

**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 enthusing 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,

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 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

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Peter Brown, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 1: 20 Years of Community Farming

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.

**End of Part 1**