



**Jack Watkins**  
visits a  
Shropshire  
farm that is  
looking for  
local landlords

**C**ould community involvement be about to throw a lifeline to some of the UK's endangered smaller farms? A pioneering scheme is taking its inspiration from the Community Supported Agriculture (CSA) movement in the USA. There are about 1,500 schemes in America in which private individuals provide capital for land trusts.

Greg Pilley is a local food enterprise consultant and a past project leader of a Soil Association programme to encourage communities to develop stronger links with food sources. He says the motivation for CSA here has been about easing the burden of purchasing farmland.

"In the USA, the trusts work differently in that it's not so much about buying land as removing the right to use it for anything else. What we face here is more difficult to overcome because the cost of agricultural land is generally far greater than it is possible to earn from it."

Land trusts are a mechanism to remove land from the marketplace, separating the enterprise that is operating on it from the value of the land itself.

"If you can remove the cost of land, the farm enterprise will often be more viable than it would otherwise have been," explains Greg. "You can see that when you compare family owned farms against tenanted ones. The owned farm where there is no mortgage is the more likely to survive."

Greg is a founder member of Stroud Community Agriculture, a small community owned business based in Gloucestershire with a turnover of £60,000 that employs farmers to produce meat and vegetables for its 100-strong membership. In partnership with local publisher and fellow pioneer of social enterprise schemes Martin Large, funding has been secured from Carnegie UK and the Tudor Trust for a two-year Community Farm Land Trust project.

#### **Promoting initiatives**

Explains Greg: "One of the aims is to support a number of emerging community farm land trusts. We facilitate meetings between interested parties and provide technical advice and expertise.

"We might bring in legal help to assist with their incorporation and organisation, or on drawing up tenancy arrangements between the trust and the new tenants. We can help promote their initiatives and fundraising strategies and we are also putting together a web-based action pack and forming a steering group.

"There are several initiatives around the country, but as yet there has been no way to network and communicate learning."

One area of concern is the issue of county council owned farms, now facing serious questions over their





future. It's a pressing matter, says Greg, because county council farms have traditionally provided new entrants an affordable step into the industry.

"They have tended to have a philosophy of progression, with short-term tenancies, because there's an acceptance that the tenant won't remain there for ever, making it easier for them to move up the ladder to larger farms."

**Funding questions**

But now councils are facing tough questions about whether they can continue to justify running them for the benefit of farmers when the resources could be diverted to health and education.

"Anybody working with county council farms sees the real service they are doing," says Greg. "But it's still a difficult one to answer. In Gloucestershire, for instance, the council has £30 million of assets tied up in farms benefiting about 100 farmers, when the money could be used to establish primary or secondary schools for thousands of pupils."

Greg says Stroud Community Agriculture is looking to acquire land, and that it is in talks with Gloucestershire County Council about entering some form of community farm arrangement. "It would link the public more closely with the farm, which could also be used to stage celebrations and cultural activities. The council could remain the landlord, but a greater number of people would then be benefitting from the community enterprise on that farm."

Every movement draws strength from a *cause celebre* to help it gain momentum, and Greg agrees that the widest publicity for CSA is now being generated by a campaign being waged by a group of under 25-year-olds near Market Drayton in Shropshire.



Charlotte Hollins, left, her brother, Ben, and project manager Sophie Hopkins.

The Fordhall Farm Community Land Trust initiative has to raise £800,000 by this July if the 55-hectare farm is not to be sold off for development.

Spearheading the challenge are its tenant farmers, Charlotte Hollins, aged 23, and her brother Ben, 21, backed by project manager Sophie Hopkins, 23.

Their youth would be enough in itself to garner a few column inches, but the fascinating history of the farm guarantees it.

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**Farming history**

The Hollins family have been tenants at Fordhall Farm for centuries but, in a remarkable parallel with Charlotte and Ben, children from his second marriage, Arthur Hollins had responsibility for running it thrust upon him at the even earlier age of 14 in the 1930s.

At a time when the trend was strongly towards intensification, Arthur reversed the work of his father, determining to return to compost farming and experimenting in nutrient cycling and soil fertility. Effectively, he was one of the first organic farmers before the term was recognised, though, as Charlotte says, it seems strange to call him a pioneer.

"He wasn't actually doing anything new, but going back to what had been done before."

To fund his research, Arthur developed what would now be described as value added milk products, including yogice, yogtails (yoghurt ice cream, and alcoholic yoghurts) and soft cheeses, which were stocked by London stores Selfridges and Fortnum and Mason among others. →



- Above: Connie Hollins
- Left: Charlotte Hollins wants to continue the organic methods pioneered by her late father, Arthur