borrowed. The bottom line is a concept how I like how it should be done. So, you don't have to sell the farm at the end of the day if you can't pay back the loan. But you've got a whole circle of individuals that are prepared to take that risk with you.

Jeremy Smith: Technically you're a tenant farmer, a tenant of St Anthony's Trust...

Peter Brown: Well, the Cooperative is, yes.

Jeremy Smith: In a way, you're surrounded by a warmth body of the community that makes a total difference to how an ordinary tenant farmer has to operate.

Peter Brown: Yes, it does. One has to say that other than the appeals, you know, it's not like we're being subsidized all the time by that community. But, it helps in many ways because one feels that there's warmth. They feel an interest and a commitment to come and buy from you, which means that we can kind of rely on that. It benefits them and it benefits us.

Jeremy Smith: And we see the difference in the numbers of people employed on the farm. At Tablehurst, we've got perhaps 20 or 25 people employed. On a conventional farm of the same size, you'd have perhaps two or three.

Peter Brown: Well, our neighbor has one, and not even full time.

Jeremy Smith: Yeah. and they're getting on as well, aren't they? The average age of a farm worker in this country now is about 59 or 60, I think.

Peter Brown: Yeah.

Jeremy Smith: At Tablehurst, we've got a lot of young people keen to come and work and they're starting families as well. So, we've got children on the farm, which is also very rewarding.

Peter Brown: Yes, it is. And I feel very, very lucky because I'm stepping

back from the actual day-to-day farming. And there's a team in their 20s and 30s that are actually doing the farming. And that's going to... you know, when the children need to go to school and that, it's going bring its own challenges. But it's lovely to see, yes.

Jeremy Smith: Peter, we've talked a lot about what it is to be a community farm. But, when I meet young horticultural farming apprentices, I'm conscious that a very large problem looming in their minds is how do they get access to land? And another issue is for farmers who do own land but their children don't want to take over from them.

So, it seems we've got lots of young people who want to farm and who want to start market gardens or whatever. But how do they get into that? How do they find access to land? And then, we've got existing farmers who own land, but their families don't want to follow them. What are your thoughts on this? And what could we do to help this situation?

Peter Brown: Well, there are number of issues there. And it's quite complex, but very important. There definitely is more and more young people, just about feeling, as a right that they should have to be able to access some land.

In fact, this is a worldwide issue. And there's a movement which started in other parts of the world called the food sovereignty movement, where you really had, you know, the landowners and then you had employees, which are not employees as we know them but really being kept on extremely poor conditions and low wages and no possibilities to live a decent life.

But that is now spreading worldwide. And even in Britain, I just attended such a meeting where there was, I think, about 280 people. And

many, many of them young people, enthusiastic people, not just wanting organic farming, but realizing that this industrialization and just going for profit and just going for mass produce of poor quality is not the way forward. And they describe that we've got a broken food system in this country, or in most countries.

And, so, for them, it's a question. And for me, it's a question. And in a way, it's the question that you raised: How can we change our farming landscape that we have healthy food, fresh food accessible to people, not produce that's aimed to be processed? And then, we have all the issues that we have in the modern society of obesity and disease and cancer and so on and so on. And there's no magic bullet to that. But I think it's trying to imagine, is there a British countryside that we can imagine where that could be different?

And I strongly believe that is the case. And it's very interesting how the transition village or Transition Town movement spread across the country, which has gone a bit quieter right now because of the collapse in the world economy and the oil price having collapsed. But they were trying to look at what were we going to do when the oil price got so high that it would affect the transport and so on, which would've meant producing more food locally?

And I think this is the secret of how we have to view agriculture, that you have to imagine around each village and each town that we have farms producing as much of the produce for those villages and towns as possible, you know, particularly things like vegetables and fruit and so on. And that, in a certain sense, small is beautiful, and that we don't have to have just one or two abattoirs left in the country where animals are carted all across the country, bad for the animals, you

know, bad for everything. And then, it's all carted back again.

We have to have local abattoirs. We have to have local food processing. We have to have local farmers where people within the towns and villages can relate to them. And it doesn't have to be a community farm in the sense that we're talking about.

But, of course, that does seem to work. It does help people become aware of what's involved in growing the food. And it enables people to have a relationship to nature and to animals and to plants. So, I think that a food policy has to be created which encourage those things, which are going to create such a landscape.

You can then have, you know, your arable and there are, of course, lots of farms as I said before. Each farm is different. And if you're up in the north of Scotland on some moor land, you're not going to be growing arable crops and producing vegetables. But it shouldn't be that all the vegetables are produced in the east of England and carted over the rest of the country.

And I think that easily things could be put in place to help support that. The main thing which stops that is this globalization of food. A very interesting thing, for instance, is that in this country sows were banned from being kept in a sow crate. Now, a sow crate is a metal crate which the animal is kept in for most of its life. It could stand up and lie down, but it couldn't turn around. And it spent a large part of its life in there.

Now, they've been banned in this country. The pig farmers complained that they couldn't compete with other countries that still allowed it.

Because if they put them in a straw yard or had them outside, it cost more. I'm sure the politicians only put that through because of the pressure of our society, saying that, you know, it's not right for the animal to be kept in a crate. But as soon as you try and change that, it's not a level playing field as far as the farmer's concerned, because he can't compete.

And, so, as soon as you try and say, "Okay, well, we want to actually tax the farmer who's going to pollute the groundwater and the land," he can't compete suddenly on the international market. And I don't know the answer to that, except that I know it's wrong. And, so, society has to decide as a society what they want. You can't expect the farmer to change. Because it's not fair.

I totally understand the conventional farmer who uses his chemicals and who has done all those things. I would never keep pigs in a crate, but I understand how it's evolved to that. Because he's trying to survive, as far as he's concerned. And it's up to society, and our government is what's been put in place to help create the laws, to decide that. And, so, in a way, it needs education of the greater public.

It needs attention drawn to that, and I don't know the answers to how you do that. But all I know, that there is a growing movement just like there's a growing movement who feel that it's wrong to pollute the countryside by fracking, they're beginning to realize that industrialized agriculture is not the way forward. But how you change it to the degree... because obviously we're talking about government and big companies here. And they've got a lot of money behind them, a lot of lobbying power.

And just as they are still pushing the fracking, despite people being

unhappy, it's not going to be an easy thing. But actually, at the end of the day, it's society, not the farmers. And, so, it needs groups of people. And that's why, in a way, I think a community farm like ours is a kind of little guidance or a little... I don't know, not guidance. That sounds wrong. But...

Jeremy Smith: It's an example...

Peter Brown: An example of how something could happen. And so, but we've got to get more and more people to envision how our landscape, our different way of producing our food could really work. And I have no doubt myself that we can feed the country, we can feed the world using biodynamic and organic agriculture.

And I know that's another whole theme. But that's the main thing that's put against it. If you look at the world as a whole, there's still 70% of the people are being fed from small farms at this point. And with the developments within biodynamics, within organics, within our society of understanding about the soil and the place of, you know, of microflora and everything, be it, you know, digestion or in the soil. And all the technology that we have, which we can use in the right way to help us develop sound agriculture, is completely possible to feed the world.

Jeremy Smith: One of the things I've noticed on both Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch farms is that when we get customers and visitors, they tend to have smiles on their faces. They like coming to the farms.

Peter Brown: Yeah, they do. And they pick up something, don't they? And it's difficult to put one's finger on it, perhaps. But I mean, it is about animal welfare. It is about having a healthy attitude. They can pick up

that something different is happening here. And... but not just here.

And I also want to say that there's lots we're not doing right yet. And there's so much we can improve. And that's what makes it really exciting. That's what gets me excited. How can we keep our pigs out all year without destroying the soil and having healthy, happy pigs? How can we keep developing things that... there's so much potential there.

Jeremy Smith: And I guess there's also an educational aspect to a community farm, isn't there? Because as you mentioned earlier, the farm is clearly doing something different from the mainstream. And people come onto the farm and they sense that. But should we have a more explicitly educational role in terms of showing people why it's different?

Peter Brown: Yes. But, again, you know, you asked earlier on about what are the difficulties for a farmer. Now, I think that, well, Manfred Klett, this farmer from Germany, always used to talk about, how the farms should be the universities of the future. And I think that's what he meant. I think there's so much inherent in how we farm, and be it maths or be it ecology or whatever, that people can learn. It's definitely where it should happen.

But the farmer himself can't do it all, and can't pay for it all, can't afford the time. He's also got the farming to do. So, one would have to have a group of people or there would have to be some money forthcoming from somewhere to enable that to happen. I mean, we're already, you know, the Biodynamic Association has a two-year apprenticeship for young farmers to learn biodynamics.

And so that can be done. And there, there's an arrangement between the apprentice and the farmer. But you're talking about the society or the public being educated. And one could do so much there, and farm walks, and not just farm walks but a tractor ride, you'll have them queuing up as soon as you have them being able to ride on the trailer behind the tractor. And one can do it in really imaginative ways. And it could be really exciting. And it definitely has to be done.

Jeremy Smith: But, as you say, the farmers have to get on with the farming and the growing. And, so, that implies there have to be, for example, the Co-op shareholders and members who come in to help with these things once they've been trained.

Peter Brown: Yes. Again, I don't think there's any set way, because everybody's life, more and more people are in a kind of rat race. And they all have full lives. So, it's not just the farmers. But, it can be others. And there is this story that if you want something done, ask somebody who's busy, you know.

So, of course, the Co-op members could volunteer their help and support, and enable that to happen. Or they could help organize some money to help it happen. I don't know how to do it. But it, again, it can't just be the farmer's responsibility. You're absolutely right. It has to be other people involved in that.

Jeremy Smith: You mentioned the role of government earlier. And the suggestion was that government won't do anything until the people actually push for it. How far off do you think we are from a change in government agricultural recommendations towards a more holistic form of agriculture?

Peter Brown: If I'm realistic, I think we're a long way off. But I think there's a lot of hope out there, you know. What gives me a lot of hope is that I can see more and more interest, from young people specifically, but also generally.

I think more and more parents of young children, they don't care what they eat themselves, but they are concerned that their children get the best. And as more and more crises happen across the world with our food, with pollution, with the effect of the way that we're doing things, it's going to come more and more in the forefront. And that will wake people up. And unfortunately, I think they need waking up, because it's easier to just shut it out and not worry.

I would say we're a long way off. But, you know, when I started here 20 years ago, you know, five, ten years down the road we're talking about local food, we're talking about food miles. I would never have believed that people would've cottoned on in this country that it's good to have local food. Now they don't necessarily think it has to be organic or anything, it just has to be local. But that took me by surprise. And it's really sunk in for society,

And now, we as biodynamic or organic farmers are not seen as completely mad anymore, which 20 years ago we were. And, so there's a lot changed. And, we've got a billion obese people in the world, apparently, now. And we have a billion people starving. People are talking about 30%, 40% food waste. So, this is not an agricultural problem. This is a problem of society.

We've got to sort out how those who need it get it. Because there's lots of people with extra food and a lot of people don't have it. And what sort of

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society do we want? And how does society solve the problem? I think agriculturally, there are ways. Biodynamics is the one that comes to the fore. But for other parts of the world like large parts of Africa and Russia and so on where you... you have a climate which is quite warm and you're getting this desertification,

Allan Savory has come up with this sort of way where one can concentrate the animals and it's not about... it's about changing the landscape. And I can be very excited about... I mean, some people call it mob grazing and so on. But if you combine these different things together, we can feed the world. And there's ways of doing that, which benefit the environment. But we as people, as individuals, as society have to make a step to make that happen.

Jeremy Smith: Peter, you're the director of the Biodynamic Association in the United Kingdom. And as such, you clearly spend a great deal of time talking to farmers and growers throughout the country. What is your perspective and the perspective of those farmers and growers on their relationship with supermarkets?

Peter Brown: This brings up an interesting issue. Because supermarkets have a bad image. And as far as I'm concerned, it's generally completely justified in that they try and get the produce for the lowest possible price from the farmers, or from whoever's supplying them. And although there's rhetoric that they want a long-term relationship, they don't actually seem to be interested in that, in other words giving a fair deal to the farmer that they stay in a long-term relationship.

But what it comes down to is actually this question of the public and of society, the bigger society, and how they actually have the power in their

hands, but they're not aware of it. For instance, we have fair trade chocolate or coffee or whatever, which is trying to deal with the issue that not just the companies that bring it over and process it get all the money, but the producer, the farmer, at the other end is getting a fair proportion of that. And, so, many people are prepared to pay more for the fair-trade coffee knowing that that is the case.

But, of course, we don't have fair trade milk in this country for our dairy farmers, the supermarkets could change the milk price very, very quickly if they wanted to give the farmer a decent price. Because at the moment, the milk price is so ridiculously cheap that the farmer can't make any money on it, is losing money.

There's farmers going under, which basically society is doing is creating more and more bigger industrialized units. Because by not treating the animal in the best way, by using industrialized methods, they are managing to get the price low enough that they can survive. And all the farmers that are doing it right are having to give up.

Jeremy Smith: What's the effect on animal welfare of this industrialization?

Peter Brown: Well, the fact is, is that they might be kept inside all their life. So, they're dry. It might be that, you know, they are on straw, but usually they're not, they're on slats in the manure. It means they're not getting access to the fields, usually. The food is brought in from greater distances, which means that you've got a pollution problem because the manure has to be taken or dealt with. But that's the sort of technical side.

What I want to focus on, really, is that each of us has our weekly wage, our money that we spend on our food. And, so, we have the power in our hands. And if you had a supermarket that had good quality produce on the shelf, which was quite expensive because the producer was getting his fair share of the money, and you had your horse meat burger next to it, which is sort of industrialized and the food comes from all over the world to make it as cheap as possible, and it's a dirt cheap price.

And the customer had a label on there saying that the people that produced this are being exploited, be they in South America or whatever, I think you'd find that most of us would be prepared to pay a fair price for the food, just like I believe that most people would be prepared to pay a fair price for a pint of milk if they knew that the farmer was getting it and not the supermarket.

So we have this power. And, so, how can we channel that in the right way? And the customers that come to Tablehurst Farm, for instance, or other farms like it know that they are at least supporting that farm, and they know that that farm is selling its own produce, or if it isn't then it's a very, very clear label where it's coming from so everything is transparent.

And that's what we want. We want transparency through the system. The question is how do we bring that about? Because that would wake people up. And again, it comes back to this question that I think if people were aware of these issues... it must be made easy for them, though. So, I think we need some entrepreneurs that are going to start off a supermarket not just a supermarket with all the good food, but with both.

That people can walk through and actually they realize that they have a

choice. And then, they become much more powerful. It's the same issues, be it, you know, with fracking for instance, or energy, or how can we give people the choice? Because then, people can really put their money where they mouth is in what they do.

Jeremy Smith: The idea you had of different types of food next to one another in the supermarket, that implies some sort of legislation over labeling, doesn't it?

Peter Brown: Yes. But there is issue in now, particularly in the supermarkets, where they fought for this because they say they have no choice. But nearly all our egg production, our poultry, a large part of our pork, and nearly all the milk from dairies is all dependent on buying in soya protein from South America and other parts of the world.

It's all GM food. And the farmers are buying this GM food and they're feeding it to their animals. And you're drinking the milk and eating the meat and eating the eggs from that. And it doesn't have to be labeled. So, you have to label if something's got a GM ingredient in it, but not if the animal is fed that. I feel that's not right. And I think that's sort of not transparent. And it means that things are going the wrong way.

The only way you can be sure at this moment is if you go for organic. You know there's no GM food in there, but that might be too expensive. It shouldn't have to be that they have to go organic for that. It's very complicated, and yet it's simple. I don't know if you know what I mean.

So, I don't know about the labeling. Yeah, I suppose it does have to happen. Or somebody can be doing it voluntarily. You are still allowed to label that this has no GM in it. And so, the supermarkets could change

that very quickly if they wanted to. Let's put it that way.

Jeremy Smith: I talked quite a lot to people who are coming to shop at the farms. And it's very clear that more and more people are really concerned about these sorts of issues. And they want to know where their food comes from. And what they like about Tablehurst or Plaw Hatch is that they know exactly where the food comes from because they can go and see it growing and they can go and see the animals and they know the people who've grown it. And...

Peter Brown: Well, it's trust.

Jeremy Smith: It's trust. And having that relationship with the people who grow your food is a very life-affirming kind of experience. So, perhaps there is hope that this model can spread more widely. What do you think are the chances of that in coming years?

Peter Brown: Well, all I can see is that I am happy and surprised at the level it's spreading already. Because when we started 20 years ago, you know, we were one of the first in the country. And then, I know the Soil Association was getting inquiries.

And because of the inquiries, they put a little team together. And they put a leaflet together. And we were one of the farms that they visited to inform people that were interested and farmers who were interested. And it has, it's really it's really spread a lot. I don't know how many there are in the country now 30, 40, 50. I don't know. It's spreading all the time. So, I didn't think that.. I thought we were too special a situation. But it is happening. And of course, we want it to happen in thousands, not just in the tens. But I think that will come.

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Jeremy Smith: Could you say anything about the role of associative working in encouraging new farm and garden enterprises to link up with more established community farms?

Peter Brown: Well, it's rather astonishing. Because, a lot of farms get worried about the concept that there's going to be competition, and that you're then competing rather than collaborating. In practice, my experience has been the complete opposite, in that we have Plaw Hatch Farm, which you're aware of, who are also growing vegetables and produce.

But then, we have a shop in the village who are doing the same. We have another nursery down in Groombridge who are doing the same. And they're all growing. And the more we sort of support and help each other, the more it seems to happen. Collaboration, associative working, is definitely the way.

Jeremy Smith: market garden nearby could come to Tablehurst or Plaw Hatch Farm shops and say, "I haven't got an outlet for my produce. But can I retail it through you?" And that's the role that the more established farms could easily take up, I would've thought, as long as they were satisfied with the quality of the produce.

Peter Brown: Yes. In principle, yes. I think every situation is different.

Jeremy Smith: Because the demand is growing. And we've already talked about the limits to growth for a particular farmer. But if the demand keeps growing, we have to find ways of supplying it that are healthy ways.

Peter Brown: Yeah. We have a farm shop because we want to encourage the transparency. We want to enable our customers to

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interact with nature and the farm, even if it's just coming to the shop. But I think there are many different ways, you know.

And the obvious way that is happening many places now is the farmer's market. I do think that we could have a horse and cart delivering stuff around our village as well. I think there's endless ways that can be found. I don't think there's any just one way of marketing.

Jeremy Smith: Peter you have given us literally food for thought.

Thank you very much indeed, I'm sure we are going to explore a lot more of these issues with other colleagues of yours, so thank you very much.

Peter Brown: A pleasure.