



Two Shropshire farmers in their early twenties are plotting a quiet revolution in British agriculture. **Bill Taylor** went to meet them

HISTORY HAS a way of repeating itself at Fordhall Farm. In 1929, the organic pioneer Arthur Hollins took over the farm at the age of fourteen when his father died. The family was in debt and eviction seemed a real possibility, but Arthur fought successfully to establish Fordhall as a showpiece of holistic, sustainable agriculture. He died last year at the age of eighty-nine.

Now his youngest children Charlotte and Ben, aged 23 and 21, are in the midst of a campaign to save Fordhall from developers who want to turn part of the land into an industrial estate. They have until July to raise £800,000. If anything, the stakes are higher this time. The Fordhall campaign has become a test case for the future of British agriculture.

Charlotte and Ben Hollins have launched an international appeal to sell shares in Fordhall at £50 each. If they raise enough to buy the farm,

Farming co-operative ... new entrants can't buy farms any more,' says Charlotte Hollins. 'This is a way of taking the land value out of the equation'. Top left, Ben and Charlotte with their father Arthur, 'eccentric and entrepreneurial' who pioneered organic farming since before World War Two



Raising the stakes

it will be owned by a Community Land Trust on behalf of the shareholders. Charlotte and Ben will then rent the farm from this co-operative trust. It is the first scheme of its kind in the UK.

As well as ensuring the survival of the holistic farming principles that Arthur Hollins fought so hard to establish, this model of community-owned farms is seen as one of the few ways that young farmers of the future will be able to afford a foothold on the land. If it succeeds, it will indeed her-

ald a quiet revolution in agriculture.

"This project is unique," says Charlotte, "a model for the rest of the country. New entrants to agriculture can't buy farms any more. This is a way of taking the land value out of the equation. Our chances are pretty good. Everything we're doing is right with public opinion. It works now or it doesn't work at all. We need people to put their money where their mouth is."

Some big names in the environmental world have given their support already,

ncluding Sting, Monty Don, Zac Goldsmith and Patrick Holden of the Soil Association. Prince Charles offered a tour of Highgrove as an auction prize to help raise funds. There is a sense that the whole organic movement is on trial here.

"The public response has been great. If every person we met and had phone calls from actually bought a share, we'd be there by now. One chap sent £1,000 – you only need eight hundred people like that.

"We had a letter from one man who bought a share for his son. He said: 'I can't buy him a farm, so maybe this is the next best thing'. We have support from retired farmers who say that farming today has lost its centre. We have one shareholder in Australia who thinks what we're doing is fantastic."

At the heart of the Hollins' campaign is the commitment not only to save Fordhall as a working farm, but to turn it into a place that will 'reconnect people with the land and food'.

In practice, this means building a bunkhouse for visiting school groups and an education centre to explain to city children the natural cycle of pasture to plate. There will also be a farm shop and organic tea rooms.

"We hope that visitors will take away an idea of why we eat and appreciate everything that is involved in growing our food. A lot of children don't get a chance to come out of the city and develop a deep understanding of farming life.

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FORDHALL PHOTOCALL: 'pure, live, nutritious' is a message that rings as true today as it did in the farm's post war heyday



always the centre of communities and that's been lost over the generations. People are only going to eat more healthy food if they can see it grown for themselves."

When Arthur Hollins started out as a fourteen-year-old farmer, he approved of chemical fertilizers as his father had done before him. Slowly, however, he discovered that spraying ever more chemicals on his fields did not continue to increase the yield, while wild woodland and pasture fertilized by cow muck seemed more productive. So began Arthur Hollins' lifelong research into soils and natural fertility.

Philip Conford, author of *The Origins of the Organic Movement*, takes up the story: "Fordhall's most successful period was from the mid-1940s until 1975, when his first wife May died. His second wife Connie attributes his extraordinary energy to his home-grown diet. During this productive time, Hollins converted the farm to organic, established a nationwide business both making and marketing organic yoghurt, ran a country club and restaurant and invented the 'pulvoseeder'.

Where to find Fordhall

Fordhall Farm lies on the outskirts of Market Drayton in Shropshire. Directions are on their website: www.fordhallfarm.com

To buy shares in Fordhall's community land trust, phone 01630 638696 or email project@fordhallfarm.com

You can also buy their beef, lamb and pork by mail order. Details on the website



"This machine avoided damage to the soil which he believed was caused by the plough. Arthur Hollins' success with pasture was such that the cattle were robust enough to stay outdoors all year round, a policy his family still follow."

Fordhall has now been pesticide-free for more than sixty years. "My dad was very eccentric and entrepreneurial," says Charlotte, "and tried always to think of new things to do on the farm. He was always working on it and improving it. It was only in the last few years of his life, he felt: 'I've got it right now'."

With Charlotte and Ben Hollins, the whole family struggle begins again. They are building up their stock of free-range cattle, sheep and pigs. For now the farm shop pays the rent and bills. All their meat is slaughtered and butchered locally. With the help of volunteers, the Hollins have also set up a nature trail and a picnic area.

"We think things are turning round. Every time there's a food scare on TV we have a rush in the shop, though it doesn't last. The first step is for people to buy local and organic comes next.

"Buying direct from farmers is the way to go. The inflated price of organic food in the supermarkets doesn't come back to the farmer. At the same time, the amount of money everyone spends on junk is startling. People simply eat too much of the wrong stuff."

In these days of great uncertainty for British agriculture, perhaps Charlotte and Ben Hollins will emerge as the Right Stuff. Certainly, they offer a sense of hope. At Fordhall, the farm manager and the leader and manager of the community land appeal are all under twenty-five. I can't imagine hat they won't stay on the land. ■

Reconnecting people with the land and food the Hollins are also bidding to save Fordhall as a working farm

