David Junghans, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op
PART 2: From Student Farmer to Managing Director

Jeremy Smith: So would you say that there is a limit to your growth, or the growth that the farm would be prepared to contemplate?

David Junghans: Yeah. Yeah. I think it's very important that people still have a relationship to most parts of the farm, no matter who they are, whether they are just a temporary helper in the café or whether they are one of the enterprise managers. And you still need to sit around a table. And you still need to have personal relationships. And so as long as you can still have a meeting where everyone can sit around a table, I think you are okay. If that starts to be pulled apart, then I think it becomes tricky.

Jeremy Smith: So it's keeping it to human scale?

David Junghans: Yeah.

Jeremy Smith: One of the things I know that you do at Tablehurst is that you have breakfast together and you have lunch together. Is that an important component of keeping the farm with this sense of everyone being involved?

David Junghans: Yeah, absolutely. It's I mean, we do it because we run a care home. And we have three young men with learning disabilities there. And they spend the whole day on the farm. And we are their family. And so that's why we started having lunches and breakfasts together.

And it means that it's not a job you go and work, and then you go for your lunch break somewhere, and then you come back. Work and your personal life's boundaries somehow kind of are a bit blurred. And so it becomes a lifestyle.

And within that, it has its own, you know, challenges and issues, of course. But your attitude to what you do changes through that. By the way I'm very interested in SEKEM Farm in Egypt. Don't know if you heard about it.

Jeremy Smith: I'm interested, too. I want to get the young man who's currently running the farm over here to talk at Emerson.

David Junghans: Helmy Abouleish, I think, is his name. Yes. I haven't been there. I've spoken once to Ibrahim Abouleish and once to Helmy Abouleish at a conference in Dornach, but I've watched some YouTube videos of them and read the books by Ibrahim Abouleish.

And they are rather big. They have several companies like for textiles and, you know, all kinds of things. And they have many, many smaller biodynamic farms in Egypt producing for them. But on SEKEM Farm, which is quite a big place now, they must have, you know, more than 200 employees at any one time there.

They do meet up every morning in a big circle. And so they do manage at that scale still to kind of keep a certain spirit up. So I'd be quite interested to maybe that will prove me wrong, you know? That you can actually scale up even more. But I don't know how that actually works and how much relationship people still have.

Because, I mean, if you think of a farm at a certain scale, let's say, you know, 10,000 acres again, and the production, if you have the same diversity that we have, it's impossible to be involved in each steps of production, from, you know, cultivating land to selling the produce in the shop or processing it for the shop or the café.

And that means you start losing the relationship. And then you have, let's say, something like quality control in between, which is great. It makes things a bit more professional if you know, if you actually have a quality control, an official quality control system.

But you might have a farmer, someone doing quality control, somebody doing processing, somebody doing retailing. And then it becomes very difficult to bring these people together. And then the outcome will be a very different product. Like let's say, you know, you can get a really good meal, mass-produced and vac-packed and then you heat it up at home.

Still a good quality. It'll be different to what your grandma produces with the same ingredients. Why is it different? It's the same ingredients, the same process, almost. But one is cooked by a person, and one is part of an industrial process.

Jeremy Smith: And one is presumably produced with love. And the other one…

David Junghans: Well, maybe that's the difference.

Jeremy Smith: Yes. So, what are the plans that you have for Tablehurst over the coming five or ten years?

David Junghans: Well, you need to understand that the farm still benefits from people that put a lot of effort and work, and volunteers, and so on, that give their expertise for free and work much longer hours than they should. And that's how it works.

So there is this extra you know, extra 20% that everyone has to put in to make it possible and successful. And, of course that can't be a long-

term business model. And so what we have to do is we have to scale up certain parts of the farm. We have to improve the infrastructure.

And increase our production, which is absolutely possible. We have a lot of young farmers. And we are all learning and so on. So there's a lot of improvements can still be done. And to bring the farm into a situation where we can actually pay salaries that allow people to live, to rent, or to buy here in the local community. Become an attractive employer so we can, provide perspective for the people that work with us. So I think that is very, very essential. Because a business model can't just be based on good intentions and the hope that somebody will come and help out.

At least that's my personal view. And in our particular case, it's really improving the infrastructure. And then we can kind of increase our scales, slightly. And I think then we'll be fine. And once that has been accomplished, I think the farm is a very representable model for community farming. And I would really like then to kind of reach out more. For example, the relationship between landowners and farmers, there is no good link there that can bring these two together. That's something where places like Tablehurst Farm I think could really kind of help.

Jeremy Smith: So find new ways of developing community amongst landowners and the farm.

David Junghans: For example, a lot of people sell their farms. And then you get people moving in from the city. And they are working in London, let's say, during the week. And then the weekend, they are there, and their families are there, and they have their horses, and so on.

But they have far more land than they need. But they don't understand

the needs of the farmers. And without bringing the landowners and the farmers together, and we could, possibly facilitate these things. There needs to be a meeting point where the mutual understanding is created and where you can sit around a table.

And I think that will help access to the land for young new farmers. We are we currently have three apprentices. We usually have four. And once they are done with their training, we can't take them on. Because we can't just increase our staff levels all the time.

So they need to find something else. And they really struggle to find something else. When I graduated from Emerson College, I was in touch with several landowners. And they were all interested in me farming their land. But they were interested in profit.

They were interested in all kinds of things. In prestige. But they didn't understand anything about farming. They destroyed infrastructure. They wanted to keep the subsidies, which are for the farmers for very good reasons. As long as the food prices need to stay so low, farms need subsidies.

So there's no understanding and no formal relationship there. And I think there's a lot we can do in the future. And so it's really reaching out into the wider community, and helping to improve the situation.

Because we are, if you look at the U.K., we are in quite a dire situation. Average farmer is around 70. A lot of farms are in family ownership. Of course if the sons and daughters are not interested in farming, it's a wonderful asset that you can sell. Or you can do all kinds of things with it. But where are we going to produce our food in the future? And how is it

being produced? And how can we provide a real perspective for new young farmers?

Because farming at the moment is not an attractive occupation. It means long hours and very little income. And a lot of farmers start in a caravan. In a mobile home, you know? New farmers. Farmers who have not taken over their family farms. And so, a lot of good people that would take up farming don't see a prospective for them and do something else.

Jeremy Smith: By contrast to what's happening in a lot of conventional farms, Tablehurst is attracting, as you've mentioned, young people who want to come and work here. You've got families starting on the farm, children being born. How do you see the future for those families and their children in terms of the farm being able to provide them with what they need in order to send their children to school, to get the material goods that most families seem to want? Is that going to be a struggle for the farm to meet those needs?

David Junghans: We are just in the beginning there. And of course, I've thought about it. I know what I have to do on the farm in order to improve our situation and then improve the situation of the people who work on the farm, in the long term. So I think… but I haven't spent too much thought in it, because I think we are very much dependent on the local community and people understanding what we're doing, the value of what we're doing, understanding that food has to cost a little bit more money.

I wish there would be a way of measuring the health benefits and what we actually save for the national economy if, you know, there would be hundreds of farms like Tablehurst Farm and people would adopt a healthy

lifestyle and have access to produce like that.

So, I think it'll work out somehow. But if I focus too much on this now… I mean, it's easy to focus on individual needs and my needs, and the needs of the people I work with. And we are very aware of that we have to do the necessary improvements.

And then, there will be a trickledown effect. But without the local community, and their willingness to buy our produce, and their willingness to, let's say, maybe support us by lending us money, by maybe acting as a guarantor if you want to borrow money from elsewhere.

There are lots of interesting ways of how they could support the farm and improve the long-term situation. So this communication between us and the community is something that will have to be, I think, in the near future reestablished.

Because at the moment, well, you heard from Peter Brown, about the early days and how the spirit was there. And there were, you know, a group of 20, 30 people who were very close to the farm and really had the feeling, "This is our farm."

Whereas now, the farm is for many years now running quite, you know, steadily and quite well, and is increasing its you know, what it offers to the community. And people even-even though they are owners, they come as customers. So we have to rethink how we reestablish our close link with the… or a more active relationship with the local community.

Jeremy Smith: I was going to ask you about your understanding of the word ‘community’. Has the term as you understand it changed over the years? And does it need to change again?

David Junghans: Well, I don't think that in the beginning I really understood what it meant to be honest. Because I came here to study at the college, and then went to the farm, and just worked day and night, really. And I didn't know who the community is. So it was a little bit abstract because I wasn't born here. I wasn't brought up here. And I also haven't had much time to actually interact with the community. Back then, we worked sometimes 70 hours a week.

So the community are the people that come to the farm, really. So that's what it was for me for a long time. Now, as managing director, of course, you establish more and more relationships with the community. So for me, it has changed. My perspective has changed. But I don't know if the community has changed.

Jeremy Smith: When I was speaking with Peter Brown earlier, he talked about concepts that, for example, Patrick Holden of the Sustainable Food Trust has brought forward, this idea of true cost accounting where farms have to — or should have to — pay for the true cost of all the inputs. And it seems to me that what he was suggesting was that there is a huge educational need both in terms of people understanding the true cost of what conventional agriculture is, and what the true cost of food should be.

But there's also the need to have government change its policies to encourage a much more healthy approach to farming and eating. And I was wondering, is this something that has to be done at grassroots level? Or should there be a campaign nationally to try and change people's minds?

David Junghans: It's a difficult question. I think most things happen on a

grassroots level, really. And then at some point they get enough publicity, so it becomes public awareness grows, really. I understand the difficulties — or I can imagine difficulties — of our politicians nowadays. First of all, they often don't know. And they have to rely on their advisors or lobbyists. And so whether a national campaign will help, I don't know. I think what helps is direct experience.

And of course, we can reach out to 600, 800, you know, 1,500, maybe a few more people. That's what we can do. Maybe, something like that. An interview, or a little documentary, or a book that has been published and so on, you reach a few more people. But I think the direct experience is absolutely important. Because most people only learn from experience.

Jeremy Smith: That implies that as a farmer on a community-owned farm you have a wider remit than just your farming. You also have this cultural remit of explaining what you're doing and trying to help people to understand what the issues are.

David Junghans: Yeah. When it comes to politics the problem is, there is one issue at a time is being dealt with and one policy at a time. But it actually needs many people from different areas — policy makers, farmers, traders — sitting around a table.

And it needs a holistic approach. And unless there is a way of doing that, I can't see the right policies being made. And so, what we have, we have an holistic approach on a very, very small scale. And that works. And then, you know, I can talk to the local community.

And we can kind of take several things into the equation when we talk about things. We could, sit down with, let's say, the local supermarket, a

few of the local landlords, and so on. And so that's all possible. And a national scale or international scale, that's, of course, much more difficult. But, yeah, my hope for the right policies… I'm not very…

Jeremy Smith: You're not holding your breath.

David Junghans: I'm not holding my breath. But I think, as you said, on the grassroots level it's market forces, market dynamics that change things most easily. Because everyone reacts to it. And you know, the organic movement is a real movement of success.

I mean, it's been 30 years ago when organics farmers or the organic movement has been seen as somewhat, you know, some weirdos, really. And now, it's a respectable business, really. And it's billions, you know, a year in the organic sector.

And I think the community farming — the relationship of the communities to their farms, to their land, to their environment, to food — this is really something that-- has to be multiplied, something that we do here. And I'm really grateful.

I mean, I, you know, I haven't done much to bring this about. It's been others before me. I'm just making sure that, you know, it continues, really. But if that could be done again, and again, and again. And there is a growing awareness that we can't just be consumers.

We can't just be spectators in this world. We have to become actively involved, that's what it takes, I think. Then policies will… policymaking will be changed by that, at some point.

Jeremy Smith: You mentioned earlier that human-scale farming

is important. Globalization is something that reduces us by contrast to passive consumers or spectators feeling powerless in the face of these huge forces. If that is the case, and if our community farms have a way of counteracting that tendency, what does that mean for people working on the farms? Can they cope with the additional tasks of interacting with their local community and helping to educate them? Or is it the responsibility of the local community to come in and help the farmers with these issues?

David Junghans: It's in their interest. I mean, I'm not doing — well, I'm doing, because it's, you know, such an advantage, personal advantage for me to do that. I'm working because I believe this is necessary. It's a benefit created for the local community.

And so it is in the interest of the local community that this can continue to work like this. So, of course, the local community are also landowners, local business owners. The local community are all sort of people. It's not just customers.

Yeah, so, as I said, we all have to become active. You know, when gosh, I don't know. I was still… '95… how old was I? Can't remember,,, anyway, I in Yugoslavia, 1995. Former Yugoslavia. I saw footage. People, you know, you'd think war means, you know, people die because they, have been shot or whatever.

But the biggest problem was food supply. And that's, something that probably always happens when you have civil wars. But it made me aware of that people living in cities give the responsibility of their food supply to other people.

And, of course, we work in that way nowadays, that we have to do that in some respect, division of labor, really. But it's such an important issue. I mean, it's not just food supply. It's our environment, our air, our water. All these kind of things are affected by farming and can be destroyed by farming or can be improved by farming. So it's very important that people get actively involved in that again and just don't leave it up to others.

I like the idea. You know, we have a small allotment scheme program on the farm, mainly for parents and their children. And I like the idea that everyone, like it used to be not that long ago for most people, actually know how to grow food.

It's an essential skill. You know, people are so, nowadays, helpless because they give all that responsibility away to big corporations. Even education. And it's so important that we kind of take charge of this again as communities.

Jeremy Smith: David, it's been a fascinating discussion. Thank you very much indeed. And very best wishes for the future of Tablehurst Community Farm.

David Junghans: Thank you, Jeremy.

End of Part 2