

Some 20 years ago, two young siblings did the seemingly impossible – they saved their family farm from developers. Now, with a new generation of custodians and a bolder vision, Fordhall Organic Farm hopes to be able to inspire many more. **Olivia Midgley** reports.

Standing on 52 hectares (128 acres) of north Shropshire pasture that ripples gently towards Market Drayton, Fordhall Organic Farm is an example of a community-owned farm delivering symbiosis between people and the planet in its truest form.

Siblings Charlotte and Ben Hollins have certainly worked hard to get to where they have today.

Farmers Guardian readers may remember that the sister and brother team, then aged 21 and 19, issued a nationwide appeal to save their family's tenanted farm from being sold for industrial development in the 1990s. Supported by the farming press and national media, what happened next has since passed into the folklore of British farming.

The siblings opened the gate – literally and figuratively.

Help

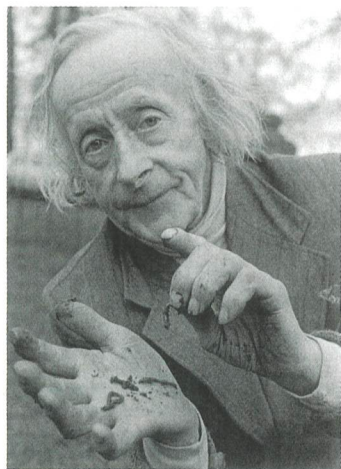
They invited people in, asked for help, and help came.

"Twenty years ago, the farm was on its knees," says Charlotte.

"We spent 15 years going through the courts, so livestock was sold to pay for legal fees. Everything Dad had built up on the farm was rundown."

It was their father Arthur Hollins' legacy that the family were keen to preserve and enhance for future generations. Arthur was a stalwart of the organic movement and had walked away from artificial fertilisers just after the Second World War, convinced that the land and the livestock it sustained deserved better.

Charlotte says: "When we eventu-



Arthur Hollins was passionate about organic food production.

ally took on the tenancy we had only 11 cows, six pigs and six sheep. But we also had lots of enthusiasm and we were very naive, which, looking back, was important because when you look at things in that way you believe anything is possible."

The idea of community ownership was novel. A charitable Community Benefit Society – the Fordhall Community Land Initiative – was incorporated to hold the freehold.

In order to transform their family farm into a community-owned model, the siblings had to raise £800,000 in less than six months. They achieved this by offering £50 non-profit-making shares to the public.

"Our community wanted the farm to stay in local ownership – managed by my brother who knew the land and had a passion for organic live-

stock farming and food produced in a regenerative and as natural a way as possible," says Charlotte.

By the deadline of July 1, 2006, more than 8,000 shareholders from around the world had collectively secured Fordhall's future.

"We had people reach out from Australia, South Africa, United States, Canada, Hong Kong and across Europe – all the places you would not think would care about a little farm in Market Drayton," she says.

"So many members had struggled to keep hold of their farm or had grown up working or playing on farms and wanted to be part of it again. They also wanted to safeguard this land for producing food.

"But we could not have got to where we did without the printed press, which saved us.

"*Farmers Guardian* and other national media really amplified our story – the power of small collective action – and that really inspired us and everyone else to move forward."

The siblings' mother, Connie, still lives on the farm, and Arthur's legacy continues. The farm now employs up to 150 local people, and hosts a care farm supporting adults with learning disabilities, a youth project offering placements for young people struggling in school, educational visits, farm tours, volunteering, free farm trails, a cafe, an award-winning farm shop, weddings and glamping.

Ponds

More than 5,000 trees have been planted onsite, three ponds have been restored and another pond has been created.

At the heart of it all, cattle, sheep and pigs still graze those carbon-rich pastures, boasting 10% soil organic matter. Ben farms the land under a 100-year Farm Business Tenancy – a tenure rarely heard of in the farming industry.

He has spoken candidly about what it means to invest in soil and infrastructure, knowing that his children may, if they choose, carry that work forward after him.

Charlotte, who manages the Fordhall Community Land Initiative, frames the model in terms that resonate far beyond farm business policy.

She says: "By placing the farm into community-ownership for perpetuity, we have been able to uniquely plan and think long term.

"While technically known as

shareholders, we like to call our members 'custodians'. A shareholder extracts value; a custodian safeguards it for those who come after.

"A farm becomes purpose-driven rather than inheritance in a cash form, but that is hard to untangle when you cannot think of it as anything but a financial asset.

"And that is what holds so many people back from getting access to land – high land values and the hope value that land has. The hope value is what is dragging this industry down and people just cannot get in."

She adds: "So much land is being sold to investors and they are going to give out short-term tenancies to maintain the value of the asset.

"The moment we offered a 100-year tenancy to Ben, the value of the land dropped by half."

More farms

The board of the Fordhall Community Land Initiative consulted its members in 2025, asking whether the knowledge and skills gained over the past 20 years should now be used to help more farms move into community ownership.

The response was clear. Now a further organic farm in Devon is about to join the fold.

Fordhall has set itself a target of welcoming 1,000 new community shareholders in 2026, building towards a movement that could see the model replicated across England and beyond.

Charlotte says: "The charitable structure of Fordhall Community Land Initiative means that the work begun by our tenant farmers today can be continued and secured well into the future.

"Any farmer who might not have an obvious successor but wants to continue their legacy can gift their farm to the initiative and be guaranteed that the land will remain in organic stewardship and community benefit, generation after generation, regardless of market conditions or political turbulence."

She adds: "But we do not want to be doing this in isolation. We want to create a system where we have a national community of people supporting farms in their country, governed by the local community, with a farmer at the centre who understands the land."

MORE INFORMATION

Visit: fordhallfarm.com.



Left to right: Ben, Arthur and Charlotte Hollins in 2004.

How a small tenant farm inspired a movement

Charlotte and Ben Hollins have continued their father's legacy in organic farming, and are expanding their community ownership model.

