



# FARMING FOR THE FUTURE

Three generations of the Hollins family have followed organic farming beliefs at Fordhall Farm in Shropshire. But the farm's future is now under threat from developers. Rachel Crow spoke to the youngest generation and the plans for a pioneering and ambitious community project that could save the farm and set an example for promoting a sustainable future. Photography by Adrian Jones.

Increasingly more and more people are becoming aware of the benefits of organic food and farming, not only in terms of the healthier and tastier produce, but also in preserving nature and the environment. But in the ever-demanding consumer economy, traditional farming is struggling to be a profitable profession, particularly for small farmers, like Fordhall Farm near Market Drayton, which have to compete with the large producers and supermarket chains.

Charlotte and Ben Hollins took over the farm from their father when it was on the decline, following years of struggling to keep developers at bay. Arthur Hollins had himself inherited the farm from his father at the tender age of fourteen in the 1920s and, seen by many as an eccentric, was one of the few farmers who remained organic after the Second World War.

"After the war everyone was pushing food produce and using chemical fertilisers to promote crop growth. But dad didn't think that was the right way to go, as it wasn't doing the soil any good. The fertilisers feed the plants but not the soil. Once the plant has taken what it needs the rest is wasted and if you keep applying it there will be no fertility left in the soil. He slowly researched soil fertility and nutrient cycling and saw, through trial and error, that by using natural muck you get out what you put in, although it is slower and therefore more expensive. The local farmers thought he was a crack-pot," Charlotte explains.

Arthur was one of the pioneers of what is now called organics, developing it throughout his life. The farm went through numerous stages to its current use as a pasture farm, and all the while their father was giving talks on organic practices, so Ben and Charlotte grew up in this progressive and forward thinking environment.

In order to develop it as a pasture farm Charlotte explains: "Dad brought different grass species, which were all accustomed to different climates so the cattle can stay out all year round. Each field has a wooded area and a natural spring-fed pool. He was one of the first to try this type of





foggage farming, which is based around balance and using everything natural to is most efficient." The result of feeding the cattle and sheep all year on herbs and grass means the meat has higher contents of the essential fatty acid omega 3, so is healthier and also much more flavoursome.

Arthur passed away in January at the age of 89, having put his whole effort into staying on the farm. And now Ben and Charlotte continue the fight. They are both also relatively young for taking on such an enormous burden - Charlotte is 23 and Ben 21 - but on speaking to Charlotte there is an air of confidence and maturity that would be lacking in many of her peers.

"Dad never pushed us into farming. He wanted it to be our own choice," she explains. Charlotte gained a first class honours degree at university in environmental management and maths and Ben gained an HND in agriculture. However, because they were facing a notice to quit the farm, of which the family has always been tenants, they had all but given up on it and were looking elsewhere. Then they met someone who would change it all.

Mike Kay and his German wife Dagmar visited the farm in 2003, as Arthur was mentioned in a book of English eccentrics for having designed a crop feeder to replace the plough. Mike had himself owned an organic farm in the south and Charlotte tells me: "He got hooked by our story, due to the fact the family had been here so long and owing to dad's enthusiasm. He worked with us until April last year, when he returned to Germany, to come up with the idea for the Fordhall Project, a community initiative to save the farm from being broken up and sold."

The concept behind the project is to reconnect people with the land, while guaranteeing that farming will be an affordable way of life for generations to come. They garnered local and national support from various volunteers and organisations for a new form of community ownership structure, developed by Greg Pilley a national expert on local food and Community Supported Agriculture and Martin Large.

"The Fordhall Community Land Initiative was incorporated as a Society for the Benefit of the Community (Industrial and Provident Society). This structure will raise the money to buy the farm and then lease the land back to us for as long as we want to stay here," Charlotte explains. "We'll continue to farm the land and it will also be developed into a community asset as an educational resource,



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promoting healthy living and sustainable farming techniques and an area for all to access. Work has already started on renovating g buildings and a nature trail's been developed.

"A lot of the project has been done at the farm previously, as dad had always given lectures and had school groups visiting. This is just putting a modern twist on it and seeing how it could work commercially."

The launch of the Community Land Initiative was held recently and has attracted the interest of the national and regional media. "The word has just spread through people who are interested. We sent out thousands of letters to begin with to as many organisations and people we could think of. It was hard going for the first 12 to 18 months, but we are completely motivated by keeping the farm and with so many people offering their help and support it really enthruses you, and gives you the necessary boost when you get down," Charlotte notes. "Most of the people getting involved are interested in wildlife, bio-diversity and a natural way of life and want to support these kind of issues."

They now have until July 2006 in which to raise the £800,000 required to purchase the freehold in the land. This they hope to do through a combination of fund-raising activities and the sale of shares in the Trust. People can buy returnable, but non-transferable and non-tradable shares, valued at £50, which includes a free membership to Friends of Fordhall for one year. Although the shares are non-profit making, it allows people to support what the farm represents.

"This is the first trust of its kind to be set up and its hoped it will be used as an example for other similar initiatives throughout the country. It's amazing that the farm was pioneering in being organic years ago, and now it's pioneering as a community farm project," Charlotte enthuses.

She is confident they will raise the funds to save the farm. "We've come too far and moved on so much. There is so much support it has to work. If Fordhall Farm is secured and leased out by the Community Group it can ensure that the small farmer will be given an opportunity to maintain and capitalise on family traditions."

And if it does work, Charlotte can't ever see herself or Ben wanting to move on. "It's part of us." ■

*Anyone wanting to find out more about the Fordhall Farm Project or interested in buying shares in the Trust can visit the website at [HYPERLINK "http://www.fordhallorganicfarm.co.uk"](http://www.fordhallorganicfarm.co.uk) [www.fordhallorganicfarm.co.uk](http://www.fordhallorganicfarm.co.uk) or contact Charlotte or Sophie Hopkins on email [HYPERLINK "mailto:project@fordhallfarm.com"](mailto:project@fordhallfarm.com) [project@fordhallfarm.com](mailto:project@fordhallfarm.com) or telephone 01630 638696.*

