

**O**ver the past three years **FORDHALL FARM** in Market Drayton, Shropshire, has become one of the best known social enterprises in the West Midlands as over 8,000 shareholders from around the world have invested in its future. The heart-warming story perfectly demonstrates the success a local community can have when it is fighting for a common cause. **SE** spoke to **CHARLOTTE HOLLINS**, who set up the enterprise with her brother, Ben.

Fordhall Farm is one of the longest established sites of continuous organic farming in Britain. In 1929 Arthur Hollins took on the tenancy of the farm at the young age of 14 following the death of his father. He carried out extensive research into soil fertility and the relationship between farming and nature and became a pioneer of organic farming methods.

In 2001, the farm was hit financially. The landowners wished to sell, just as the farming industry was experiencing a number of difficulties including foot and mouth disease. Charlotte and Ben, Arthur's youngest children, took it upon themselves to save the farm and their home.

After a long and high profile campaign, the Fordhall Community Land Initiative (FCLI) was established in 2006 and began selling shares to raise capital to buy the land. FCLI succeeded in raising the £800,000 required and took ownership of the land. Speaking about the initiative, Charlotte says: "We began the venture simply by opening up the farm gates and inviting the community to get involved. That's what we felt a community-owned project should be about."

Bringing the land into community ownership enabled Charlotte and Ben to remain tenant farmers. Ben now continues the day-to-day running of the farm business and the last three years have seen significant developments, including the opening of a new farm shop and butchery. At the same time the community enterprise – as the landowner – has developed farm trails, volunteering opportunities and educational visits, which are led by Charlotte, whose role as Project Director and Company Secretary of the Initiative allow her to remain at the forefront of the farm's development.

# REAPING TH

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## Charlotte and Ben's top tips for a successful community-owned enterprise...

- Keep your local community involved from the very beginning.
- Involve your local papers - they are one of the most useful tools for keeping your community involved with your project.
- Always ask for help and advice - this is the most powerful way of involving and empowering people.
- Develop a variety of ways in which people can get involved, such as offering advice, volunteering, offering equipment or stationery, donating money, spreading the word. The more ways you can think of, the easier it is for people to fit your project into their lives.

Charlotte says: "With the support of our community, we have been able to meet our main goal of saving the farm and we are now continuing to work on the objective set by my father many years ago: to reconnect people to the land, food and farming. The community is key to every aspect of the FCLI: it is they who volunteer to help organise our events, they who bring their children and families to walk the farm trail, or they who offer to volunteer on an organised weekend to help put that infrastructure in

place. Their ideas and enthusiasm are what drive our enterprise forward."

The community-owned model has proved highly successful for Fordhall Farm. And it is a model that has seen a boom in the UK in recent years. Charlotte says: "For those people thinking about starting a community project, my advice would be communicate, communicate, communicate – as much and however you can. We networked with the media and local figureheads on a regular basis, frequently updated our website and blog, and kept the community



# THE BENEFITS



**Spot on:** Charlotte and Ben Hollins with a Gloucester Old Spot cross Tamworth pig at Fordhall Farm, the first community-owned farm in England.

- 1929** Arthur Hollins takes over the tenancy of the farm.
- 1940s** The Fordhall Country Club is started, complete with grass tennis courts and swimming pool, and is used to fund Arthur's pioneering work into soil fertility and organics.
- 1992** The farm comes under significant strain due to the foot and mouth crisis and increased pressure from the landowners to sell the land.
- 2004** Two days prior to their eviction, Charlotte and Ben Hollins are successful in extending their leasehold on Fordhall Farm.
- 2005-2006** The Fordhall Community Land Initiative structure is launched and successfully raises the £800,000 required to purchase Fordhall Farm, which becomes the first community-owned farm in England.
- 2006-2009** Charlotte and Ben, the local community and over 8,000 shareholders successfully develop Fordhall Farm into a place that connects people to the environment and provides the local community with organic produce.
- 2010** The future of the farm is looking bright, with plans in place to build a new classroom and an organic tea room. The eventual goal is to restore Fordhall Farmhouse to its former glory.

up to date with our progress. We have received great media interest, with national newspapers such as The Guardian, The Observer and The Telegraph promoting our campaign and pledging their support. We were also 'Highly Commended' in the Daily Mail Enterprising Young Brits Awards 2009 and won the 'Against All Odds' prize of £25,000 at the 2008 Morgan Foundation Entrepreneur Awards.

Being a part of SEWM's Flagship Social Enterprise Programme means a lot to Fordhall Farm. Charlotte believes

that this recognition will encourage other communities to work together to complete projects which will benefit the local area. In addition, Charlotte concludes: "We hope that other projects look at our success and realise that a community that is able to work together can achieve anything they desire. It took a lot of dedication and team work to make Fordhall the success story it is today, but we have proved that it's not impossible and hope other communities will follow our lead." **se**

## MAKING CONTACT

**Fordhall Community Land Initiative** | [www.fordhallfarm.com](http://www.fordhallfarm.com)

**i** **Fordhall Community Land Initiative** is a ground-breaking Industrial and Provident Society, which took Fordhall Organic Farm into community ownership in 2006. The land is now owned by over 8,000 people from across the world and tenanted to farmer Ben Hollins. It is England's first community-owned farm.

**STUDY VISIT** | Fordhall Community Land Initiative will be hosting a study visit on **4 March 2010**. To register your interest, contact [s.crowder@socialenterprisewm.org.uk](mailto:s.crowder@socialenterprisewm.org.uk)