



Farm with a view...Charlotte takes time out for a well deserved rest in the battle to save Fordhall farm (LEFT) part of which dates back to the 16th century.

Ploughing their way to survival

Leaving the dull drone of the A53 behind and heading along the dusty drive to Fordhall Farm is a little like stepping back in time.

Bounded by the River Tern, which winds its way around the farm's lush pastures, and with scattered clumps of woodland, ponds and meadows, Fordhall seems more like a nature reserve than a working farm.

It is a world away from the intensive agriculture that accounts for much of Britain's big farmlands, acre after acre of fields which are all but dead to nature. Yet this organic backwater was almost lost to the town as its tenant farmers spent years fighting plans to build on the land and poured their funds into a lengthy legal battle.

With Fordhall facing ruin, the family managed to secure an 18-month extension to their lease just two days before they were due to be evicted. In October 2003 they embarked on a new effort to save the land as a community resource, and so the Fordhall Project was born.

Since then, brother and sister team Charlotte, 23, and Ben Hollins, 20, have built up the farm's stock, set up a farm shop, nature trail and picnic area. Ben still studies agriculture part-time at Harper Adams College and both have second jobs to support the family. All cash raised from the farm is ploughed back into the project.

Their biggest success to date was a Family Fun Day that attracted 2,000 people to the farm and raised around £3,000

towards the venture. "It's been a whirlwind," says Charlotte. "We have just flown into it and it has worked."

"The amount of time that people have given to the project is amazing. It's so exciting."

Fordhall has been organically farmed by the family for more than 60 years.

Charlotte and Ben's father, Arthur, who died earlier this year, took over the 140-acre farm in 1929 at the age of 14.

Years ahead of his time and enthused by ideas of sustainable farming, he collected grasses and herbs from around the country to develop a year-round grazing system for his cattle.

This natural farming method helps wildlife to thrive and Charlotte says it makes the cattle fitter and the farm's meat healthier, with a higher than usual concentration of the essential fatty acid Omega 3.

It is this patchwork of a history, wildlife, sustainable farming and quality food that has drawn many people into the project. "There are

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have something like Fordhall Farm so close to us and we should really try to appreciate it much more."

Charlotte says they plan eventually to open an organic tea room and coffee shop on the farm, convert a barn into a bunk house for school groups and build an exhibition room.

The Permaculture Association is also interested in using Fordhall as a demonstration farm because of the special farming methods used there.

The project's long-term vision is to secure the farm for community use and as a centre for ecological study.

"The idea is that people can own part of the farm land but we would still farm it," says Charlotte. "It would be community owned and therefore people would have

community access. It would also be run with the purpose of being an educational resource showing how farming and wildlife can work together sustainably.



Hereby hangs a tail...

many people who are involved with the project because it is organic, others want good quality, humane meat that's traceable and others just want a nice place to come," says Charlotte.

"Some people are interested in the historic aspect and others in the wildlife aspect."

The project has been helped by supporters from the local community and friends of the farm around the country, including many who knew Arthur and the farm years ago.

Charlotte and Ben hold regular working weekends, where volunteers get together and spend time improving the farm's facilities.

Volunteer Sophie Hopkins, 23, got involved in February and helped organise the Family Fun Day.

"It's easy get hooked just being part of something that moves forward so quickly," she said.

"I really believe in everything that Charlotte and Ben are doing. They are trying to create a community in Market Drayton, which is struggling for an identity.

"I think we are lucky to

"Shropshire Wildlife Trust has said it is interested in becoming a shareholder because of the rich array of wildlife on the farm.

The trust wants to try to use Fordhall to show how nature and farming need not be in opposition.

For a family that faced eviction just over a year ago the plans are ambitious indeed; they hope the project will raise around £1.5 million over the next two years to fund the plans.

But having come this far simply with an infectious enthusiasm, bags of determination and a group of committed volunteers, few would bet against them.

"The support is what has kept us going," says Charlotte.

"If we did not have that support we would not have been able to do it.

"You are working hard and it is emotionally draining but when we get that feedback from people it just brings you back up to 100 per cent."

●People can visit www.fordhallorganicfarm.co.uk for more information about Fordhall.

