

Cover story

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important to get people to your farm to see how you rear your livestock, so they can feel confident and safe."

They want to build an education resource room thereby investing in the next generation, a "bunkhouse" to accommodate schoolchildren and volunteers, an organic café, a farm shop and, of course, happy animals, fully sustainable hedges and a fine array of natural greens.

Even the landlord was impressed. "They are very young but have shown enormous determination since they took over the farm, which is why the trustees are prepared to give them this opportunity," says Philip Gosal, a land agent at Carter Jonas, which is acting for the landlord.

With the launch of the Fordhall Community Land Initiative, Ben and Charlotte have until July 1 to raise £800,000 to save the farm, by issuing thousands of "co-operative" shares, each costing £50. They cannot be traded and no profits can be made from them. "The idea is that a trust will hold the land for the community, so it can never be developed," says Ben, who will lease the land with Charlotte as tenant farmers. The plan is the brainchild of Greg Pilley and Martin Large, of Stroud Common Wealth, a Gloucestershire-based consultancy that advises on community land deals, and which was recommended by the Soil Association.

Ben is in the unusual position of being a student farmer while running his own farm. He studies agriculture at Harper Adams, a nearby university college, three mornings a week – after first feeding the Hereford cows and Gloucester Old Spot pigs, the traditional breeds with which he is restocking the farm. Isn't this all, I ask, a massive responsibility? "If I had a pound for every time someone said that, we would have raised all the money by now – maybe twice over," he says. "I don't see it as a responsibility."

Ben and Charlotte are good-natured and exude youthful energy. He lifts calves with one hand and is adept at butchering cows; she bends the ears of "suits" 30 years her senior and can type 60 words per minute. He is practical, calm, silent; she is talkative, "stressy" and drives the campaign. Farming, they say, is all about passion.

"It is this optimism and vitality that is so heartening," says Patrick Holden, saluting their determination. "They say yes to things. They don't know how to do it, but they're going to do it anyway."

So far, they have raised £65,000 of their £800,000 target. They have also applied for grants from Grantscape, the Garfield



CHRISTOPHER JONES; IAN JONES; ANDREW CROWLEY/AP



Harvesting hope: Ben and Charlotte Hollins with project manager Sophie Hopkins (centre) in the farm shop; and high-profile backers (above left, from top) Prince Charles, Zac Goldsmith and Sting, who has bought £2,000 worth of Fordhall shares

‘The young team is encouraged by the amount of support the farm is getting, and ‘completely blown away’ by the passion’

Weston Foundation and other bodies, but it will be June before they know if they have been successful.

"Of course, we'll do it," says Sophie Hopkins, the 24-year-old project manager. "I was completely blown away by the passion. There is so much support out there."

The fight for Fordhall Farm could have been a quiet footnote in a personal history, but today's generation has made it a headline. Fordhall is being held up as a David and Goliath battle to protect the countryside against all sorts of threats: chemically-intensive agriculture, house building, retail sheds, the monopoly of supermarkets.

Fordhall's three fields, which fall from woodland down to the edge of the River Tern, have been a haven for wildlife for more than half a century, says the Shropshire Wildlife Trust. The nettles and thistles most farmers would tidy away are crucial to that natural system, says John Hughes, the trust's development manager. "It's really one of our last reserves of wildlife that we can use to recolonise the rest of the countryside. If you wipe away Fordhall, everything is gone."

A flick through the farm's 400 shareholders reveals a wide range of banners: conservationists, environmentalists, nutritionists, educationists, wood-recycling experts, businesses, "green" rock stars (Sting bought £2,000 worth of shares), organically-certified royalty (Prince Charles has donated a tour of Highgrove as an auction prize), Ecologist editor Zac Goldsmith, who has praised Fordhall in print, inner-city families from Birmingham and London, young people who want to support other young people and old people who recall

how farms used to be. "My son wants to be a farmer," says one. "I said, 'I can't afford to buy you a farm, but I'll buy you a share in one.'" The shares entitle buyers to vote on how the trust looks after the farm's assets. If the bid to save the farm fails, shareholders can have the money refunded, minus administrative costs, or donate the funds to Friends of the Earth or the Shropshire Wildlife Trust.

What drew me to the farm was the pleasure of being able to get out into the countryside and actually do something, such as putting up a fence or planting trees, rather than just going for a walk around someone else's fences and trees," says Christoph Alexander, a writer from south London who is a regular volunteer. "It's a great way to feel part of a community of people who are willing to work for love and enthusiasm, rather than financial reward."

That's just as well, because the core team earn a pittance. Charlotte gets £150 a week from working at an old people's home, Ben lives on £90 a week from fitting out milking parlours, and the farm shop brings in about £1,000 a week. After months of working for nothing, Sophie is now funded by an EU grant, but, like Charlotte, she often works until 2am "catching up" while Ben goes to see his girlfriend. "We're really exhausted," says Sophie, "but there are too many opportunities to miss."

The signs outside are of regeneration: a picnic area, farm shop, newly-planted trees, a nature trail, even a beetle bank, made out of canes, to encourage ladybirds and other beetles – all created by volunteers. But the

gloom begins the minute you walk into the farmhouse and see wallpaper peeling off walls, ivy breaking through the windows, dead-flower arrangements, faded prints, a tragic bar with dusty bottles from the long-gone country club days and the unique squalor you get from papers and knick-knacks lying undisturbed for decades. There is no central heating; ice forms on the inside of windows, and in winter five layers of clothing are an absolute must.

"The landlords have said that if we want anything repaired to do it ourselves. And we haven't got the money, so unless it's things like the farm shop for the business, we've left it," says Charlotte. Last November, though, she spent several late nights with Sophie clearing the "office" – the old sitting room that was stacked high with 25 years of paperwork.

But this is the advantage of youth, when people have the nerve and energy to focus on the dream, rather than getting bogged down in reality. "What, I ask Ben, will you do if it doesn't work out? He pauses. "I don't know... get a council house and a job, I suppose. I haven't really thought about it."

■ For more information, or if you wish to purchase lifelong £50 shares in Fordhall Farm for yourself or for your children (each share buys 32 square metres of land and entitles the holder to a vote at the annual general meeting), contact Fordhall Community Land Initiative (01630 638696; www.fordhallfarm.com).

■ Fordhall Community Land Initiative is holding a fund-raising charity ball on Saturday May 13 and a Family Fund Day, on Sunday, June 11. It also has regular volunteer weekends.

‘It's the muck that does it'

The eco-pioneers: Arthur Hollins – first in an occasional series

Among the visionaries who worked to save the planet long before the current fashion for all things green, Arthur Hollins (below, with second wife, Connie) achieved widespread recognition as an organic pioneer, but his beginnings could not have been more inauspicious. He took over Fordhall, aged 14, in 1929, when his father died, leaving debts of more than £1,000 because of the poor yield from acres of sub-fertile "niggardly" land.

Driven by the intensive food production of the First World War effort, Arthur's father had embraced artificial fertilisers, the fashionable creed of his time, which resulted in an ever-increasing decline in the fertility of Fordhall's sandy soil. "No matter whom I turned to for advice they always recommended the same thing: more artificial fertiliser," he writes in his memoirs, *The Farmer, the Plough and the Devil*.

But young Arthur was struck by the big difference in the rich growth in the wood-lands, and by the prolific allotment of his stockman. "It's the muck that does it, that's all," he said. "Tons and tons of muck."

Shortly after the Second World War, Hollins developed a farming method that would form the basis of 21st-century organic principles. Relying solely on animal muck as fertiliser, he pioneered the "foggage" system, which allows the pastures to accumulate enough grass in the growing season to sustain cattle outdoors, all year round, rather than bringing the herd in during winter to feed on synthetic supplements. (Devotees maintain that the meat has a lot more flavour.)

He also invented the Pulvoseeder (renamed the Cultureseeder), an eco-friendly alternative to the plough, which he

believed upset the natural cycles of the soil. Designed to seed and feed as it goes, while maintaining the balance of soil bacteria, the Cultureseeder was never manufactured, but it is now acknowledged that ploughing is the biggest cause of carbon loss.

In his desire to process products on the farm and reconnect with the public, Hollins was an early model of what is now fashionable. With his then wife, May, he was the first in the country to sell live yoghurt, in the 1950s, and was soon supplying leading London stores, such as Fortnum & Mason, and Selfridges, with

products including Yogice and Yogtails – yoghurt mixed with alcohol. The couple also sold healthy salads, such as raw grated beetroot and orange, innovative now, let alone in 1950s Market Drayton. This was Fordhall's boom period, when it was one of the biggest employers in the area. Part of the

farmhouse was set aside for a "country club", where people could stay and relax, and a restaurant serving home-grown food. Visitors – university students, Women's Institute and school parties – were encouraged, and Fordhall working holidays were advertised in Australia and New Zealand.

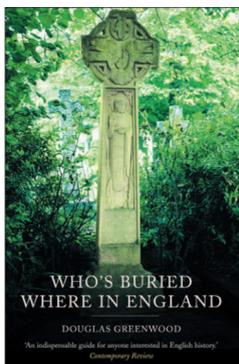
By the 1960s, Hollins's reputation had spread (he is listed in a German book on great British eccentrics) and he found an ally in Lady Eve Balfour, founder of the Soil Association (SA). "He was one of the few high-profile leading figures of his time," says Patrick Holden, SA director.

The dairy and country club closed after the death of May, his first wife, in the mid-1970s, but the farm continued to produce meat and the restaurant was open until the mid-1990s.

SW



telegraph books



Who's Buried Where in England

Douglas Greenwood £14.99

This is the definitive guide to the last resting places of the famous. It gives details of the final burial places of illustrious men and women in English history, from early royalty up to the 21st century.

The 350 entries include politicians, members of the armed forces, celebrities, heroes, criminals and eccentrics. It features recent figures such as Spike Milligan but goes as far back as Boadicea – who is buried under platform 10 at King's Cross Station.

Illustrated throughout, it is an intriguing volume, which includes a brief biography for each entry and a geographical checklist by county. It is rich source of fascinating information.

Call 0870 155 7222 or visit www.books.telegraph.co.uk

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PETSUBJECTS



CELIA HADDON

Just before Easter 2001, I went into our old parish church with Maisie, our field spaniel, to pray for animals and farmers during the foot and mouth epidemic. Half a dozen people were rehearsing an Easter play. The music suddenly became loud and the figure of Christ (the vicar) staggered up the aisle wearing a crown of thorns and carrying a wooden cross. A centurion was cracking a whip and the "crowd" were shouting. Maisie raised her head, looked at me with agonised eyes and seemed ready to go and rescue Jesus. Then she put her paws on my shoulder, and her expression said: "Can't we help him?" The play then moved up to the altar, I soothed Maisie and we slowly left the church. Dogs can teach us so many things.

SL, Needham Market, Suffolk

After learning that a cardinal's dog had walked out of the new Catholic mass,

I asked if dogs ever seemed to have liturgical preferences and it turns out that several dogs attend church.

"We took Fleet, our border collie, to a dawn Easter service at the top of May Hill in Herefordshire, and he began to howl when people started singing accompanied by a guitar," reports his owner. "This may have been because he had never heard a guitar before, though I often play worship tapes so he is used to this style of singing. Whether he would have howled had he been at a high church service, I don't know."

Howling suggests to me that he enjoyed the service and was joining in. Another dog, Tops, regularly attends the village church with his owner and behaves in a quiet and reverent way. "When he attends a communion service he is told to wait in the open aisle where he can see his mistress. Despite people walking past him all the time, he never stirs."

Harvey, our very own Easter bunny, has developed some charming habits. He sits beside my chair at mealtimes; dashes into his box whenever I open the fridge door because he thinks he's trained me to give him a carrot when he sits there; sorts through anything new he finds on the floor; runs through each room every morning before settling under the table; and pushes his head into my hand when I reach down to stroke him. He gets excited and sings when it's time for breakfast. I came downstairs yesterday to find him stretched out in front of the fire, fast asleep, totally in possession of his home.

JM, by email
The charm of house bunnies surprises

people who thought rabbits were just boring animals in hutches. Because house rabbits live in close contact with humans, they become as affectionate as cats or dogs. The tragedy for many rabbits is that the traditional way of keeping them is to have just a single rabbit in a hutch with nothing to do except stare out upon the world.

This Easter, the Rabbit Welfare Fund is warning rabbit owners to take steps to protect their bunnies from a fatal disorder. Every year, hundreds of pet rabbits are killed by fly maggots. These hatch out in the dirt on their bottoms and then eat into the living flesh. All rabbits should be checked daily in hot weather and fed a diet that consists mainly of hay. There is also an excellent preventative spray, Rearguard, available from vets.

We have a stray cat, Bill, who we believe has always been fed on biscuits and will now eat nothing else. He has an enlarged liver. We would like to get him on a more varied diet, but have so far failed to tempt him. How can we change his food to tinned?

R H, Bodmin, Cornwall

Cats are very strong-willed creatures, which is why so many people find they are obliged to buy the most expensive cat food. Nor can you starve cats into eating different food – it's not safe. Try rolling the biscuits in a tiny amount of the tinned food and serving them this way. Then, if Bill will eat them, very slowly, over several weeks, increase the proportion of tinned food. Or try mixing the tinned food with

a super-treat. For instance, if Bill likes tinned tuna (and many cats do) then serve a small portion of tuna and tinned cat food mixed 50:50. Again, slowly increase the proportion of tinned food. If he turns up his nose at these tactics, at least make sure he has enough water.

We are running a "Purrfect Purrems" competition to get British cat lovers to send in their "purrems" and win the chance to have them published, alongside celebrities' poems, in the *Whiskas Book of Purrems*. The book will raise funds for pets in need of vets.

LW, Whiskas, London

This column never uses poetry but I know many readers write them. Enter the "Whiskas Purrfect Purrems Competition", by logging on to www.whiskas.co.uk, or by writing to Whiskas Purrfect Purrems, c/o Ketchum, PO Box 4064, 206 Whitechapel Road, London E1 6AU. Manuscripts cannot be returned so keep a copy. The deadline is May 31.

RESCUE ME

Rosie (right), a four-year-old female Easter bunny, is in search of a home where there is plenty of space. She was brought into the Mayhew Animal Home in London from a house where there were too many rabbits due to uncontrolled breeding.

To prevent that happening again Rosie has been spayed so she can have a home with another rabbit for company. The Mayhew Animal Home will handle the introduction, or home

her with one of the 20 or so rabbits they already have.

"She is rather nervous and distrustful, so needs a home without young children," says Caroline Yates of the Mayhew. "The owners will need a spacious hutch and a run that is at least three meters square. She enjoys a good run around."

Because the Mayhew has limited floor space it has recently opened a series of rabbit towers, ingeniously increasing the space by building vertically. So many rabbits are unwanted pets that the Mayhew has a long list of ones needing rehoming.

Should you want an Easter bunny there are plenty to rescue. If you can give a home to Rosie or another rabbit, phone 020 8968 2350 or email info@mayhewanimalhome.org.



■ Celia Haddon regrets that she cannot answer all readers' letters personally. All sick animals should, of course, be taken to a vet.