

FOCUS

Young farmers save an organic vision

When Ben and Charlotte Hollins lost their father, they faced a race against time to save his organic farm from developers. Now, aided by 7,000 investors, their buyout signals not only a victory for the organic farming industry but one for the people.

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SHROPSHIRE, Britain
In the English countryside today, young farmers are as rare as hedgehogs: Most of them have vanished over the past two decades. To put it mildly, a farmer's lot is not a happy one and, as more than 20 percent of farm businesses made a loss last year, it's a wonder there are any left at all.

On the National Federation of Young Farmers' Clubs Web site, the main news is of next year's annual general meeting. "What music would you like to hear at the AGM?" the Web site asks, "Chesney Hawkes, BBC Radio 1 DJs, an Abba or Queen tribute band?" Even young farmers are out of date nowadays, it seems. Brother and sister Ben and Charlotte Hollins, 22 and 24 respectively, who are just about to buy the organic Shropshire farm in northern England where their family has worked as tenant farmers for 700 years, are something of an anomaly then.

When I arrive at the 56-hectare Fordhall Farm on the outskirts of Market Drayton, Ben and Charlotte are not the awkward young farmers I expected. They are so engaging and funny that the writers of "The Archers" could use them as a blueprint for some new, non-irritating characters. They come with their own dramatic backstory, after all, having spent the past year campaigning to stave off eviction from Fordhall.

This wasn't just a battle to preserve family honor, but to save one of Britain's oldest organic farms. Fordhall helped to define the whole contemporary movement of a holistic and sustainable agricultural system without chemicals.

Arthur Hollins, Ben and Charlotte's father, pioneered an array of techniques and the land has now been fully organic for some 65 years. Lady Eve Balfour, founder of the Soil Association, which is the voice of the organic food sector in Britain, used to visit on fact-finding missions. And yet, while consumers stuffed their trolleys with organic produce, swelling the market to a £1.2 billion (\$2.3 billion) pesticide-free fruit and veg fest, planning authorities still considered it appropriate to concrete over Fordhall.

Arthur's last years were spent fighting the owner's attempt to sell the land for development. In 2005 the family was given until this summer to raise the money to buy the land. Ben and Charlotte refused to capitulate, and hooked up with Greg Pillely from the Soil Association and Martin Large, chair of the Stroud Community Land Trust, both experts in

the innovative practice of using cooperative, nonprofit business models to mutualize the land holding. In this way land can be purchased by a land trust and will be forever affordable to individuals, accessible to the community and managed in an environmentally sustainable way.

According to Large, the buyout by the Fordhall Community Land Initiative is "as significant for England as the 1996 Isle of Eigg community buyout was for Scotland, sparking the 2003 Scottish Land Reform Act, which gave the community the right to buy, with startup help from the Scottish Land Fund." It has, you might say, more than a whiff of revolution about it.

When we visit, it's the eve of Ben's 22nd birthday, but he's too busy to take time out. "Day off?" he snorts, before admitting he might go out for drinks with some of the volunteers helping him with the hay baling this week. He's gone halves on the hire of the bailer with the farmer next door — who, incidentally, is growing grapes this year, so look out for some Chateau de Market Drayton sometime soon.

There is also, of course, the danger that once Ben and Charlotte start celebrating, they'll never stop. After all, they have just executed the biggest turnaround since David whipped Goliath's sorry ass. When Arthur died last year, aged 90, Ben and Charlotte inherited a tenancy to a near-derelict farm and an imminent eviction order. Today they have raised more than £1 million through the Fordhall Community Land Initiative, and in September, the Hollinses will formally hand over £800,000 to the landlords they have alternately fought and pleaded with for nearly 15 years, and become Fordhall's owners. The rest of the money will go into the farm shop and development of an education center. At the time this article was written, Fordhall had sold around 7,000 shares to people all over Britain and, indeed, all over the planet. Shareholders don't receive dividends but they do get voting rights.

It's the kind of upward mobility that is supposed to be our birthright in the 21st century, but for fledgling tenant farmers it's a near-impossible coup to pull off. The story of the Hollinses' imminent eviction was first reported back in October 2005. Then, Fordhall had just nine months to go before it would be sold to developers. The story triggered a huge response and checks and offers of interest-free loans flooded into the farmhouse office, presided over by Charlotte and project manager Sophie Hopkins, who, approaching the age of 25, is the office



ARTHUR HOLLINS at Fordhall. Hollins pioneered many organic farming techniques and made his farm one of the first fully organic ones in Britain. FORDHALL FARM PHOTOS

grande dame.

It is from here that the 7,000-plus share certificates have been issued. The room is filled with books, papers and photographs of Arthur, the wiry and wild-haired organic pioneer, all punctuated with word-processed quotations designed by Charlotte, such as Bernard Berenson's "Miracles happen to those who believe in them." They were created to spur on the campaigners when times looked bleak. In fact the miracle continues to happen, as checks are still appearing, despite the fact that the deadline has passed and the rare-breed sheep, cattle and pigs that Ben has bought to restock Fordhall, are safe from eviction.

"At one stage it was crazy," says Charlotte, who compulsively slides her hand into the letter box outside to check for new missives every time we go past. "We had volunteers waving check after check, going, 'Look, this one's for £2,000,' or whatever." The postman began phoning ahead with news of the day's volume of mail.

Some of the checks were, naturally, of the celebrity variety: Sting contributed money, actress Prunella Scales and Ecologist editor Zac Goldsmith were vociferous supporters, while Prince Charles provided a bespoke tour of Highgrove to be auctioned off at a fundraiser.

But the majority of shares were issued to normal people who didn't believe that 65 years of organic heritage and biodiverse pasture land should be paved over to provide warehouses for a dairy corporation, a site for housing or another shopping facility. Thousands of people bought a £50 share and took a stand against the fact that, according to the Campaign to Protect Rural England (CPRE), an area the size of medium sized town is lost to development each year.

"I can sort of see what people get from it," says Charlotte, surveying the volunteers who are out, midweek, bailing hay with Ben, "but you can't believe people will give up their time like that to help this place. I think with the share issue, the timing was just right. People are in that frame of mind. There's so much negativity about the future, pollution and global warming, all these big issues that people feel are way beyond their control. So when people were buying shares it seemed to empower them."

There is no denying that Fordhall is an exceptionally beautiful farm; nor is there any denying the shadow cast across the cow field by the gigantic gray sheds belonging to the farm's neighbor and one-time bidder for its land, Muller Dairy, the dairy corporation. The "LLER" of the distinctive logo is clearly visible, as are the huge lorry-park lights that stretch across four hectares that used to belong to Fordhall. The landlords sold them some 10 years ago.

Neither Ben nor Charlotte has ever "enjoyed" a Muller probiotic yogurt drink. "Never had one, never will eat one," says Ben matter-of-factly. But here the rancor ends. This is impressive because more than half of Ben and Charlotte's life, and the last 15 years of their father's, was overshadowed by the threat of eviction and the stress of fighting the land-owning trust through court.

When Muller arrived in the early 1990s, Fordhall's demise looked certain, as the

dairy negotiated with land agents to annex Fordhall's organic pastures. Presumably there would have been little local resistance — after all, Muller was and is a significant employer in Market Drayton and a thirsty receptacle for local milk — a lifeline for many farmers.

In the end Muller decided to expand across the road instead, but any victory for the Hollinses was pyrrhic, as the landlords merely moved on to other developers, keen to follow a standard pattern of rural "development."

"It would have been hived off," explains Charlotte, "a bit for industrial use, maybe an out-of-town health club and they'd maybe have left the house with some land for a paddock for a couple of ponies." It couldn't have been easy to return from university, as Charlotte did, to a chronically ill father and a mother, Connie, worn out by stress, and to try to sort them out a council house. "By that stage the farm was completely run down. It was so bad you just never wanted to bring anybody back here."

Today, the farmhouse is heavy on bucolic charm; in fact the roof looks like it might be collapsing with it. When Charlotte decorated her bedroom last year, they stripped off the wallpaper to find an original William Morris design beneath. The defining characteristic of Fordhall, however, which has withstood the foot-and-mouth crisis and a decade of court fees, is Arthur's organic pasture land.

His legacy to Ben and Charlotte was, in effect, a painstakingly researched organic system, based on diversified grasses and crop rotation, all designed to enable wildlife and to feed nutrients back into the ground.

"Dad was quite eccentric," says Charlotte — which, from what I can make out, is an understatement. A fervent admirer of the efficacy of cowpats, by all accounts his party piece involved dissecting them with his bare hands and enthusing about their nutrient quota. He also believed that the "plow unbuttons everything," ransacking soils and their nutrients, and developed a kinder alternative — the Pulvoseeder — of which a patented prototype awaits investment in a Fordhall outbuilding.

Arthur was also a proponent of diversification before anybody else knew what it was. The gardens contain a wonderful crumbling pond/swimming pool hybrid, part of a country-club scheme he devised in the '50s. And he revived yogurt-making in the area — a horrible irony given that his last years involved showdowns with yogurt behemoths Muller.

However, according to Ben and Charlotte it was Arthur's very eccentricity that led them to salvation, by way of a serendipitous meeting. Following his death in January 2005, a German couple arrived in Market Drayton for a holiday, clutching an out-of-print German book on English eccentrics that included a page on Arthur and his organic yogurt-making enterprises. Because the family was out, the German couple never met them, but left the book in their guesthouse. A few weeks later the woman who owned the guesthouse met Charlotte, who was working at a nursing home, desperately trying to earn some extra money. When Charlotte mentioned that she lived at Fordhall, the woman told her she



BEN AND CHARLOTTE (top), Arthur Hollins' youngest children, with lambs at the farm. Ben now runs the farm while Charlotte manages strategy and administration; Arthur Hollins waves from the Fordhall farmhouse (above).

had read all about Arthur. She had also translated the relevant pages from German for her friend, Martin Large, an expert on community farmland trusts. He paid a visit to Fordhall and decided that Ben and Charlotte had exactly the mix of appeal and resilience needed to drive a community farm project through. The rest, as they say, is history.

Community buyouts are becoming a trend. They are often the only means a community has to protect vital services such as independent village shops. According to VIRSA (Village Retail Services Association), there are now 150 community-owned village shops in England, most established over the past 15 years. In almost all cases this was the last chance for a community to keep basic retail services alive.

Unlike shops, however, stocked and

run presumably by consensus, Ben is clear who makes the farming decisions about Fordhall. It's him, following his father's organic philosophy but bringing the clear-headed 21st-century vision he gained studying at nearby Harper Adams agricultural college.

Meanwhile, Charlotte is in charge of managing the strategy and administration, not to mention bashing out the Fordhall Farm newsletter that will now go out to some 7,000 shareholders — a number which, Ben admits, will make for an interesting annual general meeting next year.

"If everyone comes," he reasons, "it'll probably be a bit more like a big festival." I refrain from suggesting Chesney Hawkes or an Abba tribute band as fitting musical turns.

For more information on Fordhall Farm, check the Web site: www.fordhallfarm.com



BEN AND CHARLOTTE Hollins (left and right) at the Fordhall sign with Sophie Hopkins, project manager and integral member of the team to rescue the farm.