

Lauriston Farm – A Biodynamic Social Farming Community

SPENCER CHRISTY

Photos courtesy of Lauriston Farm.



Spencer Christy at the market stall.

We have been developing our social farming community at Lauriston Farm for twenty-one years, near the village of Goldhanger, in Essex.

The farm has been owned by my family since 1992 and at the time of purchase my initiative was to hold it and pass it on. I worked with my father for nine years in engineering to raise money and in 2003 found biodynamic agriculture. The following year, I started a sole trading business for the farm and then in 2017 this business was put into community ownership using the structure of a Charitable Community Benefit Society (CCBS). We currently have

around 220 members of the CCBS with around 80% living within twenty miles of the farm. The farm has a two-acre market garden providing around fifty different vegetable varieties to the local community, a herd of around thirty Shetland cattle, a flock of two hundred and fifty North Ronaldsay sheep, laying hens, wool craft room and a community kitchen where daily lunches are made and surplus produce is processed.



Lauriston Farm.

FARM PROFILE



Some of the Shetland cattle and North Ronaldsay sheep.



Wetlands.

The concept of the living, self-supporting farm organism is explored throughout the Agriculture Course delivered by Rudolf Steiner in 1924. It immediately became a high aim for Lauriston Farm and when one takes it into the economic sphere of activity, it becomes increasingly interesting. If we aim to produce income from what we have within the farm organism, aside from the primary agricultural produce and farm payments from DEFRA, we have to look to the people within the organism, or those that are attracted to it, for initiatives that can produce

economic activity. Lauriston has always attracted teachers and people with a connection to the community of people with a learning disability and /or autism. So, as we search for sufficient economic activity to sustain the costs associated with a 210-acre Demeter certified farm, we provide opportunities for individuals to bring their interest and skills in a particular field linked to our charitable aims. This has taken the form of craft workshops, forest school sessions, a parent and child group as well as a diverse social farming offer aimed at people with a learning disability and/or autism. This diversity of income streams enables us to achieve an economic outcome that provides some modest reinvestment into the operations of Lauriston Farm.

It is hard to imagine the early days now, when I was working on my own in the fields, preparing them for livestock after a gap of over thirty years. Aside from nature, my only company was a long wave radio which provided me with live coverage of the cricket Test Matches. It is easy to understand how farmers can develop mental health challenges with so much lone working.

It is humbling that so many local people feel connected enough to

our work to make that strong, heart connection to it through becoming a member. The members are the seeds that enable the social farming community to grow. In the last seven years we have gone from one part time wage to currently employing twelve people directly and three more who are self-employed. Of these twelve, six people have a learning disability and/or autism.

A couple of years after I started, Marina O'Connell from the Apricot Centre visited and was amazed that it was only me looking after the 210 acres of Lauriston Farm. She described how the Camphill communities would have at least forty people a week working on the land on this size of farm. This came as a surprise and also an inspiration with the inner knowledge that the farm sits within an internationally important RAMSAR wetland habitat as well as being a Site of Special Scientific Interest (SSSI) and so has a great responsibility to the wildlife that breeds and visits the farm and requires tranquillity. So, developing a social farming community requires us to maintain a balance between numbers of people and the needs of the natural ecosystem.

How to achieve this was the next question which was quickly answered by a BD Apprenticeship



Very productive polytunnel.

training week at Botton Village back in 2009. What I witnessed there was truly exceptional in that there was a seamless, working interaction of adults with a learning disability together with co-workers without such a diagnosis. Everyone worked and I could sense the freedom in the commitment to the daily work as well as self-pride in each individual role within the farm organism.

Introducing such working practices into Lauriston formally began in 2017. We started to divide up our daily tasks in agriculture and horticulture to enable students from SEND colleges, supported volunteers and adults with social care day placement funding from Essex County Council. The key to this delivery is for the 'host' person to be fully competent and enthusiastic in their role on the farm, be it agriculture, horticulture, crafts or cookery. From this place, it is possible with encouragement to generate interest in the social farming participant in the practical work and enable them to undertake new tasks and learn new skills. This then has wider benefits in the participants life as it often reported to us.

We soon discovered that each individual had a particular interest in some area of the farm work. For example, one day placement co-worker is an expert at laundry so one of their weekly tasks is to wash and dry all the bags that we fill with vegetables every week and deliver locally. The market garden provides endless opportunities for social farming with high precision needed for seed sowing and potting on which seems to suit some individuals with a diagnosis of autism. In contrast, harvesting potatoes and other root vegetables by hand suit the stronger, less precise individuals as well as group working.

As we developed, we found ourselves being approached by organisations and individuals who didn't have any funding to bring people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or autism to the farm.



Chris and Richard.

As we developed, we found ourselves being approached by organisations and individuals who didn't have any funding to bring people with learning difficulties, disabilities and/or autism to the farm. It was clear that, for these individuals, we would need to become not only the provider of a setting but also the funder for these people. In 2019 we launched our Social Farming Bursary to do exactly this. From a number of local and national funders, including the National Lottery Community Fund, we apply for grants to allow us to welcome individuals without funding. This is particularly relevant for individuals with autism, people with physical disabilities and individuals with mental health challenges.

We see a true sense of belonging and ownership of the daily tasks by many social farming participants. One supported volunteer with autism is a very keen horticulturist and has a seasonal job in a plant nursery and whenever he has a day off his mother will contact us to see if he can volunteer. Through our Social Farming Bursary, we can always say, "Yes", so, instead of the person having to adjust to life at home when the work isn't available, he can keep his weekly rhythm and continue to learn about and practice horticulture.

His mother recently wrote to us saying, "We wish you all the best with all you do. I recently bumped into a friend of ours who we hadn't seen for ages. His son has recently started coming to Lauriston - another young person with difficulties who has found welcome and purpose at

Lauriston. What you do is so valuable."

Overall, in the financial year 2024-25, we created 1,857 social farming day opportunities through the Social Farming Bursary as well as an additional 1,012 day opportunities for adults on day placements and employees with special needs. This equates to an average of twelve people per day attending the farm for social farming and eight staff members without additional needs. In reality, some days can have sixty people and other days less than half a dozen, either way, we are exceeding the forty people per week indicated by Marina which seems unimaginable when I recall the walk we took together back in 2008.

In addition to this inclusive, work orientated social farming,



Dan and sheep.

FARM PROFILE

we also host primary school groups on educational farm days with help from the charity, The Country Trust. These days are packed full of lively activities, and the children get to understand the interactions between soil, plants and animals, especially through compost making. It is always a joy to offer them a piece of cow manure to smell, at first they are screaming with fear and then one brave pupil discovers it doesn't smell and suddenly the whole class wants to smell it. They are introduced to the term, "black gold".

Furthermore, we have open days every month and other local interest groups attending for educational farm walks. These are funded by Natural England through our Higher Tier Countryside Stewardship Agreement. Last year, 340 people attended these events, and they leave with knowledge of biodynamic farming, an understanding of the conservation work we undertake as well as insights into the social farming activities. Sometimes these events provide us with new volunteers and community members and are an important point of sales for produce. This is in addition to seven local markets a month, some wholesaling to shops and Farm Direct as well as a weekly veg bag delivery scheme from June to March. We only buy in kitchen ingredients, everything else comes from the farms own produce which includes yarn and sheepskin rugs from our North Ronaldsay sheep.



Spencer buying Preparation 500.



Fine and fresh....

We are repeatedly told that there is nothing like our project in this locality. Proof of this is that people and organisations are typically willing to travel up to 45 minutes by car to reach us. It is the unique blend of biodynamic agriculture and horticulture with extensive conservation work combined with a commitment to enabling people with special needs to find their place in this work that stands out to people. We have many different streams of activity which enables individuals to find something that resonates with them and from this develop more self-confidence, better mental health, enhanced well-being and the sense of being connected to a community of people. Families report that these outcomes radiate beyond the time actually spent on the farm and into the individual's wider life.

To maintain the anthroposophical foundation to our work, everyone on the farm at 9 a.m. gathers to share the day ahead and read the Calendar of the Soul together with our farm prayer given below. We translate this into the language of overseas WWOOFERS which make the day even richer. In the 100th year anniversary we also read a random paragraph from the Agriculture Course every morning, this continues at least once a week.

Finally, the glue that holds the community together is produced by the kitchen. Each day, the whole farm gathers for a morning tea break at 11:15 a.m. and at 1 p.m. for lunch. We link hands and call a blessing for the meal. The kitchen is run by two young people who completed a Supported Internship on the farm, both have intellectual learning disabilities. We learnt during the COVID pandemic, when shared meals stopped, the vital role eating together plays in community cohesion and human relationships.

Looking into the future, we are forming a charity called the Lauriston Land Trust which has the same charitable aims as the CCBS to hold all the fixed assets of the farm. The CCBS will become a tenant of the Charity and there are as many rules as possible to prevent the assets being sold or mortgaged and to prevent changes to the objects which include the requirement to undertake our work out of Anthroposophy. Our seven-year business plan in entitled 'From Lauriston Farm to Lauriston Village'. In the near future, we would love to see people with a learning disability and/or autism living and working together on the farm and then we shall be known as Lauriston Village - a biodynamic social farming community.

The Farm Prayer

Oh Earth, I perceive Thee
Gently receive me
Feel now my feet
Lovingly we meet.
With each step to take me
Onwards most gently
My home here you give me
Oh Earth, I thank Thee.

To read more about the farm visit:

www.lauristonfarm.co.uk/

Spencer Christy is Farm Director at Lauriston Farm



The kitchen team.