

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
FULL EPISODE: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

**Jeremy Smith:** We're sitting here in Forest Row at the lovely home of Bob Wills, who is kindly hosting a recording that we're making about his views of access to land, succession of farm ownership, and bringing farms into community ownership. And Bob is joined by John Thomson, who has been involved through his connection with Emerson College, which was the original owner of Tablehurst Farm. So welcome to you both, gentlemen. And, I'd like to start perhaps by asking you, Bob: What was going on at the time when Tablehurst Farm started to come into community ownership? Who were the people involved?

**Bob Wills:** Well, the problems I think that Emerson had with running the farm, and John would know more about it than me really, is that it wasn't quite their scene, and it was actually a drag on them and, you know, they really were concerned about the future. And then the question arose as to how the farm could be developed in the future. And fortunately, Christopher Mann, who was one of the people... well, he actually started St Anthony's Trust in 1972.

Christopher is the son of William Mann. Christopher's father was always very interested and he became a trustee, actually.

**Jeremy Smith:** Oh, I see, okay.

**Bob Wills:** And the thing is that going back in time originally, the St Anthony's Trust was formed for another purpose. But later it came into the lap of St Anthony's Trust partly because of the great interest of William Mann, who I think would, if he hadn't been a teacher, he would like to have been a farmer. Yeah, he was very, very keen on the land, and his son also inherited this and was also very keen on the biodynamic scene, and in fact Christopher went to America and started a very

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interesting farm there.

But coming back to the point that you raised about when Tablehurst came in, it was a very long-winded process, but finally the day came when the bulk of the land was passed over to St Anthony's Trust, and we then had the problem of running the farm with very little capital of course. And the fortunate thing is that we had a lot of support from the community, and I think I'm right in saying that the Co-op was already in existence then, and so that was an enormous benefit.

So then the farm like the one at Plaw Hatch, where we already had some experience because we'd taken that on as a failing entity, and by many miracles managed to keep it afloat and going well. And so we already had some experience in biodynamic farming and supporting it. And I don't know how much more you want me to say about what happened with Tablehurst, the beginning, perhaps John would like to say something.

**John Thomson:** Well, yeah, I'd like to come in and say, it wasn't an accident that our college, an international college be linked with our farm. Edmunds, who founded Emerson College, had the idea there should be a connection between teaching, farming, and medicine; the doctor, the farmer, and the teacher have got to deal with each other. And so when the opportunity came of buying Emerson, the association farm was just ideal for his aims. And so that was why this connection came about. It was not just an accident. It was quite purposeful.

He always regretted that he never brought the medical element in to this threesome. And when I joined in '81, so the thing had been going for already nearly 15 years or something. And I could see that Emerson run by a college of teachers basically with a finance manager, and also the

farmer, they were all part of the council. And so what began to develop is that it was felt a good thing that students coming from all the over world should experience the land.

So it eventually turned out that they were going out for picking potatoes or something that was urgent that the farm needed help in. And I could remember very well how one of my colleagues, who was also in the teaching was beginning to resent that 30 or 40 people coming to Emerson to learn about teaching should suddenly be pulled out of their studies to go and pick potatoes, and so their working together didn't quite emerge as it was intended.

But it was really a great idea, and it's still an idea because you can see that what's happening in the schools, they're very concerned about food and diet and all these things which are produced by farmers. And so it's not a wrong idea, but it wasn't implemented in the right way, because the people who were making decisions about the farm were people who knew nothing about farming, except the farmer himself, and he was really looking for help rather than for a guided cooperation.

So the good idea didn't work out. But it's still a good idea, if I can put it like that. I always felt that we should separate ourselves from the direction of the farm. But the farmer at that time was very dependent on the college because there were few funds, and some of the building that went on in the farm I think was capitalized by the college. And so there was things that seemed to me quite inappropriate and should be sorted out.

So when the idea came that the farmer decided to retire, and a new phase was coming in, then the issue came up, we separate the farm from the college. Now there was much resentment in the college because it

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was a big capital asset, this large farm, and so the college might go through quite difficult times, but we always have the backup of it. So the farm was then seen as a support... a possible support for a financial situation the college might face. And so there were difficulties, psychological difficulties, in really bringing about this separation. And in fact, from the moment of declaring that that's what we wanted to do, it took ten years, I think, for the college actually to bring about this separation.

**Jeremy Smith:** Bob, can you remember who were the leading players at that time in the decision to separate the college from the farm?

**Bob Wills:** Yeah, I remember it well. Actually the final phase was three years actually, the final phase in passing the...

**John Thomson:** Yes, I know but the decision to do that?

**Bob Wills:** The decision was made ten years before altogether, that's right. And in a way, it was very interesting to think back to those days shortly after we took over the ownership of the land and buildings from Emerson. And Brian convened a very interesting meeting in the Rachel Carson Center, which I'd like to bring up because it was convened to bring the three parties together: that's the farmers, the farm business, which is the Co-op, and St Anthony's Trust.

And we had a very, very interesting man who was called a facilitator that Brian found, a man with very clear, precise, accurate thinking. He wasn't actually anything to do with biodynamic farming, but he was obviously very good at convening people together. And so he asked us to sit in three parts of the room separately, write our personal, selfish motives,

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and then they were brought together, and it turned out that we all fundamentally had the same thing at heart, and that was the success of the farms. This was very clear.

But what did come out of it, which I found was so interesting, because I'm very keen on the idea of people working together, some of the big problems in the world really center around us working together, and here was an opportunity because the farms in some sense, it could be seen as being in competition with each other. But it was decided at this meeting that for the future, there would be no, never ever, any hidden agendas from any one of the three groups, and also that any one of the meetings that say, the Co-op had or St Anthony's had or the farmers had, would always be open to anybody from any of the other things and I found very interesting. And as far as I know, that's really worked

**John Thomson:** A major player in this was Peter Brown, because it was quite clear to Emerson that when he came on the scene, he was the right man to build the farm. And he insisted that it was taken out of the hands of Emerson. And that was a major decision.

And then out of that, what you mentioned, the Co-op was formed, which was our industrial providence society, really, which took control of the business side. St Anthony's was intended to take control of the land side, and then the farmers would be working under the umbrella of the Co-op, to do their actual job of farming and build their teams.

And I think that's worked very well. So we have to spell it out more carefully than we're doing now, but it's a kind of model that can be exercised and practiced all over the place. But it's something that's, as

Bob says, has really evolved here and has worked extremely well.

**Jeremy Smith:** Bob, you said that Brian was instrumental. Is that Brian Enfield or Brian Swain?

**Both:** Brian Swain

**Jeremy Smith:** Yes, okay.

**Bob Wills:** He was then very active in the Co-op, I believe, but he...

**John Thomson:** Yeah, he was a prime mover in building the Co-op.

**Bob Wills:** That's right, yes.

**John Thomson:** There were other people as well, but he played a major role.

**Bob Wills:** Yes, that's right.

**Jeremy Smith:** Yes. Yeah, of course his brother, John, who is responsible for these recordings.

**John Thomson:** Yes.

**Bob Wills:** Well, and that's okay, and in fact, to interview Brian would be a very positive thing because he has a lot to say and has got very strong ideas about the whole question of land ownership for example, which is a crucial one, which we spoke about on the way here. Unless something is done about the value of land, which is just a market product at the moment, then a lot of problems can't be solved.

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**Jeremy Smith:** Yes. So, Bob, when you were first involved, was that as a trustee of St Anthony's Trust?

**Bob Wills:** Yes, it was... St Anthony's Trust was formed for another purpose, actually. The reason that we got into the biodynamic farming was that Plaw Hatch Farm was at the point of being wound up and dispensed with. And Christopher Mann's father, who is one of my fellow trustees, was immensely keen that this shouldn't happen, well, in fact all the trustees were very keen that this shouldn't happen.

So it was very interesting how it was saved, because William Mann, that's Christopher's father went with another colleague of mine called Daniel Donahaye, they went to Germany to interview Stiftung, who I think were quite a wealthy sort of setup in the computer industry and very keen on supporting biodynamic farms. And they came back with enough money for us to buy Plaw Hatch. So that saved the day, which was really quite a thing, because I think the recording we're making at the moment is interested, isn't it, in how the money was arrived at to buy farms.

Well, this came from really, a gift. But it was only because they took the initiative quite strongly and went to Germany to do it. And they didn't try doing it over the phone or writing or anything, and that really does work. And funny enough, they have since then still supported Tablehurst, in another activity, and we've got to know them. And I feel that possibly for the future, this is one very important aspect to look at in trying to raise money.

The other great help we had of course was on Christopher himself, because he was very well off. His wife was one of the original... well, the daughter of the founder of a very big company in Germany. And

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Christopher used to come over and we had chats together. And he said, "How are things going," And I said, "Well, Plaw Hatch desperately needs a new entrance, Christopher, can you help?" And so he did, he paid for that. And then that revolutionized the farm, because before, the entrance was extremely dangerous and was holding back the business.

And he helped in many other ways as well, because Emerson didn't actually pass over all the land to St Anthony's Trust, and Christopher was very keen that the one or two fields at the bottom and one at the top should also be owned by St Anthony's Trust, so they weren't sold and they should be part of Tablehurst Farm. So I won't go into all the details of how this worked, but it was finally... I got very much involved in this actually, because St Anthony's actually had to find some of the money ourselves, because Christopher got to the point where he said, "Well, you find half, I'll find half."

And we managed to do it by miracles actually, when I think back at how it worked. So actually Tablehurst now has virtually the best part of all the land for the farming.

**Jeremy Smith:** So John, when Emerson was thinking about separating itself from the farm, I get the impression that Francis Edmunds, who was heading up Emerson at the time and the founder of Emerson, he had this concept of a community of gifts, I've heard. Can you say anything about that?

**John Thomson:** Yeah, that's right. Yeah. I think that phrase runs through all his thinking. So when he gathered together to found Emerson College, a lot of his colleagues were very skeptical that this was going to take off. And so, up in the Midlands, an opportunity arose and he got



some huts to start.

And then he didn't set it up in a top-down, but he looked for somebody who could bring art into it. He looked for somebody to bring science into it. He looked for somebody who could bring the crafts into it. And so on, until he... I think that's what he meant. It's people who have gifts who have come together and through their interaction and with students coming, they meet something. They meet people who have got something to share, and I think that's what he meant.

So there was nothing exclusive, eventually became very strongly a teacher training college, but that wasn't at the beginning. It was because Michael Hall actually invited him to come here and then build a teacher training. But for Edmunds, it was essentially people coming from... who'd already got into life, they weren't just students coming at 19 or 20. They'd already been lawyers or whatever, and they thought they wanted a change in life.

And so they would meet this community of gifts, of people, who'd got somewhere in their particular discipline. And that encounter would spark off of them either a change in life or a reinvigoration in what they were doing. I think that's the big idea behind Edmunds' thinking.

**Jeremy Smith:** Yes. But it must have been quite an altruistic gesture on behalf of the college to pass over one of its major assets to the Co-op. How did that come about?

**John Thomson:** Well, Edmunds had already died. He died in '89, is that right? And he'd already his connection with the direction of the college had greatly loosened, it was still there and still an important voice. But

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when he died, then Michael Spence was the bursar and he, like what I've explained, I think he's had, more or less the same view, that it would be good to reinvigorate the farm by giving it its own chief. And when Peter Brown appeared on the scene, he was the man. So things came together, there was a shift in the thinking, and then the man appeared. If the man hadn't appeared, the shift in thinking wouldn't have gone anywhere.

**Jeremy Smith:** Was there any opposition within Emerson itself to this move?

**John Thomson:** Well, I withdrew from... about the time that the farm was passed over, what was that year? '95 or something?

**Bob Wills:** I can't remember exactly.

**Jeremy Smith:** '96 I think.

**John Thomson:** '96, well, that was the year I moved out. So I don't want to talk about the people who were then subsequently in charge because I think there were divided views, you know, and nobody was quite sure that this was what we should do, but they were unhesitant about making the change.

**Jeremy Smith:** Funnily enough, while we were having lunch today at Emerson, we were sitting next to a veteran of those days, and she happened to say, "Oh, we shouldn't have given away the farm." And I said to her, "Well, if you hadn't done that, it wouldn't be here now." So...

**John Thomson:** I know who would say that, and she called about giving away the family silver. That was her expression. And it was just the family

silver. But the biodynamics are not just family silver. And I could see that with Peter, this was something that was vibrant, could develop. So we did the right thing, but it was a slow, psychological process rather than an administrative process.

**Jeremy Smith:** Yes. Yes. And Bob, can you recall what it was like at the time when the Co-op was forming was there a lot of enthusiasm in local people to do this?

**Bob Wills:** Well, there's a tremendous enthusiasm from St Anthony's Trust, and I'll tell you why. Before the Co-op was formed, not only owned Plaw Hatch farm buildings and land, but we also owned the farm business. And that wasn't our scene. And it was really a very difficult time, we had very difficult times then.

And so when the idea of a community-owned farm financially was spread around and came to birth, was wonderful for St Anthony's Trust because already we felt now we can concentrate on what we intended doing in the first place and try and do it well. And then the financial side will be in a completely different sphere, and we felt really pleased about the Co-op and how it worked.

**Jeremy Smith:** So when did St Anthony's hand over Plaw Hatch to the Co-op? Because you were responsible for Plaw Hatch, weren't you?

**Bob Wills:** Prior, well prior, to Tablehurst, of course. I'm not quite sure the actual date.

**John Thomson:** But it was only the business that was handed over. The land at Plaw Hatch and the land at Tablehurst and the... part of the land at Emerson, is owned by St Anthony's Trust.

**Bob Wills:** That's right.

**John Thomson:** So it's quite an interesting thing, you see, to get the business out, so if the business collapses, there's no collateral for it. You don't sell out the land. That's one of the significant things about this.

**Jeremy Smith:** So the land is safe in perpetuity?

**John Thomson:** Well, to a certain extent. I mean, a new Trust body 20 years down the road might change that perspective, but as it stands today, that's how it is, yeah. If the business fails, then it doesn't involve the support of the land.

**Jeremy Smith:** We had an interesting interview with Peter Brown earlier today, and during that, I asked him whether the concept of community had altered at all over the years since he first became involved. And I wonder how you feel about that? How has this idea of a community-owned farm evolved from mid-1990s to today?

**Bob Wills:** Well, I think if you go and look at Tablehurst today, you'll see a tremendous enthusiasm for what goes on there, and all sorts of activities. And for instance the other day, we went to buy some stuff there and we had to wait in a queue with two serving, and so they are immensely busy. And it was a really good feeling because round the corner was the little café with people sitting at a table, and then up on the bank, Peter Brown had developed this play area for children, you know. It's got a good feeling about it.

And also of course the support they get and actual work on the land from the community is quite good, I believe. I haven't been involved myself, but people will volunteer to help on the farm, which is very nice to know. But

one of the problems I think that St Anthony's has — we're not quite sure how to finalize this — is this question of the importance of holding the land in perpetuity and taking it out of the commercial sphere.

But at the same time, we actually have used the assets and values of St Anthony's in the form of the land et cetera as a security for raising money for buildings and so on. And that is something that we feel I think, and John will back me up, this is a temporary arrangement. We would like to eventually get out of this situation where we're actually in fact using the land as an asset to raise money. It doesn't really quite feel right.

But we thought an awful lot about this, and I was very concerned and I spoke to many people who are involved in the anthroposophical world. And it turned out that the thought was that you work with the time, and that at this time, this was quite a good thing to do. But in the long term, try and get out of this. Am I right in saying that, John?

**John Thomson:** Yeah, I think that's where the discussion is. But of course, well, we've seen what's happening, you know, in the cities and so on that people who work there can't live there and the people who don't live there can buy the houses. It's unbelievable. And the American, Henry George in the middle of the 19th century already saw the problem. I don't know how well known he is, but that's how you've got to deal with the land problem.

And so this is little communities trying to deal with that in an ocean, which is totally ignorant about the problem — or seems to be — not entirely of course. But the other thing I think when the farm was passed over to... and it began as development of the Co-op, then the shops started. And these are a very important economic element in what we call the farm; it's

the farm and the business of direct selling.

And that plays... I don't know the actual details in the balance sheet, but it's a very important element, which wasn't there at all in the old Emerson / Tablehurst arrangement.

**Jeremy Smith:** Well, as far as I understand it, both farm shops are reporting quite rapidly increasing turnover. So there seems to be real demand from people to come and buy their food from a place where they know how it's grown and they see how the animals are looked after, they know who's growing the food, and they feel good about buying in such situations.

**John Thomson:** So I think your question about the community, there wasn't really a community. The Tablehurst was part of Emerson and Emerson was a college dealing with foreigners. And when Peter took over, a great effort was made to make sure it's a farm in Forest Row, and the villagers are part of the clientele, and the orientation of the farm just totally changed. It wasn't just orientated towards students coming from anywhere, but much more orientated towards the locality. And that's a big, big element in the community. If you're isolated in the community, you're not a community farm. And I think Peter and also Plaw Hatch have done an enormous amount to develop that side.

**Jeremy Smith:** Yes. One thing I was wondering about was, we've talked about not wanting to use the land as an asset, to borrow money against. But how does a community-owned farm, which doesn't have a large profit relative to its sales, how does it raise capital for new infrastructure, new machinery? Have you any thoughts on that?

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**Bob Wills:** Well, that is a big question. Through St Anthony's, considerable legacies have been received, which have been used to develop the farm buildings and so on.

A website would be a good move in today's world, so that people who have a certain amount of knowledge but not a lot about the farms, but are quite keen on supporting it can see through a good website, ways and means in which they can fund... and that's what you have in mind, isn't it, to do this? I think that a very good step forward.

The other thing is that there are other, I call them stiftungs because they're often in Germany, but we did actually, when the Rachel Carson Center was financed, there was a company in Holland. So there are these companies around now who have assets, which they can use to support farming, and maybe bring more onboard, perhaps.

**Jeremy Smith:** So we need to seek out these philanthropic companies, yes?

**Bob Wills:** Yes.

**Jeremy Smith:** Yes.

**John Thomson:** We haven't been very successful in that so far, I think.

**Jeremy Smith:** That's true.

**John Thomson:** And the question of legacies has benefited the college. People, and often people who are not directly connected with the whole ideology behind it or ideas, but visited a farm and felt a connection with it and left a part of their legacy to it, and that has greatly benefited the

building of the farms. But there's a balance between getting out and putting yourself up with a brand, a Demeter brand that promises this and so on, that doesn't lose its...you know... what's the word? Its...

**Jeremy Smith:** Its integrity perhaps?

**John Thomson:** Yes, something like that you know, and yet it should be better known, and I've always felt that the background of the farming should be more open and presented in a understandable way that people don't feel you're floating into another realm which we can't understand.

**Jeremy Smith:** So we need to have our feet firmly on the ground.

**John Thomson:** And we don't need to do that. It's well-grounded. There's quite a lot of experimentation been going on that indicates certain things are valuable in growing crops and preparing food. And that's a common discussion everywhere, it's on the media all the time: our food, that we eat and what it does to us and all our children are suffering in unbelievable ways today. And some of it is cured by good diet, you know. Behavior, all sorts of things. They say prisoners change by giving them a good organic diet, you know. Prisoners are different people.

So this is out there and to enter into that debate and that discussion in a positive way is I think one of the things we could do. But that itself needs the people who can do it, a certain amount of finance behind it to get it out there in a certain way in a certain presentation that is coherent with what everybody else is talking about.

**Jeremy Smith:** I've come across recently in America this concept of what they call patient capital, which is where you find investors who aren't



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looking for large returns on their loans but are prepared to make a loan at low interest rates over a period of time. So I wonder if that's something that we could explore in this country a bit more, there may well be people who have some money that they aren't particularly needing to get a large return on, but who would like to invest in something that they believe in.

**Bob Wills:** Well, my — change of subject slightly in relation to this — always having had my own business and building the business up from nothing, I always had a strong feeling that the business should be self-supporting. And I can't help when I think of the farms, I can't help feeling that I would like the farms as a run to be self-supporting, so that any money that comes from outside is used for example in buying land and that sort of thing.

So if you divide it into two parts, one, the working of the farm itself, I would like to see very strongly that it's organized in such a way with a shop and so on, that it is self-sustaining, as a business. It would be good and healthy if it could be self-sustaining. Now that doesn't address the problem of the future or the farm needing more land or something like that. So that would be more in the area of raising money in the other ways that you'd been talking about.

**Jeremy Smith:** Well, it's quite interesting that Tablehurst, which began with the St Anthony's Trust land, now has 14 different landlords, because it's renting fields from people in this area who own land. It's an issue for them in the length of the leases they have. But I wonder if you have any thoughts on whether it is important for the farm to actually own the land or whether it's simply a question of working with others in the community to make sure the land is farmed in a particular way?

**John Thomson:** Well, that's a big issue, a big issue. I think the way that Tablehurst is developed by people seeing their needs and offering them a field here and there that they can use on a basis of a lease is a very practical way of moving forward. The ideal way of course, for a biodynamic farm is that you're sustaining the soil in a certain way so that it endures, you know, it's not going to pass into...

**Jeremy Smith:** Well, it seems that landowners rather like biodynamic farming on their land because they can see that the land is being well looked after and it's increasing value of their land.

So it suits them well.

**John Thomson:** Yeah, yeah.

**Jeremy Smith:** But from the farm's point of view, I think they would like to have longer-term leases than currently they have.

**Bob Wills:** Well, a little example is right on our doorstep. If you step out of here and walk a few yards that way, you'll see a big field over here. And that belongs to a farm who have been keeping that field in... set aside for 12 years. And the land's got in a bad way really, because it's just been weeds all that time. And Tablehurst decided that it would be a good idea to see if they could rent that field and do something worthwhile with it.

Originally I think they were going to have a five-year lease, which wouldn't really be long enough. But it's a good feeling to think that they've enabled themselves to grow in a way without actually purchasing the land, if they could get a long lease on it. And already they planted interesting things to try and regenerate the quality of the soil, which is pretty poor, and they've

also had sheep in there. And I thought that's another way of expanding the farm business without the use of vast amounts of capital.

**Jeremy Smith:** What do you think about the problems that young people face these days in terms of gaining access to land, to either farm or to create market gardens?

**John Thomson:** Well, these are big issues. It's obviously difficult. Training colleges are dealing not with farmers, but with managers, you know, so that the idea that you go and how do you become a farmer, because... you're already disconnected with the land in a way because you're applying technologies either in the crops you use and the sprays you put on them and the machinery you use. And you're a certain distance from the land. And that affects the way you train people to work on the land.

So it's already a distancing kind of thing happening in agriculture. And you go out to Tablehurst and one of the 24 people, something like that, working on there, and in most other farms and maybe a similar farm, there might be three people. So that's a big thing to change.

**Jeremy Smith:** Yes, what about the influence of the supermarkets on this situation? Do you think they will be able to evolve their position or are they going to keep trying to screw farmers down to the smallest prices they can get?

**John Thomson:** Well, that's part of the ongoing debate at the moment. Yeah, and also, see if you think of a farm as an entity, in which it's dealing with its own fertilization process and so on. That's not interesting for a supermarket who wants to get a guaranteed crop of peas or cabbages

or whatever from a farm just devoted to that, and then they can get the size they want, the shape they want and so on.

And that's guaranteed, whereas what comes from a farm like this which can serve a local community, but not easily I would imagine a supermarket, because the local community can go along with changes in the weather and things like that, that supermarkets want to avoid if it possible. So it's another big problem.

**Jeremy Smith:** Do you see model of ownership at Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch as one that is capable of being extended to other situations?

**Bob Wills:** Interesting thought.

**John Thomson:** Well, that's certainly the ideas in the Co-op, that they have a model, which not necessarily belongs to biodynamic farming, it could be any organic farm, could develop the same model, because there aren't some very close not in their methodology maybe, but a very close sympathy between the organic movement and the biodynamic movement. And I'm sure that this model that we have here could be a value in many quite different situations.

**Jeremy Smith:** Bob, how do you see things developing in the future for these community-owned farms?

**Bob Wills:** About the two existing farms, you mean?

**Jeremy Smith:** I was thinking more of the concept. Do you see it as something that will appeal to other communities who might want to start similar things?

**Bob Wills:** That's a very interesting question, actually. Just now you mentioned other ways where this could work, were you thinking of outside farming or just in farming?

**Jeremy Smith:** I was thinking of farming, initially.

**John Thomson:** Oh, initially in farming, yeah.

**Jeremy Smith:** But it seems as though we've, as a society, got ourselves into a very difficult position. And it's going to take the efforts of communities to move the government's position, because they won't do anything without the communities demanding it.

**John Thomson:** That's right, yes.

**Jeremy Smith:** So I'm sort of wondering is there scope for other communities to do what we're doing here?

**Bob Wills:** Well, one wonderful thing about the farms is that it gives an opportunity of the community coming together and working together. And it happens to be with farming, but it's a very good concept, isn't it, that communities can in some ways be brought together? And when you question I was then thinking of other areas where the community might come together in a similar way to the way they do with farms. And that's given me food for thought.

**John Thomson:** I think Emerson, also Plaw Hatch, are lucky because they're in Forest Row. And in Forest Row there are a lot of people who've got ideas not only about food they eat, but about education, about medicine, and all that kind of thing. And if you've got that close to you, a lot of people who have these kind of ideas, then you can thrive as much

as is possible to thrive in that situation. But if you're in a totally alien environment where people are just totally turned off from these questions, you're not going to get very far.

So it means you have to find places like Forest Row or Stroud, or somewhere else you know where a lot of these ideas are circulating. And then you can plant yourself there. But get too far away, and...

**Bob Wills:** Yeah, but John, I think the importance would be to widen it, wouldn't it?

**John Thomson:** Oh, absolutely.

**Bob Wills:** You know, to get it out of this connection.

**John Thomson:** Yeah, absolutely.

**Bob Wills:** And let people who have no end idea of Steiner's principles or anything, see how this can work well.

**John Thomson:** That's right. I mean, maybe at some time that farms can sell their produce and they have an open market day in East Grinstead, or in Crowborough or somewhere like that, you see. But at the moment, I think they're just meeting their own needs. They don't have a surplus that they can go out and spread somewhere else. But that kind of way of growing is... that's organic, isn't it?

**Jeremy Smith:** So, Bob and John, we've talked a lot about how things have been as the farms have developed in the past 21 years or so. How do you see the future for young people who are working on the farms now? They come into the farms in great contrast to how things are

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
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with conventionally farmed situations. We've got a lot of young people, we've got young people who are starting families on the farms, and this is very encouraging. But do you think there is enough there to support them right through their lives as their families grow, as the children need educating, and as they come up towards retirement time themselves? What's the situation for these farm workers?

**Bob Wills:** Very interesting question, because if you think about the changes that are taking place on the farms, there were no farm shops originally. And, that wasn't sustainable. They weren't going to stay in business. And the farm shops came along with a new concept, a new idea, and that was Michael Devine's wife actually, who was already familiar with starting a farm shop. And she was a great help at Plaw Hatch, and I worked with her, actually.

And so there's an example of something that was brought in which raised the whole thing up. Well, maybe we should be looking for other ideas. Obviously, the retailing of your produce is of tremendous help because you're getting a very much better price. And so maybe one aspect for young people today in farming is to develop further something like the farm shops, which brings other activities into the farm rather relying on just the farm, which I can't quite see how that could — just the farming — would support young people today.

**Jeremy Smith:** So you're thinking of various manifestations of added value?

**Bob Wills:** Yeah, yeah, that's right, yes. Yes.

**Jeremy Smith:** John, have you got any thoughts on this?

**John Thomson:** Well, I'll give out this thought. It seems to me things are going to get worse in many ways, not better. But I think things getting worse could awaken people to the need for this kind of work, and that's there will be social changes coming towards us, we won't have to make them. People will be demanding them. Young people, they can't buy a house now apparently. So there must be a solution to this but it's not obvious. Something's going to happen out of that in ten years, 20 years.

And the discussions we have about the amount of sugar that the big supermarkets refuse to take out of their food, and they lie about how much is in it and all that sort of thing, that's getting more and more into the open, and people are... at least a lot of people are going to be more and more aware of this. So in that sense, that's when crises are going to come.

And I think the kind of farming we're talking about is crisis farming. It's not to a nice comfortable development that's going to go on with a growingly prosperous society. I don't think it's going to be like that. But that's a very personal position and I'm not sure everybody will agree with it.

**Jeremy Smith:** Bob and John, thank you so much. It's been absolutely fascinating talking with you, I'm very grateful. Thank you.

**All:** Thank you.