

# Putting “culture” back into agriculture



For the wellbeing of people, animals,  
plants and the land

Just 30 miles south of London lies a secret gem: Tablehurst Farm. Peter and Brigitte Brown founded the East Sussex biodynamic enterprise in 1994 after it had been used as a training farm as part of an adult learning centre. From the get-go, the Browns were committed to sustainable, community-led agriculture. They acquire the farm through a major local fundraising drive, which gave them the inspiration to build on local connections to make the farm a success. Tablehurst produces wholesome, organic meat and vegetables.

## Community-connected social enterprise

The farm itself is owned by the local community in a co-operative, where people pay £100 for lifetime membership. Tablehurst works collaboratively with a neighbouring farm, Plaw Hatch, which also uses biodynamic practices. Together, they farm approximately 1,000 acres. In addition, 30 staff are employed to produce, process and sell the food, which is assisted by local community volunteers. The Co-op have their own poultry abattoir and butchery. Both farms are mixed crop-livestock enterprises, but Tablehurst focuses more on meats with Plaw Hatch focusing more on dairy products.

The Co-op is governed by an elected committee, who oversee the long-term agendas for the farms, while the farm management teams organise the day-to-day activities. Together, the two farms sell a wide variety of produce in their own farm shops. There are approximately 500 individuals that are part of the Co-op, known as “farm partners”. The partners do not receive any direct benefits, such as reduced food or profits, but instead view their share as a “virtual gift” to the farms. They are then able to input into the management of the farm.

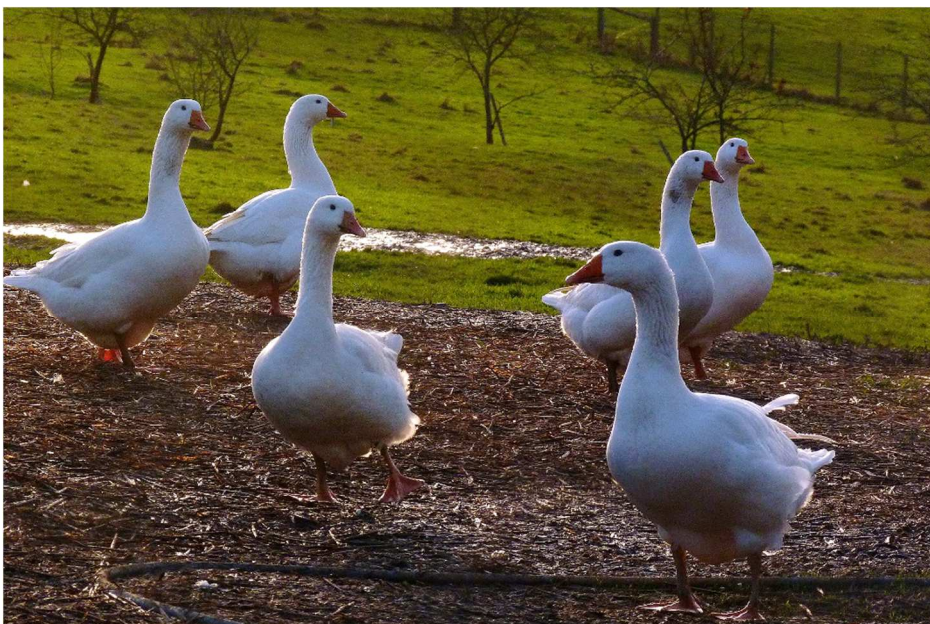
## Gardening by the light of the moon

The farm is based upon the guiding vision that it must function as a strong, self-sustaining and vibrant organism that recognises and respects the basic principles of nature at work.

As well as undertaking the usual animal husbandry work, the farm also offers guided walks and talks, barbecues and barn dances, school visits, camping and volunteer work days. They also run a small care home for three

disabled adults, who work on the farm. As part of the effort to improve local agriculture, it also hosts younger farmers, who learn about biodynamic farming practices.

The Co-op is part of a global movement, Community-Supported Agriculture (CSA), which seeks to reconnect local communities with farming. Risks, responsibilities and rewards of the farming enterprise are shared between the farmers and the consumers.





## And now for the science bit

Demeter is a food label that certifies biodynamic farming. Biodynamic farming is similar to organic agriculture in that it works in harmony with nature, rather than against it. It uses natural pest and disease control methods and builds recycling as a key component of the system. No artificial chemicals, fertilisers or genetically-modified organisms are used.

Biodynamics take into account the whole environment, including geology, ecology, biology, climatology and astronomy. Where external inputs must be brought in, like grain to feed poultry, the produce is organic. To be Biodynamic there are strict limits as to the proportion of food that can be bought in from off the farm as the aim is that it is all home-produced. That is why our poultry at present are only organic.

Preparations are used in biodynamic agriculture to improve soil fertility and plant growth. Examples include quartz with cow manure and herbs. These are sprayed onto the crops or soil at set times of the year.

The additional price tag on their products covers most of the extra costs, particularly the lower crop yields per hectare and the increased labour costs compared with conventional intensive agriculture. The lower yield is made up for by a very nutritionally-dense and environmentally-friendly product.

During 2008-2010, the farm made a marginal net profit of £8,000 on a £700,000 income. However, more recently, the Co-op has seen growth in sales and now has an annual turnover of over £1.2 million.

## More vitality

An essential component of biodynamic farming is to treat the environment, plants and animals in a way that meets their natural needs – this results in healthier food and animals that have been treated with the highest animal welfare standards of all organic certification bodies. For instance, de-horning and artificial insemination are generally not allowed.

On the farm over winter, the animals are kept inside open-sided barns to shield them from the cold and winter elements. Cows are fed hay and silage; pigs and sheep are fed on farm-grown and locally-sourced organic beans, oats, triticale, wheat and barley. Once spring has arrived, the animals are let out onto the pasture and the goslings and day-old turkeys arrive.

Fifty pure-bred Sussex suckler cows are used as beef cattle. The 180 pigs on the farm are a mix of Large White and Oxford Sandy and Black sows, along with a Large White and Duroc boar. The pigs have metal shelters that they sleep in at night, but are free to forage around the pasture all day during the summer months.

The 150 sheep ewes are a Wiltshire Horns, which shed their own wool so do not have to be shorn. Poultry include free-range organic chickens, geese, ducks and turkeys, totalling a production of 10,000 birds a year. The poultry are raised outside for most of their life, but also have houses and shelters to protect them from the elements.

The farm is certified Biodynamic and Organic by the Biodynamic Association. It is regularly a winner of the Soil Association Organic Food Awards.

For more information, check out <http://tablehurst.farm> or the short film, 'Dawn to Dusk' at <https://tinyurl.com/tablehurst>.

### **Compassion in World Farming, 2017. Case study: Tablehurst biodynamic farm.**

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