

Care farming in action

John Sones visits the Millennium Farm Trust in Suffolk

IN THE March edition of *Smallholder*, I reported on a seminar that I had attended in Beccles about Care Farming. Although seminars are very useful, there is nothing like seeing what is happening in practice. We had heard there about how Care Farming is well established in the Netherlands and other European countries so I wondered what was going on closer to home.

I was fortunate to be able to arrange a visit to the Millennium Farm Trust (MFT) which was founded in 1996 with the aim of providing adults with learning disabilities work and training opportunities in farming, conservation and rural skills. This is done through connection with other people, nature and with meaningful work activities in a supportive environment. The following is an account of what I found.

I travelled to their base at Rede Hall Farm located on the A143 approximately six miles from Bury St Edmunds, Suffolk where I met David Cook, a Volunteer Support Worker, Mike Jesky, the Workshop Manager and Alex one of the farm workers. The Trust has been renting about two acres of land and an impressive modern workshop from the farm since 2004. David took me first to see how they are using the land.

He explained that they have six regular farm workers who come on Tuesdays and Fridays. They have their own tractor (a Ford 4,000 for tractor fans) and some basic agricultural equipment. During the time that they have been there, they have grown a wide variety of crops including potatoes, onions, soft fruit, runner and broad beans, spinach, beetroot and are now trying flowers.

Where possible, the produce is sold locally. They have also undertaken some contract work which has included the erection of rabbit proof fencing, trimming a local maze which is about two miles in length by hand, coppicing a hedge and clearing the ditch for a local farmer.

David had told me that years ago he had been involved with farming and I asked him why he had volunteered to help. He explained, "I have a son with special needs. He was attending Otley College and at an open day I saw the Millennium Farm Trust stand. I have never looked back."

I then went to the workshop where Mike was teaching Alex how to use a mounted drill.

He was explaining each action carefully so that Alex would be able to set up the drill and make a hole in a piece of wood on his own.



■ David on the Trust's two acres

Donations are a source of income and have helped provide some of the equipment. Having been a furniture designer, Mike is multi skilled and his role is to pass on his knowledge and skills to the farm workers.

Alex was very proud of a shelf which he pointed to that they had made for the computer in the office and future projects include making bird nesting boxes to be sold. Mike told me, "I enjoy working with people and saw this as a means of passing on my experience".

The Trust has the following charity objective: "To advance the education of those members of the public who have learning difficulties and/or learning disabilities by giving opportunities for training, work experience, and work or employment in agriculture, horticulture and related subjects and in the principles of good citizenship, so that such persons can develop their physical, mental and spiritual capacities and grow to full maturity as individuals and members of society in the county of Suffolk and surrounding areas."

Chris and Nigel Oakley are the proprietors of Rede Hall Farm with mixed farm animals - predominantly Suffolk Horses - and the Trust also has a limited link with a community farm in East Bergholt where several families live and keep other stock. Since their host there who was also a support worker moved away, they do not go there as frequently.

Alex summed it up when he said, "I love mucking out the horses, working with animals and the woodwork".

Support for the Trust includes volunteers,



■ Mike demonstrating how to use the drill

fundraising, donations, sponsorship and grants. Although originally set up for people over 21 as it was felt that from this age there is much less other help, the Trust now take people from 18 years old as this group are able to bring some funding with them.

Phillip, senior support worker and MFT farm manager, had arranged my visit and speaking to him after, he explained that the benefits were really long term.

Through working on the farm, the farm workers found that it gave them confidence also in their home lives. Care Farming then is not just about the time spent on the farm and should be viewed for the perhaps life changing benefits that it may bring.

Want to know more? For more information about the Millennium Farm Trust phone 01359 230498/01787 237460 or visit their website at www.m-f-t.org.uk which explains in more detail what they do.

If you think that care farming is something that you could take part in on your smallholding, then I suggest that the first step is to join the National Care Farming Initiative (UK) (membership is free) website www.ncfi.org.uk, or c/o Harper Adams University College, Freepost NWW8123A, Edmond, Newport, Shropshire TF10 8NB, or telephone Debbie Wilcox, the Network Coordinator 01952 815335 or email enquiries@ncfi.org.uk ■

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