

Feeding Martin

The idea of the village farm – growing healthy local food for local people – is gathering momentum in the UK. In this month's Countryman Debate on Britain's Rural Future, BILL TAYLOR talks to villagers in Hampshire who are trying to make it happen



The Countryman Debate on Britain's Rural Futures

Nick Snelgar looks around the agricultural farming landscape of his New Forest home and ponders the same conundrum facing everyone interested in putting local food on the family table. "I'm surrounded by the astounding beauty of this Hampshire countryside. It's very fertile, easy to farm, yet I eat not a thing from it. Why is it that we live in this valley and we have to go to the supermarket to source our fresh food – which is very good fresh food, but it's not from here, indeed it's not even from Britain. None of it comes from our local community and these fields."

The difference is that Nick Snelgar is one of a growing band of Britons who have decided to do something about it. He has a dream of reviving the village farm – or to give the scheme its more formal name, community supported agriculture. The idea is a farming revolution in the making in this country. It is already widespread in the United States.

In the village farm, members of a community give the farmer a guaranteed market for his produce, promising to spend a regular monthly amount for at least a year on this locally grown food. Sometimes villagers own part of the farm; often they spend at least a few days a year working on it.

The relationship between farmer and customer is completely transformed. The farmer grows exactly the kind of healthy food the villagers want to eat. Packaging costs, transport costs and environmental pollution are kept to a minimum. In return, the farmer has a secure market for his food that is not subject to the vagaries of world commodity prices in an increas-



ingly global agricultural economy. In Nick Snelgar's case, the dream is to create a 50-acre farm with resident manager supplying vegetables, lamb, beef, pork, sausages and dairy products to his home village of Martin for £12.50 a week per family – all delivered to the door by a 21st-century version of the environmentally friendly electric milk float.

The only trouble is that neither Nick nor any of the village farm action group has any experience of farming, and in the eyes of real farmers and market gardeners, they seem idealistic dreamers. Even the village farm supporters acknowledge

Knowing their onions ...community farmers, from the left, Janet Richards, Mark Barnes and Margaret Scogings inspect their crop. Inset, driving force Nick Snelgar waters the chickens, and on previous page, feeds the pigs

the enormous obstacles ahead of them. "People don't follow their dreams," says Mark Farmer, who's not actually a farmer, but one of the founding members of the action group. "Nick Snelgar's a dreamer. He's in cloud cuckoo land. And that's fine. More than most of us, he got off his backside and got a group of people together. It's just a war of attrition at the moment between dream and reality."

A new six-part documentary series that has just



begun on Meridian Television follows the progress of these dreamers over a year. And what is surprising is that Martin's village farmers actually achieved so much once they had to grapple with the brutal realities of producing cheap, healthy, local food in a Western agricultural economy.

In the first episode, professional farmer Rolf Shepherd betrays a tolerant scepticism when the village farmers visit him for advice. "How many people are you trying to feed – more than 300 adults and 100 children? I think you'll be struggling to feed that many on 50 acres. They're gonna eat every day, are they? Obviously not if you're in charge," he jokes.

And there is a nervous laughter round the room. Not for the first time, Nick Snelgar takes in a deep breath, holds his head in his hands and contemplates the mountain of obstacles ahead of him.

Even if they could produce enough food for the village, our new co-opera-

tive farmers cannot count on all the villagers being willing customers. Retired farmer John Hooper still grows his own vegetable patch at home and is unlikely to sign up for that reason. "Having been working on the land all my life, I don't consider it would be easy to get such a scheme off the ground," he says in the gentle cadence of his rural tongue.

And the village farm committee itself has constant debates about the economics of the scheme. When Nick Snelgar outlines his hopes of producing organic free range chickens at £3.72 each, one of the founders retorts: "You'll just go bust. There's no room for error. Everyone needs insurance of some kind, otherwise we don't have a business."

Still, behind the thatched cottage comfort of Martin's main street, there may be more of a demand for cheap food than first meets the eye. Mark Farmer says: "You look at the chocolate box houses and you think, my goodness – this is a rich and exciting village! But

this parish has the second highest percentage of people on income support in the New Forest. So I am interested in that part of the scheme – people being involved in growing food locally for local people."

Two of the young mothers in the village have seen their attitude to food transformed by the desire to feed their own young children healthily. They are now born-again village farmers. "If you can't pick it, dig it up or kill it – don't eat it. It's not worth eating. Someone's fiddled with it."

Nick Snelgar is unrepentantly optimistic. "We meet every sort of criticism, but we're overcoming it." He also holds on to the aspirations for closer community that lie behind so many village farm schemes. "I don't think you can have a community unless you work together." But if Nick and his friends are dreamers, then so are an increasing number of country people in Britain.

Economist Jo Hunt has studied community supported agriculture (CSA) here and in the United States. He carried out a nationwide review of village farms for the Soil Association and is also helping establish CSAs in the Scottish Highlands. He says: "Looking five years ahead, we will potentially see a very dramatic increase in CSAs in this country. The idea that peo-

ple make a commitment to local farmers is something that could take off very strongly. It could be as widespread as farmers' markets are now. For small producers the only choice is to get out or get local. They don't have any other option."

Britain has around 70 village farms at the moment, averaging 40 acres and usually run by two or three people, with 'consumers' often volunteering four or five days' work on the farm every year. Depending on the size of the farm, between 40 and 400 local families sign up for a share.

Only a few village farms can supply all a family's food needs, mainly because of the large capital investment needed for meat and dairy production. These big operations can typically produce all the fruit, vegetables, meat and dairy for a family of four for £45 a week. "It compares well with what you pay at the supermarket," says Jo Hunt, "and it's certainly better than the supermarket. The emphasis on freshness seems to drive the consumer interest.

About two-thirds of CSAs use organic principles. "It's a break-even business, though. For the farmers it's a route to survival, not a way of making money."

The system appeals to family farms and small producers. "The most successful are around 30 to 40 acres." In most village farms, the farming family either already owns the land or there is a benevolent landowner in the background. Farmers and crofters on Skye are also looking at a different kind of co-operation where 20 or so producers work together to share one set of customers.

"The most useful role the CSA plays is to give security to a farmer to make the change to local production. That's a new relationship, the very opposite of the supermarket relationship, and it builds



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Bringing home the bacon ...the village farm should be producing its own pork by this autumn. Left, Margaret Scogings bags up vegetables

up a new kind of trust between the producer and the customer.”

This is certainly the experience of Nick Snelgar and his village farm enthusiasts in Hampshire. “In one sense, the problem is the farmers. They are wholesalers at heart. They’re often worried and suspicious about direct contact with customers. And they’re sometimes disinterested in their product so long as the cheque comes through the door. We’re an example of re-connecting the producer with his people.”

A year down the line, the village farmers of Martin are making significant headway. They produce more than 30 chickens a fortnight and sell them almost exclusively to people living in Martin. They should be producing their own pork this autumn and they are also selling vegetables: onions, potatoes, carrots, leeks, French beans, cabbages and pumpkins – not bad for a bunch of dreamers who had no previous knowledge of farming or market gardening.

Janet Richards, a village farm founder who is also a Green councillor, says that – inevitably – they have all learned some hard lessons. “Our original concept had three main aims which were probably never going to be completely compatible. “We wanted to produce and sell a range of food locally to high environmental and welfare standards, but at a price that is competitive enough to make it attractive to everyone in the village. In addition, because our target market is the village and it is so small (only 164 households), we are doing it all on a very small scale.

“We have already had to make one

difficult decision recently with the chickens when we found that we had underestimated our costs of production. The chickens had been fed on an organic feed which was very expensive. However, we have managed to find a feed that is free from antibiotics and GM ingredients. We have had to make a compromise, but feel that we are still sticking to the essence of what we are trying to do. It remains to be seen how our customers react to this change, however!”

The group is still operating on rented plots of land. The next stage is to take on a farmer or farm manager and see an expansion of production, possibly into beef and dairy.

For Nick Snelgar, the miracle is that the dream is working at all. “We’ve got veggies and chickens on the table, and pork coming soon. We’ve battled Health and Safety and the Food Standards Agency and survived. It can be done! We’ve started and we’re yielding.”

And for Janet Richards, it has all been more than worth the struggle. “It has been a great way to get to know other people in the village – not just other people involved in the project, but our customers as well. We have had a tremendous amount of support from people in the village, who have been so enthusiastic about what we’re trying to do – and also from local farmers who have given us a lot of help with the project itself.

“Of course, whether or not we are really achieving something in terms of creating a sustainable business remains to be seen. We are really only at the beginning of what is going to be a very long journey.”

The six-part documentary series *Feeding Martin* was made for Meridian Television by Touch Productions, a rural film and TV production company based in the village of Donhead St Mary on the borders of Wiltshire and Dorset.