

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op
PART 1: 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

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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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.

End of Part 1