

Fordhall Farm

Standfirst: Phil Pickin went to meet the brother and sister team who worked to save their pioneering father's Shropshire farm from developers and in the process created the first community-owned farm in England

Headline: One farm with 8000 landlords

There cannot be many who are people passionate about food and the environment, who haven't heard about the fight to save Fordhall Farm. Located in Market Drayton in north-east Shropshire, the farm as it stands today is a testament to the tenacity and fighting spirit of Ben and Charlotte Hollins as well as numerous people, from all over the country, who were involved in the fight to save it.

Among those who came to the rescue included well-known names such as former Police front man Sting and his wife Trudy Styler, Ainsley Harriot, David Bellamy and Prunella Scales.

This family farm's story is so inspiring that it has even been turned into a book. Although the latest chapter in the farm's history has been attracting a lot of attention – its story goes back to 1929 when Ben and Charlotte's father, Arthur Hollins, took over the tenancy of the 140-acre Fordhall Farm at just 14, after the death of his father.

"When he took over the farm the soil had been very intensively farmed and had been drained of nutrients," says Charlotte. "He couldn't see any worms or spiders in the soil and realised that if you couldn't see any larger life then bacteria and nutrients would also be missing. He noticed a neighbouring area of woodland was growing without being fed or maintained, while the farmland, which was being fertilised, wasn't producing anything."

Arthur took, for its time, a radical and far-sighted decision to eschew chemicals for improvement of the lifeless soil. Opting instead for good honest muck to fertilise the fields, the soil on the farm has now been chemical free for more than 65 years.

"My father believed that nature had sustained the planet for millennia and that in recent years we were trying new methods with farming which weren't working. He wanted to run the farm by working with nature to produce better quality organic food."

This wasn't Arthur's only far-sighted idea. Having built up an organic dairy herd he and his first wife May were among the first in the country to make live yogurt and

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were soon supplying the country's major city stores and markets. Arthur also found time to extensively research into sustainability and biodiversity. A Country Club was established in the 1940s to fund this research – and, as a result, thousands of visitors were invited onto the farm to learn about farming in harmony with nature – the Arthur Hollins' way.

However, in the 1970s May died in a car accident and the Country Club came to an end. Arthur later remarried – Ben and Charlotte are the only children from his second marriage to Connie, in 1981.

Since the 1990s pressure had been coming to bear on the Hollins' family to give up the tenure of Fordhall Farm, fuelled by the farm's neighbours, the Muller Dairy UK company, which wanted to develop the site. Money started to drain away to cover legal costs and the farm's organic meat stock had to be sold to help cover the bills. The fabric of the farm began to deteriorate and the foot and mouth crisis of 2001 did little to improve the situation - the future looked bleak.

Sadly, in January 2005 Arthur Hollins died, at the age of 89, leaving the farm, its fight for survival and his farming legacy to Ben and Charlotte.

The pair were left feeling that they didn't have anything left to fight for – but a visitor to the farm helped to convince them that they did.

“When people started to leave the farm and were no longer involved in its running or visiting, it lost its life and its heart,” said Charlotte.

“We decided to take the farm from its rundown state and turn it into a working business – but we didn't know how to bridge the gap. So we asked people to help.” They turned to the community which had always sustained and benefited from the farm – to help them put the life back into it. “We wanted it to become once more the resource for the local area which it had once been. So, we held a meeting and asked people what they wanted from the farm. We also told them what we had planned for Fordhall and we found a way to come together. We saw that in order to save the farm from being concreted over we would have to buy it from the landlord and were given just a year to raise the funds to buy it.”

Without the ability to purchase the farm outright themselves, the Ben and Charlotte decided to place it into community ownership and so the Fordhall Community Land Initiative was established as a charity, with a fundraising target of £800,000 – the amount needed to secure the farm's future and buy it back from the landowner.

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“The land initiative is a non-profit making society. Shares were sold at £50 each both nationally and locally and each shareholder is a part owner of the farm,” continued Charlotte.

As a result more than 8000 people, to date, have bought into the farm as shareholders and the farm has since been leased back to Ben and Charlotte on a 100-year agreement, with the pair managing the farm and livestock and the farm shop run as a business from which they pay the rent and make a living.

The idea was to also use the farm as an educational resource in order to continue Arthur’s ideas about promoting living, and farming, in harmony with nature.

Now Ben and Charlotte are in the process of trying to put in place the plans drafted out when they first inherited the farm. Having suffered financially, it’s going to take time to get things back to how they should be but major progress, in the form of a well-stocked shop, has been made. Open days have been held to outline just what the Community Land Initiative means to the local community and the benefits it can have to food production, not only at Fordhall, but nationally.

The brother and sister team, together with Sophie, one of many volunteers who give their time for free, run the farm and produce a range of high-quality organic meats including beef, lamb and pork as well as sourcing other local, organic produce to sell within the shop. Extensions to the shop and the addition of on-site butchery facilities are all on the cards as well as plans to create an organic tea rooms, giving visitors the chance to enjoy the taste of truly organic produce on the farm where the stock has been raised.

“This is all part of the farm’s aim to bring local produce to the attention of more people. It will take a change of attitude and habits,” admits Charlotte, “as most people are used to buying their food from supermarkets.” But if customers can only do some of their shopping in shops such as the one at Fordhall, while buying meat, vegetables and bread from local suppliers, the benefits for both customer and producer will be significant.

So what of the future? Well, more of the same. Ben and Charlotte will continue to build up the farm, and hope to return it to its former glory. It seems that despite decades of battling the hard work is only just beginning but at least the farm is now on a firm footing.

“Ben wants to build up the livestock levels and we both want to ensure that the community is kept as involved as possible. Our plans also involve opening a bunk

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house so that educational parties and volunteers can stay on the farm to learn more about the pasture-to-plate cycle. It's a really big project."

If only Arthur could see what he started and how his children have fought to continue his work. "I think he would be proud of what we've achieved," says Charlotte. He was always really passionate about involving people in the farm. We believe, as he did, that it's important for people to have access to green space and now thousands of people are able to visit the farm and do just that."

Undoubtedly he would be proud.

If you would like to find out more about the farm, buy a share or a copy of the book visit the farm's web site at www.fordhallfarm.com or contact them at the following address.

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