



# NEW MODEL *farming*

Feature by Sam Henderson

*If 2007 was the year that everyone suddenly started taking climate change seriously then 2008 looks like it was the year of food.*

**S**teep increases in the price of oil and gas early in the year meant fertiliser and transport became significantly more expensive. As a result we saw food riots across the world. In March, India and Vietnam restricted rice exports in an effort to keep the cost of food down. In May the UN called a three day emergency meeting on the food crisis. The price of wheat hit record highs throughout the year.

In the UK, a government report entitled *Food Matters* recognised for the first time in a generation that we can never take food for granted. Soon after the report was published, an annual audit of the average UK family's weekly food shop found that it had risen by £27 over the previous year alone.

It is this developing crisis that is the real drive behind the groundswell of interest that we are seeing for local produce, farmers' markets, box schemes, allotmenting, and community farms; and this is just the beginning. Another sustainable food project looking to go that bit further is Church Farm in Ardeley, East Hertfordshire.

'I think the crunch came,' said Church Farm's owner, Tim Waygood, 'when I saw about twelve sorry-looking green beans sitting on a supermarket shelf, wrapped up in about three layers of different plastics, flown all the way from Kenya, and retailing for £1.60. I'd been looking into climate change and peak oil, as well as all the other nightmarish side-effects of

what gets called 'conventional agriculture', and I think that was the moment that I thought to myself, "We've got to be able to do better than this."'

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Just under a year, some serious investment, and a gargantuan effort later, Church Farm has been transformed. Turkeys gobble and plump-breasted chickens peck under a woodland of newly planted nut and berry trees. Next door is a herd of Red Poll cattle – a 'dual purpose' breed which can produce both meat and dairy – and in the corner of the field an exercise in pig husbandry is crossing traditional Berkshires with British Lops. The aim, says Tim, is to produce "the best bacon in Britain."

On the opposite slope, polytunnels are being erected and beds are being dug for an eight acre vegetable growing operation which will eventually be able to supply over 120 households with at least 90% of their veg, salad and herbs; while around the corner,

laying hens strut their stuff under a five acre orchard that includes over 170 varieties of native fruit trees.

'What we're starting here is a modern, ecological revival of traditional mixed farming,' says Tim. 'That means rejecting desert monocultures in favour of a mixed farm that values and improves the land and the wildlife that lives on it, and it means renewing our ancient contract with farm animals. It also means radically altering our food system, from field to fork, and finally, it means reconnecting people and communities with their food and where it comes from, making farms the bustling centres of local activity they once were.'

Apart from processing all the food on the farm and selling it directly to customers, capturing the margins that usually line the pockets of wholesalers, buyers and retailers, Tim is offering local households the chance to actually join the farm. Members will get access to food off the farm as well as all those essentials that can't be grown – think toilet paper, tea bags and detergent – through a kind of ethical buying club. They'll also be able to play an active role in the running of the farm, or simply pay a visit, wandering the footpaths and feeding the animals, or taking part in the weekly programme of on-farm events.

'It's about re-imagining all that a farm can be,' says Tim. 'Rather than churning out commodities for mass markets, we want to provide a full, sustainable food and lifestyle

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service to members of our farm, who would be far more than just customers.’

Sounds a bit like a hotch-potch of existing ideas: community supported farms, crossed with group buying clubs, and dressed up as a kind of farm theme park. ‘We have drawn on a lot of existing initiatives’ responds Tim, ‘But the difference is that a lot of these projects either rely on a group of individuals self-organising, or else they’ve diversified so far that the farm becomes more of an attraction than a place which grows food.’

‘Our philosophy is to start with great food. To achieve that you need great farming, and that kind of farming can be a part of a great life. We want to make all that, not just the food, readily available to our members. Great food, great farming, great life. They just need to choose to sign up, then decide how they want to be involved.’

It’s all very enticing, but isn’t this the worst possible time to be promoting a service that might be seen by many as a luxury? ‘I actually totally disagree with that’ says Tim, with a certainty that probably should, by now, have been predictable. ‘People are realising that they’re surrounded by this kind of debt-fuelled illusion of satisfaction; that they’ve been overspending in a meaningless way, and that it’s time to

re-prioritise. We’re giving people the chance to join a genuine community that’s totally divorced from the false value of consumerism.’

‘In fact, we’re already planning to repeat the model on other farms. There’s no reason there can’t be thousands of these farms up and down the country. We’re not aiming any lower than reforming the UK’s food system and posing a direct challenge to the domination of the supermarkets.’

On my way back to London, wandering through the soul destroying retail parks that surround Stevenage train station, it strikes me that in this world of economic chaos, planetary emergency and social disintegration, Church Farm is a beacon of hope; that I have just had a glimpse of the future, of a sustainable marriage between people, their food and the land that produces it. ■

Visit [www.churchfarmardeley.co.uk](http://www.churchfarmardeley.co.uk) or to find out more about the ethos behind the project visit [www.agrarianrenaissance.co.uk](http://www.agrarianrenaissance.co.uk). If you’re interested in good food, eating or growing it, then have a look at some of the sites listed in the sidebar.



## FOOD FACTS

For every single calorie of food, ten calories of energy (mostly fossil fuels) are used to grow, process, and transport it.

*Getting food onto our plates accounts for between one fifth and a third of all the carbon emissions which the UK is responsible for.*

*Food production consumes vast amounts of water, erodes topsoil, destroys habitats, generates waste, and condemns millions of animals to appalling lives.*

*Many farm workers are underpaid and exposed to harmful levels of toxic substances; substances that remain in the food until consumed.*

### FIND LOCAL FOOD SUPPLIERS

[freerangereview.com](http://freerangereview.com)  
[localfoodweb.co.uk](http://localfoodweb.co.uk)  
[bigbarn.co.uk](http://bigbarn.co.uk)  
[thelfd.com](http://thelfd.com)

### GET INVOLVED IN GROWING

[sustainedmagazine.com](http://sustainedmagazine.com)  
[landshare.net](http://landshare.net)  
[cuco.org.uk](http://cuco.org.uk)

### FOOD FOR THOUGHT

[slowfood.org.uk](http://slowfood.org.uk)  
[thinkfoodandfarming.org.uk](http://thinkfoodandfarming.org.uk)  
[foodforlife.org.uk](http://foodforlife.org.uk)  
[soilassociation.org/](http://soilassociation.org/)  
[foodandfarming](http://foodandfarming)