

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

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.

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.

End of Part 2