

CAN YOU SAVE FORDHALL FARM?

Through an innovative scheme designed to rescue their farm from the clutches of developers, the Hollins family are offering you the chance to buy a piece of organic Shropshire pasture – but you need to act fast

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Charlotte and Ben Hollins have a month to save their farm. Unless they can raise £800,000 by the beginning of July, they will be evicted from the land that their family has tended for three generations: 128 acres of grassland, more than 200 livestock and a 16th-century farmhouse will be sold off to developers.

At stake is much more than the livelihoods of two young farmers. Fordhall Farm was the home of the late Arthur Hollins, a pioneer who devoted his life to transforming its poor, chemically fertilised soil into rich, organic pasture. This north Shropshire farmland, bordered by the River Tern, is among the healthiest in Britain – but it could be lost for ever if it is sold for housing and industrial units.

Now, however, for just £50, 32 square metres of that land can be yours. In a bid to preserve the legacy of their father,

who died last year, and secure their futures, Charlotte and her brother Ben are selling shares in Fordhall Farm to help raise the money to buy it. “It would be devastating if the land Dad put so much time and effort into was built on,” Ben says. “In its heyday the farm was one of the biggest employers in the area and we feel a responsibility to make it successful again for local people.” Tenant farmers, like their father and grandfather before them, they have no wish to own the land; instead, they want to place it in community ownership. If successful, the scheme will open the farm to the public – hosting school visits and farm walks, converting outbuildings into a bunkhouse, and helping people to reconnect with farming and food production.

In the first project of its kind in the UK, the Hollins family have created the Fordhall Community Land ▷





PREVIOUS PAGE, TOP LEFT A photo of the late Arthur Hollins, described by his daughter Charlotte as an eccentric and entrepreneur. THIS PAGE, LEFT Charlotte and Ben: "How many young people get to run a farm and manage a project like this?" BELOW LEFT They are hoping to renovate the brick and timber farmhouse into a bunkhouse and organic tearoom



Initiative. Charlotte and Ben will rent the farm and house from the initiative, rearing organic livestock and continuing their father's ground-breaking research into holistic farming. So far they have sold £79,000 worth of shares – a fraction of the purchase price demanded by their landlord. But the siblings are doggedly optimistic, spurred on by the support of local people. "It's so easy to be cynical and negative in farming, but the reaction we've had has inspired us to stay in the industry," Charlotte says.

Their enthusiasm and commitment is all the more impressive for the fact that Charlotte and Ben are just 24 and 21. Charlotte was planning a gap year after studying environmental management at university, when the family received its final notice to quit Fordhall Farm in 2004. After 15 years of battles with a landlord determined to evict them ever since he sold land to Müller yogurts – which built a factory next to Fordhall in the early 1990s – the farm was almost bankrupt from legal costs, leaving the family with derelict buildings and virtually no livestock.

The prospects looked gloomy for Fordhall, which Arthur had farmed since 1929, taking over the tenancy, aged just 14, when his own father died. "He was an eccentric and an entrepreneur," Charlotte says. An organic pioneer in every sense (he was an early member of the Soil Association), he was so dismayed at the damage that decades of fertiliser use had inflicted on the soil that he resolved never again to use chemicals. In the 1940s, he started to develop ways of working in harmony with the land, although, as Charlotte says, he never used the word 'organic'.

Moving from mixed farming into dairy, he was one of the first commercial producers of live yogurt (creating innovative products such as yogurt cocktails and frozen 'Yogice'). He then switched to beef farming, where his experiments with soil fertility resulted in a mixed pasture of herbs and grasses so robust that it could nourish cattle and sheep all year, avoiding the need to bring them in over winter. And, in true Heath Robinson fashion, he invented a prototype soil-friendly alternative to the plough called the 'Culturseeder' (it never went into production but the design was patented and still has its admirers among engineers and ecologists). "What inspired him was his respect for nature," Charlotte says. "He was way ahead of his time and never stopped striving to improve the soil."

In its heyday, the farm was a focus for the whole community and, despite the problems confronting them, Ben and Charlotte were determined not to let it die. They approached the landlord with a business plan to resurrect it and he was impressed enough by their attitude to grant them an 18-month tenancy. "When we took the renewed tenancy on we had 11 cows, six pigs and six sheep," Charlotte remembers. "We got a loan from the Prince's Trust, put in our own savings of £2,000 each, and bought a few more animals. Friends helped us to renovate the glass lean-to next to the house and we sold our meat from a little chest freezer there." During the next two years, Ben, who takes care of the day-to-day management of the farm, followed in his father's footsteps and began rearing his own rare-breed livestock. Meanwhile, Charlotte has led the fundraising project, and now, with 70 Aberdeen Angus and Hereford cattle, 30 Gloucester Old Spot ▷



LEFT Charlotte runs the fundraising campaign from the farmhouse. Together with brother Ben and project manager Sophie, she regularly puts in 14-hour days and seven-day weeks. Despite the insecurity hanging over them, the team's efforts are paying off, with high-profile supporters including the Prince of Wales and Sting



and Large White pigs, 120 sheep and a smattering of chickens, Fordhall is becoming viable again.

Meat sales pay the bills – Ben and Charlotte have converted an old milking shed into a farm shop. They opened a nature trail last year, and now host regular fundraising events, such as this month's family fun day (11 June), which will include a gymkhana, sheep-shearing and wool-spinning demos. The Hollinses' belief in their project is infectious. A legion of volunteers and mentors have given invaluable help, from laying the recycled wood floor of the farm shop to planting trees and building fences.

None of it would have been possible without Greg Pilley and Martin Large, the leaders of the Community Farm Land Trusts project, who made Fordhall Farm their flagship case. By exploring a revolutionary way of placing private land into community ownership, to be enjoyed by local people while providing work for young tenant farmers, the project aims to tackle the growing crisis caused in farming by rising land prices and falling employment – the average age of farmers is 55. So it is helping not just Fordhall and the Hollins family, but a generation of new farmers. "For young people like me it is impossible to get into farming unless you inherit a farm or have the money to buy one," Ben explains. "By taking the capital value of the land out of the equation, Community Farm Land Trusts could make it easier for new farmers to get a foothold."

In an industry plagued by bad publicity and falling incomes, Ben, his sister and their 24-year-old project manager, Sophie Hopkins, are an inspiration. In the old farmhouse dining room that doubles as their HQ, Charlotte and Sophie eat soup at their desks beside a fire lit to counter an unseasonably chilly spring, while Ben splits his time between single-handedly managing the livestock and his agricultural studies at Harper Adams University College. They have been given first refusal to buy the farm before their tenancy expires, but on 1 July the property will go onto the open market. "I feel lucky," Charlotte says. "We've got an opportunity to do something amazing, but we've only got one chance – after that it will be gone for ever."

Thanks to his children, Arthur experienced the joy of seeing people and animals returning to Fordhall before he died in January 2005, aged 89. "Since we started the project we've had people here again – in the shop, at events and on the volunteer weekends. That's when the farm feels like all farms used to – the centre of the community." 🐾

ACT NOW TO SAVE FORDHALL FARM

Lifetime shares in the Fordhall Community Land Initiative cost £50 each*. Alternatively, you can become a 'Friend of Fordhall' for £15 per year (£30 for families). To buy shares, please send a cheque made payable to Fordhall Community Land Initiative to Fordhall Farm, Tern Hill Road, Market Drayton, Shropshire TF9 3PS (with your full name, address, postcode and contact number). Call 01630 638696 or buy online at www.fordhallfarm.com.

Cheques must be received before 1 July 2006.

*SHARES ARE NON-TRADEABLE AND NON-PROFIT MAKING, BUT SHAREHOLDERS HAVE A SAY IN THE WAY THE INITIATIVE IS RUN. SHARES INCLUDE A FREE 'FRIEND OF FORDHALL' MEMBERSHIP FOR ONE YEAR. THERE IS NO LIMIT TO THE NUMBER OF SHARES YOU CAN BUY, ALTHOUGH EACH SHAREHOLDER IS ENTITLED TO ONE VOTE ONLY AT THE AGM.