

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

**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

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

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.

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PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

**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?

**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.

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

**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 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.

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

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.

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

**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

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

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



Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

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.

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

**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.

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

**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 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.

Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

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

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Bob Wills and John Thomson, Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farm Co-op  
PART 2: Early Days on Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms

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.

**End of Part 2**