

The Food Magazine

Britain's leading, independent watchdog on food issues



Our new farming columnist Tim Waygood with a talk on the wildside...

My parents met at the local young farmers club, their parents farmed two villages apart. I thought everyone was a farmer, until I went to school. Every relation was farming in some way, cousins, uncles and siblings in law.

I was going to be a farmer forever, I got a degree in agriculture but the farm was not a viable option. I diversified at 22, starting and growing an events business called MotivAction, by the time I had got to 42 none of us in the family were farming. A familiar farming story, over 200,000 (50%) farms have vanished in my lifetime. Now the average age of farmers that are left is over 60 and there are more people in prison than working the land.

The story of my life has been holding onto – albeit as tenant – this small farm over the years of set-aside and then starting to farm again, but totally differently – the objective being to create an ecological alternative to corporate supermarket consumerism. And, at least to have a go at making a future so my children will be able to say I tried. So Emma, my gorgeous agrarian partner, my brother, and I, with the bemusement and support of former farmers, set about farming again.

Reducing the number of farms is deliberate policy, enacted first by UK governments and latterly by the European Union. The big farmers are kept drunk on subsidies whilst the small, medium and family farms have been squeezed out. Farms have been commoditised in order to create and feed a food industry. This is a globally driven policy. Currently there are 1,500,000 small farms in Poland, some of the most biologically sustainable food production enterprises in Europe, being deliberately taken out of business, to make way for global agri-business.

Back in the UK, one supermarket now makes more profit than the whole of UK agriculture. We are reliant on oil and gas to make nitrates and pesticides – these accounting for around 40% of the fossil fuel inputs into agriculture. A few corporations dominate agri-business. Meanwhile the food industry has created an obesity epidemic, costing the UK billions, as well as a population totally disconnected from the land and food.

My father built a pig herd, when this became unviable in 1987, the pigs went, and the land was 'set-aside' sown to grass and left fallow – ironically I was studying a degree in agriculture at the time. As happened across Hertfordshire, the animals disappeared from

view.

Shortage of cash led to a new business being spawned via a local advert entitled 'Everyone remembers their first bang' and inviting people to come to the farm clay shooting. Bizarrely, from this small start, quite a sizeable events business grew over the next 20 years that enabled the farm to be retained. We had fun creating games like 'Human Table Football', and 'Blind Landrover Driving'. But, I knew I didn't want to do that for the rest of my life.

One thing that commentators all agree on is that food and farming must change. We must feed people in the future without using nitrate fertilisers. The only route that is being seriously considered and actively pursued by the powers that be (corporations and government have revolving doors and set the policy) is more of the same, more agri-business, larger farms, plus the promise of GMO's being able to fix nitrogen - technical fixes, and the same chemical, and linear industrial model.

Could there be an alternative? Would it involve envisaging farms as a place to produce food, and the farm as a service provider - a polycultural, complex, vertically integrated, systems and ecological approach based on biological efficiency? Would it involve farms that connect directly with customers and so are not slaves to a single or handful of buyers? If we can combine food and farming systems that are environmentally sound and productive, with business models that work, then maybe we can forge an alternative and a renaissance of real food and farming.

Convinced by background reading and given a kick up the butt after falling ill for months and facing my mortality in 2007, my family and I moved from passive observer of the farming scene for 20 years to bringing the family farm back into production. Fire: Aim: Ready has been the approach to establishing a farm to feed people.

Farming v.2.0 at Church Farm

- Vegetable garden of 8 acres growing over 200 varieties of vegetables and herbs grown in Beards Oak Kitchen Gardens.
- New orchard of 8 acres, 130 varieties of fruit: apples, gages, plums, cherries, quince, medlar, damsons and more...
- Vicarage Field 2 acre soft fruit enclosure
- 60 Black Welsh Mountain sheep
- 60 Lleyn sheep & ram
- 30 Red Poll cattle & bull plus followers
- 6 British Lop & 6 Berkshire breeding sows plus boars
- 600 Light Sussex, Cuckoo Maran, Black Rock, Rhode Island Red and White Leghorn hens
- 300 Sasso outdoor reared poultry
- 200 Norfolk Black turkeys
- 100 Embden geese
- 100 Aylesbury ducks
- 3 Bee hives
- 20 acres of new woods in-filled with wild cherry and hazel
- 2 acre walnut orchard
- 4 acres of wild bird seeds and pollen/nectar mix
- 30 acres of woods: 3 of ancient hornbeam coppice, 7 acres of established 60 years old woodland and 20 acres of mixed, mainly hardwoods, planted over the past 10 years
- 2 acres of rough nesting ground amongst a line of old clay pits
- 2 ponds established in 1996, two more flood ponds and a new pond in the vegetable gardens.

Church Farm spans 175 acres in Ardeley, a small village in north Hertfordshire. Now two

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years into what I call Farming v.2.0, we have managed to open a farm store, farm café, veg box scheme, local mechanic service, green gym, offer green meetings, events, courses, wood cabin hire, summer camps, have started a mobile farm shop as well as set up a 'rural care' providing places for people with learning difficulties to help on the farm. Next month there will be a farm vet service. In the summer we held a camping and music festival. Every type of animal, vegetable and local fruit, even walnut orchards have been established. All these efforts are concentrated on offering an alternative to corporate supermarket consumerism, putting provenance and human scale enterprise first. This is a farm that grows food and provides services for customers.

All of this depends upon customers. I use the word deliberately rather than consumers. Here we have conscious customers who can see the provenance of their food and get as involved as they like. Some visit nearly every day, to some we deliver. The produce we bring into the store is either from local, organic or fair trade sources.

The happy co-incidence of a farm to feed people is that I tend to say, "come on my land," and customers never ask me to abuse the animals, chemically castrate the pigs, destroy the hedges or pump carcinogens onto their vegetables. I don't do this as I eat the produce and live here. The farm does not rely on any one product or customer, true diversity is, I believe, essential for long term resilience in any sphere.

Coming soon at Church Farm will be a Farm Vet service and then the culmination of the plan will be proving the viability of a Farm Membership. Something that could, depending on the future, be of far greater value than joining a golf club or gym. The farm is designed to be able to feed a wide diet to at least 200 people, joining the farm will enable 200 members to have a stake in the farm's success – and when profits are made, 30% will be distributed amongst the members.

Membership is for a 10 year period and although members are not obligated to spend any money with the farm, the win: win also means that, in the event of food security issues, farm members will have 10 years food security. Currently even the wealthy enjoy only about 3-5 days food security through the 'just in time' supermarket supply chain. Pioneer Memberships will be released at a cost of £2,000.00 for 10 years to people within a 10 mile radius of the farm. Groups from further afield, including London, will be able to join the farm by combining together in groups. We will then provide weekly deliveries to pick up points.

That's a bit of an introduction and update. We certainly do not have all the answers, but we are giving it a go.

Next step is getting together with other like minded farmers to form a national network, an agrarian renaissance if you like... there are 5,000 farmers who deal direct with the public, it's from this base we could pull off creating a nationwide, alternative umbrella brand. So that's next week's job.

See video at:

www.churchfarmardeley.co.uk

www.peoplelandfood.co.uk

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