

TABLEHURST AND PLAW HATCH COMMUNITY FARM NEWS

SUMMER 2012

Many of you reading this newsletter will recently have received a letter from the Co-op committee. It contains the tragic news that Alan Hope, the new farmer who arrived at Plaw Hatch in April, went missing on 7th May. His body was found on 23rd May and his funeral took place in Forest Row on 2nd June. Our condolences and warmest wishes go to Alan's family.

These events have had a profound effect on the whole community, but particularly those living and working at Plaw Hatch, including Tom and Julia Ventham, whose departure was extremely imminent at the time this happened. As a result of Alan's death, the event to celebrate their time at Plaw Hatch was sadly cancelled. However a small farewell barbecue did take place, where friends and colleagues were able to pay tribute to their enormous contribution to Plaw Hatch over more than a decade. They have now left the farm for pastures new.

The Plaw Hatch management and farm teams have been working tremendously hard over recent weeks to deal with this tragedy, to keep the farm going in the short term and to put in place arrangements to carry Plaw Hatch into the future. This has been a challenging time for all of them and we would ask everyone to give them every possible support at this difficult time.

Memories of Alan Hope, by John Twyford

I first met Alan when I started doing part-time work at Plaw Hatch in late 2007 whilst studying Biodynamic Agriculture at Emerson College. One of the evening jobs was bedding down the cows in the big barn. Alan and his boys Josef and Jack used to come and watch us bedding down and Alan asked if he could pitch in. I immediately sensed his enthusiasm for farming, and was struck by the old worldly farmer's image that Alan brought to mind, wearing as he always did his tweed cap. It was clear that he had used a pitch fork before and as we worked I discovered he was a Yorkshire man. My grandfather had learned his farming in Yorkshire before travelling to South Africa. That, together with a common interest in an old book by George Henderson, called "The Farming Ladder", brought about in me instant intrigue.



The next time I met Alan was after we had advertised for Tom's position. Alan was in the shop and I was serving. We started to talk about farming and he told me that he had been on a journey that had taken his career away from farming, but that he now felt that farming, and dairy farming in particular, was his true vocation. He was unaware that we were looking for a farmer. Eventually he asked whether we had a vacancy. Jenny, who had been listening to our conversation, smiled at me and we told him that as it happened, we were. It then came about that Alan applied for, and was ultimately offered, the position of dairy farmer at Plaw Hatch. I was particularly excited because of Alan's deep interest in anthroposophy and its application to agriculture.

My suspicion that Alan was a bit old worldly was confirmed immediately when he realised we had just bought a new disc mower, and he started talking about sickle-bar mowers and small tractors. I had become interested in sickle-bar mowers a couple of years ago when a Swiss farm volunteer told us they had just bought a modern version that had the width of conventional mowers. They are particularly friendly toward insects

From Krista Braun

"At the memorial on 16 June which was held in honour of Alan Hope a friend gave me this verse which she received from him on the morning of Easter Sunday."

The whole bright world rejoices now
Hilariter, hilariter
And birds do sing from every bow
Hallelujah, Hallelujah

*"Hilariter" is latin, and means "joyfully".
This is the opening verse of a hymn.*

Memories of Alan Hope, continued

because there are no rotating blades, just gentle back and forth movements of the knives and you can watch the grass being laid down neatly behind you. My father always used them. Alan told me about the peaceful experience of using these mowers on a summer's day, without the roar of big tractors and rotating drums.

This was the type of quiet energy that I felt Alan was bringing toward the farm. He never owned a car, but went by bike and public transport. As it happened he came into quite a stressful situation, of spinning disks and rotating drums you might say. In a few weeks Alan had to learn a mountain of stuff from Tom who had developed the unique herd that we all love - over 12 years. One of his challenges was learning the names of the cows which had become, to quote him, "a sea of brown and white". I have had that feeling before. Now that I know the herd it seems unimaginable that someone could mistake Chalky for Olive, but I remember too well the time when it all seemed such a blur. I also remember the time when the procedures of milking and washing down were just a big cloud of confused tasks.

My memories of Alan now too seem like a disconnected sea of experiences. I never knew him well, so all that remain are glimpses. It was lovely to watch him with his boys on the farm. I remember him sitting with them three abreast on the veranda eating apples and carrots for breakfast; "horses' breakfast" Alan called it. I remember his dash of colour, never without a bright jumper or a coloured scarf. He was not a "Steiner said" sort of person, but spoke of "Steiner's indications". I experienced him as a gentle, caring man who somehow served us well in a short time. The positive impulse that he was to bring with him to Plaw Hatch has become, albeit subtly, part of us.

John Twyford

Plaw Hatch – The Interim Plan

As I write this it has been a week since Tom left Merijn Van den Hout and I with the cows and other animals while we gather ourselves and begin the recruitment process for a new dairy farmer at Plaw Hatch. It is not the first time Tom has left me with the cows. During my summer placement Tom left me with them for a week to go on holiday, and has left other students with them too. The difference of course, is that he is not coming back and that he has not left them with me alone, but in the capable hands of Merijn.

Tom always went on holiday quite strategically at this time of the year when the cows have finished calving and all that's required is to methodically feed them and milk them according to a set of instructions. Tom did leave us with a rough set of instructions for the week or so after he left, but we are running out of them now and have to start preparing our own plans about what to do on a daily basis. Fortunately Tom left us with a book, a bible if you like, which includes a very good summary of Tom's approach to herdsmanhip.

Merijn has latched on to Tom's approach very quickly. It is amazing to see how he truly loves the cows, each and every one of them and already has quite some insight into their characters. He has recently declared an interest in doing a course on animal communication! Those who know me will understand how I squirmed. We meet every day after milking to talk about (not to!) all the animals and plan what needs doing that day.

The problem with looking after a herd of animals for 3 months, which is how long we expect this interim phase to last, is that there are many decisions that require a longer term view. If we don't act now on some of these, it will affect the herd in a year from now. We need to make sure cows (and sows, and ewes) get pregnant, are dried off, and sadly, are moved off the farm when the time is right. So yesterday for example, we moved Bob in with the herd since many of the cows to calve next spring are coming into heat and he had a very active day, so fingers crossed! We also weaned 8 piglets. Diamond, one of the oldest cows in the herd, was moved off to be with the dry cows so as not to fall pregnant again. When she has reared her calf it will be time for her to move off the farm. It is so very difficult for us to make some of these decisions. How difficult it must have been for the man for whom Diamond was one of the first Plaw Hatch calves 10 years ago.

After completing the previous paragraph I had to leave writing this article because the herd had broken out of its field and spilled into Legs Heath Lane. It was all hands on deck, a moo and a whistle but they are all back safely grazing now.

The overall point I am trying to make is that in the interim, between Tom leaving and a new farmer permanently taking over the herd, it seems to be going OK. The cows seem happy, mischief among them, milk is flowing, calves are still with their mothers, Merijn has a plan to wean them at 4 months when they'll go to Tablehurst, the sheep have freshly clipped feet and the pigs are well fed and growing.

John Twyford

Plum Tree House at Plaw Hatch

I would like to introduce Plum Tree House and its current inhabitants to you. Plum Tree house is the house at the top of the farm driveway, with a beautiful wooden sign (see photo) made for us by the woodworkers at the Pericles roundhouse and it is where all our apprentices, students, wwoofers and temporary workers live.

My name is Janice and some of you know me as a gardener as I work part-time in the garden here, some of you know me as a storyteller as I tell stories at farm festivals and events and to groups of children who visit the farm but another of my roles is looking after Plum Tree, welcoming the people who come to live here and keeping the house in order, making sure everyone has what they need to make their stay comfortable and enjoyable.

I first came to Plawhatch in May 2009 after spending 6 years in Findhorn in Scotland where I worked as a gardener in the community supported agriculture scheme based at the Findhorn community. I came upon Emerson college and storytelling at the Biodynamic conference held on the Scilly Isles in 2007 and my journey since has brought me here where I can combine gardening and storytelling on a community farm. My passion is to tell stories of nature and the earth that can hopefully help people connect to the beauty that is around them. I hope to develop this work here and with my experience of living in community hope I can also contribute to the building of community on the farm.

And now to introduce the amazing people that share the house with me. People come here from near and far, some with experience and some with none but a willingness to learn and each one brings their own uniqueness and gifts, without which we could not keep the farm running as well as it does.

Alex, 30, has come to us after 7 years in Brighton, where he worked for a raw food company before starting his own and latterly worked at the Infinity café there. He says, "I am passionate about good organic food and wanted to explore the growing side of things. It was a visit to Seasons in Forest Row that led me to the farms and inspired me to come as a wwoofer. My roles on the farm are varied, I spend time in the garden and shop as well as bottling milk and feeding the animals." Alex shares his love of food with us by making farm lunches and creating juices out of all kinds of waste from carrot tops to old chard leaves that otherwise would end up on the compost. He would love to set up a juice bar on the farm!!

Jan, 25, originally from Hanover, is already half a local as he has spent a few years in the area and finished his education at Michael Hall school. He says, "I came to Plaw Hatch because I love alternative approaches to farming. I'm particularly keen on biodynamic gardening. I became interested in these things because my uncle has a farm, and my parents are gardeners and own a piece of land that I started farming myself. On that piece of land, I developed my own way of growing plants and vegetables which is very harmonious with biodynamics. I see myself staying in this area for the foreseeable future and combining my passions for art and biodynamic farming and gardening." (Jan is a keen tango dancer in his spare time!) Jan is supporting Johannes on the farm with the arable field work.

Bence, 24, comes from Budapest in Hungary where he studied conventional agriculture and played rugby in his spare time. He has come here to do his practical. He says, "I wanted to try out something different, which is why I came to Plaw Hatch. I'm learning about all different aspects of the farm. My practical only had to be a month but I've decided to stay for 3. I'm also very curious about the English way of life, and trying to survive the weather!"

(You will learn about Merijn, the other inhabitant of Plumtree elsewhere in the newsletter)

Janice Witherspoon



The Plaw Hatch Team

(Standing) Abra,
Lee, Andy, Alex,
Jenny, Anna, Maeve,
John, Janice, Dan,
Johannes, Merijn,
Bence, Helen.

(Kneeling) Liz,
Ionela, Tali, Nick.



The Buck Stops Here ... Introducing the New Directors and Managers of Plaw Hatch Farm

All the predictions for 2012 were for it to be a tumultuous year and it is hard to think of a more appropriate word for the first 6 months here at Plaw Hatch. It has been a testing time to say the least. Our hearts have been asked to hold so many extremes between the departure of Tom and his family, the excitement and then tragedy surrounding Alan Hope, and in between all of this, to carry on 'business as usual' ensuring that all the hard work of turning Plaw Hatch's business fortunes around was not lost in so much upheaval.

There will be many individual reflections upon how this relatively young team has weathered these past few weeks. Each of us has had to dig deep in different ways, and it will take sometime for calm to prevail. What has emerged though is how resilient and strong the team is, and it is my pleasure to take this opportunity to tell you a little more about ourselves and how we have come to make up the present constellation of Plaw Hatch.

Some of us are more reluctant than others to call ourselves either directors or managers, preferring a more idealistic view of egalitarianism on a community farm. Yet the buck has to stop with someone and however we may interpret the legalities of business Plaw Hatch now has 5 internal directors - Jenny Wright, John Twyford, Tali Eichner, Johannes Nilsson and Liz Charnell, as well as David Lewis who is our one external director. The former are also managers of their distinct areas - Shop, Business/Farm, Dairy, Fields/Farm and Garden respectively.

We are also joined on this front by Janice Witherspoon. She manages Plum Tree House in true community style ensuring that all the summer workers, WWOOF'ers, apprentices and volunteers are looked after and understand the rhythms and nature of the farm and responsibilities to the land, animals and fellow workers. She also works 3 days in the garden, Friday afternoons in the shop and chairs our Farm Team Meetings, whilst at the same time pursuing her talent as a story teller. If you ever get the opportunity to see her perform I recommend you grab it!

David Lewis has long been connected to Plaw Hatch and more recently his remit included bringing the farm into a more comfortable relationship with responsibilities regarding Health and Safety. He continues to cajole us into recognising how important this is without it taking us over or impinging on the open nature of Plaw Hatch or on our intention of keeping it a simple and real farm experience. With his help we have commissioned electrical and fire safety surveys and we are now rectifying some of the more 'antiquated' electrical areas of the farm.



The five internal directors represent a team that has come together over a three year period. Jenny bridges the recent past with the present becoming a director soon after Susan Cram left. The remaining four have only recently formally declared their commitment, becoming directors in April of this year after Tom resigned.

John, Johannes and myself are beginning our 4th year here. Our own journeys are diverse. John came via Emerson and the BD Course. Johannes has lived all his life in Camphill Communities and also attended Emerson. His partner Anna is responsible for all the chickens on the farm as well as cooking farm lunch and working in the shop. As for me I have become a gardener via the Findhorn Community in Scotland.

Tali became the Dairy Manager in October 2010 having worked with Susan in the summer of 2008, learning all the basics in that time. She lives on the farm with her partner Nick who takes an active role in all aspects of living here, helping Tali out if needs must.

We all arrived when the farm was under review by the Co-op. This was a testing time, although it pales in significance in the light of recent events. What is important for us is that in a short time with determination, visioning and hard work, we have turned a struggling business in to one that is far more healthy and robust whilst at the same time remaining very clear about our commitment to the land, the animals, to each other and the importance of what we leave behind for the next generation.

This is only a brief introduction. We are always extremely busy and nearly always here! We are all aware of the diverse interpretations of recent events. Perhaps it suffices to say we have remained united as a team in the face of adversity. It is beholden upon us now to reflect deeply upon what has happened in these most recent weeks as well over the years here. It is our intention to continue to build upon the strong foundations of all the different aspects of this farm and to improve upon them also.

If you have any questions of us please feel free to come to the farm and talk to us directly. It really is quite a beautiful place that works wonders on the soul.....

Liz Charnell

... and thank goodness we still have Richard Evans. Richard has been a constant presence at Plaw Hatch for many years and in that time has seen 5 farmers come and go. His enthusiasm is boundless as is his passion to educate the young people who come to the farm. He has a wealth of information around machinery and life in general, and his contribution and help in maintaining, repairing and even recreating old principles in new machines is a huge asset to us all. We need to honour this contribution as we step into this new phase and we would like to think that we will continue to work together learning with and from one another, freeing up real time for our volunteers, WWOOFers and youngsters to spend time with Richard learning about the old crafts and sharing his attention to detail.



Tablehurst Farm invests in photovoltaics and ethical banking

In December of last year, Tablehurst realised two of its long term ambitions: to start generating its own electricity from solar gain, and to work exclusively with an ethical bank. Tablehurst moved its current account to Triodos Bank and took out a loan of £150,000 to pay Southern Solar to install a 40Kw PV system on the roof of the main barn. The system came into operation on 8th December 2011, just ahead of the Government's snap decision to alter the market conditions for solar power. Peter Brown, one of Tablehurst's farmers, said that 'We are really grateful to all at Southern Solar and Triodos Bank for ensuring that we could meet the deadline and realise our ambition to generate sustainable energy on the farm.'

The system is the largest that could be installed without a major upgrade to Tablehurst's National Grid connection. It should meet about a quarter of the farm's electricity requirement, while also feeding power into the grid for use by other customers who support sustainable energy production. We are installing a meter in the shop that can show what is being generated.

An invitation for you to get involved

With an expected life in excess of 25 years, the PV system offers the farm considerable long term energy security, particularly for cold storage of the farm's produce. However, we have had to take out a substantial 15 year loan, which represents a risk for the farm. **To help us manage our risk, we hope that a number of you will be willing to support us by gifting or lending us money that will allow us to repay the loan more quickly and, consequently, at a lower cost.**

Working with Triodos Bank, we have calculated that we can afford to repay the loan largely from the payments that we will get for producing the electricity and selling our excess energy.

With the support of Triodos Bank, we would like to reduce the interest burden of the loan, by asking you to lend us money for the first 5 years of the scheme. In return for your support, we will repay your loan after the 5 years together with an additional sum reflecting interest on your loan above Bank of England Base Rate. This will allow us all to benefit:

- The farm will have reduced financial risk during the early years of the scheme;
- You support sustainable energy production and ethical banking while getting a reasonable return on your money;
- Triodos Bank has more capital available to support other ethical investments.

If you are willing to consider getting involved we would like to invite you to a meeting on **8th September at 11am** to discuss in detail what we propose, and how best we can set up the system to ensure that we all achieve our objectives. If you would like to attend, please send your name, address, phone no and email to the farm or to tablehurst_farm@talk21.com.

We are, of course, also happy to accept gifts! We hope that you will join with us in supporting this scheme that is so vital to the future development of the farm.

Neil Ravenscroft

Tablehurst Farm Report

Being a farmer your relationship to the weather changes and "good" and "bad" weather are merely a matter of timing. After a winter with hardly any rain the soil was bone dry and the spring crops struggled to come up. The weather change around Easter was a blessing, but now flooding is our concern. The weather seems to change more from one extreme to the other these days and we have to learn to adjust to it. However, the field crops have so far survived the rain and the majority of them look really well, particularly our new milling Rye variety which we imported from Germany.

Raph and Steffi's leaving has challenged all of us to fill the gaps they left behind and since Peter has been elected Chair of the BDAA there is a very young team now running the agricultural side of the farm. So far it all went well despite the fact that we should be making silage, spray preparations, top the fields and make compost but can't because of the weather.

Despite the rain, we have been extremely busy with building the road, preparing for new milling facilities and getting machinery ready for the season. At the same time the turkeys and geese for Christmas have arrived and we are looking forward to see them grow, especially since we got a different variety this time, "Norfolk Black" from Wonnacott Farm in Devon.

While the cows are doing really well the wet weather has been a problem for our ewes with lambs. First the grass was too "rich" and the ewes inflated like balloons until we moved them onto poor land feeding them hay, then the mature grass meant some lambs had a nutrient deficiency and unfortunately we lost three. Under Peter's supervision Tomi, one of our apprentices, has taken on the pigs and with careful management our litter sizes are finally improving again.

Our fastest growing enterprise is the market garden run by Rob and Amelia supported by Mario, student at Emerson, and Stephen who also took the BD course there some years ago. The wet weather meant that a lot of the sowing and transplanting has happened quite late this year but they are generally doing very well and our vegetables are hugely popular.

Our biggest efforts have been to facilitate the changes in the shop and to help Tobi to develop the café. Another challenge is to accommodate many more visitors on the farm. We really want to allow people to have a "real farm experience", but as we are a working farm there can be safety issues if visitors don't follow the rules. We are considering further changes in the shop and café so we can be open all week soon.

Besides that we are working hard to introduce new cured and cold smoked products and are just planning to build a large wood fired oven. We are hoping that we can provide baking facilities for to turn our own flour into fresh bread and pizza baked in a wood fired oven. So there is plenty to look forward to and I hope we will see many of you soon on the farm!

David Junghans

Beekeeping at Tablehurst

When I came to Tablehurst 18 years ago Walter Rudert , the farmer before me, kept a number of hives on the farm. Despite my interest I had no real experience with bees to enable me to take on the task, so when Barry Western became our butcher he put some of his own hives here and sold the honey in the shop. Barry loves his bees and we had them on the farm but they were cared for conventionally.

The Natural Beekeeping Trust started a few years ago, based in Ashurst Wood , with the intention of doing all they could to care for the plight of the bee, caused by modern 'conventional' agriculture and beekeeping. As my role has slowly changed on the farm I have been able to take up my interest in the bees and try to ensure that the farm has happy bees cared for in a way that enables them to be as strong as possible. The Natural Beekeeping Trust has been helping me with this.

Through ' YouTube' and a lovely little book in German I became aware of the 'Weissenseifener Haengekorb" , a bee hive developed by German sculptor Guenther Mancke out of his study of bees and biodynamics. Based on an ingenious combination of skep baskets made of rye straw and wooden support



structures, the hive is intended for installation at a height of at least 2.5 metres (8 feet). The shape of the hive harmonises with the movement gesture of the bee colony and enables the bees to design their brood nests according to their own innate criteria.

Last autumn Heidi Herrmann contacted Guenther Mancke and early this year we drove over there together to buy some hives and see how they were made. Mr. Mancke was already in the process of having the book translated into English and our enthusiasm for the hive has helped this progress; we were very pleased to be allowed to name this beautiful hive "Sun Hive". The book about the Sun Hive is due to be published in time for the Natural Beekeeping Alliance Conference at Emerson College this August.



The Natural Beekeeping Trust views the

introduction of the Sun hive as a very important part of their bee guardianship endeavour, and would like to make it available to as many people as possible. It will be officially launched in Britain at their conference at Emerson. I am pleased to be involved in running a workshop about this hive together with Heidi in August at the natural beekeeping conference; Tablehurst Farm is keen to help ensure that the hives will be produced and available. Mark Haughton, the woodworker who most of you will know through this newsletter, has his workshop on the farm and will make the wooden components of the hive. Together with the Trust we will be running 2-day-workshops, led by Rachel Hanney, for the straw skep parts. The first two workshops will take place in September and October (see dates).

There is a video on the Biodynamic Association website at www.biodynamic.org.uk and a lot more information on the Natural Beekeeping Trust website at www.naturalbeekeepingtrust.org for those who are interested.

Peter Brown



10-12 August Natural Beekeeping Alliance Conference, Emerson College, Sussex

Join us at this unique gathering to learn, share and network with fellow honeybee enthusiasts and leading practitioners of natural beekeeping from Britain and the Continent. The jam-packed programme promises an exciting mix of internationally-renowned speakers, informative hive demonstrations, diverse workshop choices and a 'World Cafe' discussion space. Also included is a **Barn Dance on Saturday night at Tablehurst Farm**. Contact: info@naturalbeekeepingalliance.org For further details and to book, please contact Natural Beekeeping Alliance (www.biobees.com/naturalbeekeepingalliance/conference.php)

Farewell, adieu, despedida

With the recent tragic events very much still occupying our minds and with the planned leaving celebrations having been first postponed and then cancelled altogether we were unsure how we could properly celebrate the Venthams achievements here at Plaw Hatch and send them off on their great adventure in the knowledge of how much they would be missed and the appreciation of what has been achieved in their time here.

Yet, last Saturday evening, in Tom and Julia's garden, with the rain holding off for just that evening, the BBQ's were lit, and we were able to properly celebrate, chat, give thanks, and spend valuable time together with friends and family around a much appreciated fire.

It must be the same adventurous, pioneering spirit that brought them here, with a young family, 11yrs ago, that now takes them off to Spain, on foot, hoof and paw. It seems so fitting to be travelling this way. As someone said: 'with each step they will leave a clod of Plaw Hatch earth behind'.

Their plan, and the beauty of it is how fluid this can be, is to walk down through France with Maggie the horse pulling their temporary home, to their destination in the Spanish Pyrenees where they have rented some land. This is an area that Julia and Molly know very well and visit each year. This journey is expected to take about five months, after which they will hopefully, have a chance to relax and take each day as it comes.

We wish them well x

Jenny Wright



FORTHCOMING EVENTS

7th July, 7:30pm: Stories, Supper & Music at Forest Row Baptist Church Hall with Anne and Janice. Donations. Contact Anne 07769 692294 or annesthestoryteller@gmail.com to reserve a place.

10th – 12th August: Beekeeping Conference, Emerson College, see p7

11th August, 8pm: Tablehurst Farm Barn Dance and Barbecue

1st & 2nd September, 10am – 5pm: Sun Hive workshop, contact rachelhanney@yahoo.co.uk

8th September, 11am: Tablehurst PV & Ethical Banking Event, see p6

29th September, 8pm: Tablehurst Farm Barn Dance and Barbecue

[Briony Young presentation and workshops at Tablehurst Farm](#)

1st October, 7.30pm: Role of the Biodynamic Preparations

3rd October, 2pm: Make and bury the Biodynamic Horn Manure Preparation

4th October, 2pm: Make and bury the Biodynamic Compost Preparations

Contact Briony: email biodynamicbonny@gmail.com or text 07971 781 325

13th and 14th October, 10am – 5pm: Sun Hive workshop, contact rachelhanney@yahoo.co.uk

Please join us in welcoming Robert Mensinga as the new secretary of the Coop. He has been co-opted by the committee to take over from Oliver Fynes-Clinton and will be standing for election at the AGM. Robert is a retired businessman and has lived locally for over 20 years. He has been involved with a number of community ventures and is a highly valued addition to the Coop Committee.

"Got a story to tell?"

Over the next few weeks our resident storytellers, Janice Withespoon and Sarah Vaughan will be working to create a story about Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch farms.

As part of this, they would love to hear some of your stories. Look out for posters advising when the "Story Harvest" sessions will be held.

If you'd like to know more, or be part of this, please contact Rachel Hanney: rachelhanney@yahoo.co.uk.