**Annual Review 2022/2023**

**Farm Director, Spencer Christy**

**Overview**

The year saw the co-operative become more rooted locally and more financially resilient. The staff team grew as we employed two former interns and gave seasonal work to a horticulture student. We fulfilled our charitable aims through Supported Internships, supported volunteers, adult Day Placements, work experience for SEND colleges, the continuation of good habitat management and creation of a new wetland on the farmland and close working with the RSPB. Our local MP visited a second time and continues to be impressed with our work. We are grateful for the many volunteers that contribute to the society in diverse ways and also for the continued support of the membership without whom this project would not exist.

**Social Farming Bursary**

The period began with the beginning of the wonderful additional support from the ‘Reaching Communities Fund’ from the National Lottery Community Fund. This is the first of three years of funding we receive and it directly supports our Social Farming Bursary which enables us to host individuals and organisations who do not bring funding. This includes volunteers, supported volunteers, SEND schools and colleges and local groups and organisations visiting the farm. With this funding comes the requirement to deliver against proposed activities and outcomes which we have largely satisfied. The two cohorts that needs further development are supported volunteers and visiting groups so we shall put some energy into outreach directed towards this in 2023/24. The bursary was also supported by the Essex Community Foundation and the Essex based FSJ Trust to whom we are very grateful.

**Supported Internships**

Our financial resilience was further bolstered by our involvement in the Supported Internship program run by the Supported Employment Team at Essex County Council. We have developed a good working relationship with this team and have been told by the Director that we are a “beacon of light” within Essex. Our first two interns completed their courses in the Summer of 2022 and we hosted a celebration event at the farm with ECC and Community College Initiative (CCI) from Chelmsford who provide the qualification. One student studied horticulture and the other agriculture, their enthusiasm and commitment to their work is inspiring and we were able to offer both students paid employment on the farm. Neils works in the market garden three day a week and Aaron works on the farm four days a week. Both individuals provide excellent role models for the students that attend on work experience and also to future interns.

We are unique in Essex for employing our own Job Coach which is how we fund the program. This person supports the interns in their learning, being the bridge between our mentors and the student. The role also helps to find the students employment at the end of the qualification. Myself, Monique and Kate supported the first two students but we took the decision to advertise for an additional member of staff to focus solely on this activity for the students starting in September 2022. Unfortunately, this recruitment process was not successful and so we had to reorganise internally with Kate taking the two new students and myself and Aaron taking over the livestock work Kate was formerly responsible for.

We received a donation to provide dedicated tools for the interns and were all very grateful to Kate for agreeing to reorientate her role. In September, both new students settled in immediately and started working on the livestock module followed by horticulture module and then the domestic gardening module. By the end of the year they had progressed well and were a significant part of the farm team. Sadly for us, Kate took the decision to dedicate more time to her family’s farm which meant that she would be leaving her role. So, a new recruitment process began but uncertainties over future funding of Supported Internships meant we had to again absorb the training internally from May 2023. We all wish her every success on her family farm.

**Adult Day Placements**

This wonderful cohort of willing workers bring a warmth and sensitivity to the farm organism. The success of this stream of activity, run by Jenny, allowed us to open an additional day so co-workers attend the farm four days per week Tuesdays to Fridays, 10am to 4pm. There are eleven spaces currently occupied by seven individuals. Each co-worker has specific tasks they excel in and this is balanced with team tasks as well as activities that introduce new activities. Their work includes egg processing, woolly crafts, market preparation, sheep checks, chicken husbandry, farm laundry and kitchen duties. There are very good relations with the families and key support workers which was exemplified at Christmas with many co-workers and family attending our Christmas carol singing to the cow’s event.

**Conservation Work**

The existing three hectares of mature scrub and the one acre of woodland continue to be an attractive site for turtle doves, nightingales and cuckoos over the Summer months. We worked closely with operation turtledove run by the RSPB and they managed to trap and fit a transmitter to one bird on the farm. Many local turtle doves visit the farm and there were likely two pairs nesting here. The success of this has meant that we are allowing a further 1.5ha of permanent pasture to revert to scrub otherwise known as rewilding. The hope is to further increase the number and diversity of birds and insects that thrive in this habitat.

The birds of prey count remains high with marsh harriers, barn owl, tawny owl, little owl, kestrel, sparrow hawk and buzzards all nesting on the farm. This gives an indication of the cleanliness of the water sources and the abundance of the food chain for these top predators. We were unable to plant new hedges in the winter but this will be done in the winter of 2023/24.

Following extensive talks with the RSPB and the Blackwater Wildfowlers Association whom we rent 65 acres of grazing land from, we developed a proposal to reinstate ditches and dykes over a ten-acre area in one of their fields inside the sea wall. In August this work was undertaken by a local contractor who followed the old salt marsh low-ways using GPS mapping from drone photography, the human eye and historic aerial photographs. The depths of the ditches varied from less than a foot up to three feet with varying widths from one metre up to five metres.

When the rain came in the winter they filled with water and provided excellent habitat for wading birds. There was still significant water in the ditches going into Spring and the spoil that was created is being recolonised by clover and wild grasses. We shall see how the breeding season goes, early indications are good for lapwing and oyster catchers.

**Honeybees**

Sitting between wild animals and farm animals are the honeybees. We started the Spring with no honeybee colonies on the farm for the first since 2004. It was a very empty feeling to walk around and not see them feeding on all the flowers we have grown for them. We collected one swarm in May and housed them in a Warre hive and they settled in well, building good, thick comb. Over the two very hot days in summer I checked them every two hours and made sure they were shaded only to find at 5am on the second day honey pouring out of the bottom of the hive, clearly the wax comb had melted and fallen. Over the next two weeks many wasps came and very sadly the colony died. We hope as we enter Spring of 2023 that we are blessed with another swarm to offer a home to.

**Demeter (biodynamic) Certification**

Our annual inspection was in the Summer and we retained biodynamic status over the entire holding. Our regular preparation making was interrupted in 2021 so we had to buy in preps from other farms and the Biodynamic Association. In autumn we buried around 200 horns for horn manure and have in stock the sheaths for the compost preparations. Myself, Andre and Aaron stirred and sprayed the Three Kings preparation on Epiphany using the gesture of a spiral coming from each field instead of the boundary spray which we normally do. This new gesture invites in new impulses and we shall see how the year unfolds.

**Farm Livestock**

We said goodbye to Duncan, our trusty old bull, and acquired a handsome new pedigree Shetland bull called Diamond Oak in the Spring of 2022 and we are anticipating four or five calves in July 2023. He has solely A2 genes which means that we may have heifer calves that are also A2 type and this relates to the type of milk they produce. People are much less resistant to A2 milk than the more common A1 milk, A2 milk is produced by the traditional breeds such as Shetland, Guernsey and Jersey. It is our plan to install a micro dairy over the next three years and Diamond Oak with his A2 status will form an important part of this plan. The current herd is around thirty in number and sales of beef continue to go well with four mature (over five years) animals taken this year.

Due to a lot of unplanned lambs in 2021, there was no lambing at Lauriston in 2022 for the first time in fifteen years. It was a strange feeling but the right choice as we are still overstocked on sheep. The pedigree North Ronaldsay sheep continue to bring great joy to almost everyone that comes into contact with them. We have been breeding our own rams for many years but the bloodlines are getting very tight so we bought a new, unrelated, pedigree ram from a farm in Devon in November and called him Neville. He was presented with fifty ewes and seemed very busy as we heading into winter. Lamb, hogget and mutton sales have gone well with around fifty animals going this year.

The woolly crafts continue to provide meaningful and therapeutic activities as well as items that sell very well at the markets. Our volunteer, Lois, who spins, weaves, felts and dyes heads up our craft team. We have four looms and three drum carders that Tom and Laura (supported volunteers) used for three days a week as well as the college groups and the co-workers. They made felted bags and slippers as well as woven scarves. The scarves use 100% farm yarn with the weft being two ply and the warp double knitting or arran. All this yarn is spun for us by the Natural Fibre Company. Our Etsy shop continues to be busy and thirty-seven sheepskins were sent to Devon for processing in the late Autumn.

Our flock of chickens had to be enclosed for six months due to bird flu. We erected some very simple poly tunnels on each house so they could at least walk outside and the chickens remained surprisingly healthy throughout. The tunnels were not robust enough to be reused so we need to design winter housing for next year as bird flu will inevitably come back again.

Finally, we bought a Toyota Hilux pick up truck to replace the very old Defender.

**Vegetables**

Monique and Andre continue to develop the two-acre market garden with the addition of a new poly tunnel in the Spring of 2023. This was crowd funded for back in 2020/21 but the pandemic delayed its arrival. The summer was hot and very dry which posed many challenges and much new learning. The box scheme provided over thirty bags a week for six months, Manningtree health food store received a weekly delivery, three markets a month had produce for sale, some was sold to Farm Direct and the rest sold from the farm gate. We welcomed Daniela to the horticulture team as she completed her work experience and dissertation on the farm for her degree in commercial horticulture and was employed over the Summer. Niels ended his internship and started paid employment in August for three days a week.

**Flowers**

Monique started growing flowers two years ago and this season it expanded further. The garden not only looks beautiful and provides abundant food for flying insects, the selling of flowers is also very profitable. We sold bunches at the three local markets we attend each month as well as supplying flowers for funerals and barge trips.

**Seasonal Celebrations and Staff Enrichment Days**

We continue to develop our cultural activity in the form of celebrating the seasons. At Michaelmas we were very fortunate to host Katerina Baiter who is a singer, composer and anthroposophical music therapist. She brought various chimes and gongs and we sang in a round two different songs she wrote for Michaelmas while we also stirred the horn manure preparation. For Advent, Monique made an outdoor Advent spiral from greenery which was about five metres in diameter. At the end of each day, we all sang Advent carols while individuals walked the spiral, lit a candle at the centre and placed it on the spiral as they walked out. By Christmas it was very bright! It sits next to a public footpath and many people stopped to photograph it.

We also now hold a staff enrichment day around each festival organised by Monique. We are introduced very gently to a variety of anthroposophical and biodynamic topics and are invited to explore them through artistic activity. We enjoy a bring and share lunch and then continue in the afternoon. Further to this, Daniela attending the Oxford Real Farming Conference, I attended the online version of the Agriculture Conference from Dornach and Monique and Andre went to the Summer camp at Emerson College. We are planning our celebrations of one hundred years of biodynamics for 2024.

**Farm Ownership and Future Plans**

We completed all the inheritance process and submitted it to the Land Registry in the Summer and are still waiting for confirmation of the transfers of titles to myself at the time of writing. I had another informal meeting with the Biodynamic Land Trust about moving the land and buildings into this organisation to give some form of protection for the biodynamic status, regardless of who manages the land. I have also had conversations and visits from the Camphill Alliance trustees as we explore how we set up a residential setting with the Camphill ethos. We joined the Association of Camphill Communities and the Mount in Sussex have been in touch and are due to visit to also give advice and support.

In addition to this, we are part of a program called Powering Up by Power to Change and this is looking at the feasibility of generating renewable energy on the farm, undertaking a carbon audit and helping us write our next five-year business plan. We also secured funding from ECC to install a commercial kitchen in the cattle barn and funding from Magnox to complete the building of a new, large meeting and eating room.

Finally, we have been talking with the Hampton family at Willow Hall Farm in Wix, Essex about their farm succession and if we can help with their plans. Their 160 acre mixed farm is third generation in their family, on grade one soils and has been biodynamic certified since around 2004. We currently buy straw, chickens and chicken food from them and have a good relationship with them. We have had a few meetings and beginning to see a possible path forward. It is a big project to take on and when we feel we are ready to do so we will return the ideas to our members.

Spencer Christy

Farm Director 14th June 2023