

**Working for a chance to keep
their father's dream alive**

One of sustainable farming's pioneers, Arthur Hollins, died last month at the age of 89. His children Ben and Charlotte are working to redevelop the family farm based on many of their father's farming principles. **NEIL RYDER** reports on their progress.

JUST less than a year ago the farming future for the Hollins family at Fordhall near Market Drayton, Shropshire, looked bleak with an eviction deadline looming.

Since then brother and sister, Ben and Charlotte Hollins have persuaded their landlord to give them an 18-month farm tenancy and have worked to rebuild the farm business including a small farm shop.

Now, while their future at the farm beyond the present tenancy is still uncertain, they are hoping that they will be able to remain at the farm in the longer term. Their current landlord has agreed to consider an approach from Ben and Charlotte, but, they say, has made it clear that they will not receive any preferential treatment.

Fordhall Farm and their late father, Arthur Hollins, built an international reputation for pioneering work in sustainable farming and the production of organic dairy products. Despite many years of success, his failing health caused the farm to fall into disrepair, carrying only minimal numbers of livestock.

At the end of 2003, Charlotte had just completed an environmental management degree at the University of Central Lancashire and Ben was nearing the end of his HND agriculture course at Harper Adams University College. Since then he has continued at the College to top up his HND to gain a degree.

With the support of their mother Connie, Mr Hollins'

second wife, Ben, aged 20, and Charlotte, 22, were determined to re-establish a viable farming business based on Arthur Hollins' philosophy. A farm shop was part of this strategy with, it was hoped, a sustainable farming centre to follow later.

The farm livestock has also been built up from about 10 beef cows and a few pigs to around 45 beef cattle – a mix of stores and suckler cows – about a dozen pigs and some 34 sheep.

Their priority was to campaign against proposals to schedule a large part of the farm for industrial development. The inquiry subsequently decided that the land should remain as agricultural land. The decision was reinforced by a statement from the adjoining Muller dairy processing plant that they did not wish to extend their operations on to the land in any case. The status of the land is unlikely to be reviewed for at least the next 10 years.

If the land had been scheduled for industrial development it would almost certainly have been sold. The decision to maintain its status as agricultural land opened the way for Ben and Charlotte to approach their landlord for a new tenancy backed by a business plan.

That was on March 25, with the family due to be evicted on March 28. The landlord agreed a new 18-month tenancy with Charlotte and Ben. Later, the landlord also agreed to dismantle and remove derelict buildings containing asbestos.

Charlotte and Ben worked



Above: Ben and Charlotte with their mother Connie. Right: The brother and sister team with some of the produce available in their new Fordhall Farm Shop

hard at building up livestock numbers and by July were able to open a small farm shop on the farm offering high quality meat and some vegetables produced on the farm. Right from the start they asked for and acted on advice from both local trading standards and environmental health officials.

Later they were able to move into a larger building and to include small displays on the history and work of Fordhall. At the moment the shop is open on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday – the days that Ben and Charlotte can guarantee to be available while meeting their other work and study commitments.

Throughout the year they ran promotion and public relations campaign marketing Fordhall and fostering support for their project. This included events at the farm



bringing in other businesses and organisations culminating in a highly successful winter fair. The Dutch barn on the farm has wired for power and lighting which, it is hoped, will provide an additional facility for events at the farm.

They have also received support and advice from the Soil Association including, ironically, being advised against

incurring the work and cost of seeking official organic status until, if and when, their future is more secure.

Ben and Charlotte recognise that, at present, they have no security at Fordhall beyond the end of their present tenancy, but both fervently hope that they will be able to present a strong enough case to remain at the farm after that time.