

Care farming looks to grow

Care farming combines care for the land with care for people. **Clemmie Gleeson** went to visit the Millennium Farm Trust in Suffolk to find out more.

After a long career in agriculture Phillip Mellor decided he wanted to bring the joy of growing food and looking after animals to others who wanted to be involved but were being held back.

He applied for the role of senior support worker and farm manager for the Millennium Farm Trust eight years ago and has since helped numerous people with learning difficulties to pursue their interest in agriculture and horticulture by getting hands-on experience on the trust's own land and its partner farms.

The idea for the charity, which was set up in 1996, came about when Bernadette Shrubshall was helping

her brother, who has learning difficulties, to find work in agriculture.

He had training and was keen to put his new skills into practice, but the opportunities were not available.

"We met others in a similar position who wanted to be in agriculture, but not able to find the opportunities as they needed help and support to work and agriculture is so high-tech now," explained Bernadette.

In the summer of 1996 she placed an advert in a local paper to see if there was anyone interested in helping. Various people, who were interested in farming, conservation and rural skills, came forward and the charity was formed.

Initially the aim of the charity was to acquire its own farm of some form but the trustees quickly realised how difficult it would be to raise enough money.

Instead the team investigated opportunities of working in partnership with farmers who had appropriate facilities and who needed some extra help.

Soon the Bury St Edmunds based charity had found regular work experience for people with learning difficulties on three different farms.

Then, four years ago, they were offered two acres of land and a workshop to rent at Rede Hall near Bury St Edmunds.

"Now we spend two days a week at Rede but we still do other contract work for farmers and smallholders," said Bernadette.



Phillip Mellor, farm manager for the Millennium Farm Trust

The team includes Phillip, Mike Jesky the workshop manager, the farm workers and volunteers, who help with supporting the farm workers and tending to crops when the farm workers are not there.

They produce fruit and vegetables and a range of woodwork items to sell. Fresh produce is currently sold among friends and family, but it is hoped that they will soon be able to sell via a new local box scheme. The woodwork items (including bird boxes and boot-jacks) are sold at local shows.

The cropping at Rede includes a field of onions, and smaller areas of garlic, broccoli and a range of other fruit and vegetables. Crops are planted by hand but a current project to develop a hand-push machine in the workshop is aiming to make weeding a little less back-breaking. The site also has no running water so has to be transported to the crops in bowsers.

"We have an old Ford 4000 tractor and would love to have a small new tractor one day so the farm workers could drive it. There is no spare seat on the old Ford so it isn't suitable," said Bernadette.

The heavy clay land has its challenges but is providing experience for the farm workers.

"We take some of our folk to do contract jobs such as coppicing and helping out on smallholdings," explained Phillip.



Volunteer Tom Frost waters the raspberry plants



Mike Jesky, workshop manager, oversees farm worker David in the workshop

"We are particularly keen to find them work with animals because they get such a tremendous amount out of that and we are not able to have animals here."

The team is keen to find farmers and smallholders that need extra help. "We agree a small charge but not a lot," said Phillip. "The most important thing is the opportunities for our folk."

He said that the idea of care farming was moving forward in the region with the formation of the East Anglia Care Farming Group.

"There are smallholders or several larger farms that are looking at it at the moment to see what the benefits are before deciding if it is something they want to do," he said.

"Some will want to do it themselves. Maybe their wife or partner wants to run it as a new enterprise. Others may want help from organisations like ours. There are a lot of different avenues that people can look at if they are interested."

The trust rents a workshop at Rede Hall

Green light for county farm development

The East Anglia Care Farming Group was set up in January this year. The aim of the group, which has around 30 farmer and smallholder members, is to develop care farming in the region.

Secretary of the group is Doeke Dobma of the Sotterley Care Farming Project near Beccles in Suffolk. He said: "Research in Holland, Belgium and Norway has shown that disadvantaged people, including those with mental health issues, really benefit from working on farms."

Doeke is originally from Holland where care farming is well-supported by the government and he hopes that the UK government will soon be offering similar levels of support. The project at Sotterley has been working with people with enduring mental health problems since November 2008.

Two of the nine group members have since gone back into employment, four have gone on to do educational courses and others have started other forms of voluntary work.

"Before, their lives revolved around being at home, they didn't feel comfortable or confident to be out and meeting people but the care farming project has shown that the benefits can be huge and much cheaper than long-term medication," he said.

At the moment, support from local health services varies according to county, but some will pay farmers for the service they provide. Norfolk County Council has recently agreed that Doeke can take on one of its farms at Toftmonks near Beccles, and develop it into a care farm.

He takes over management of the 140 acre arable farm in October and plans to convert it into a mixed farm to offer experience of a range of enterprises including fruit and vegetable production and livestock.

"The opportunity to run a care farm is fantastic," said Doeke. "It is a huge responsibility on our shoulders and we want to do it well and help other farmers to follow the same path."

● **For more information on the East Anglia Care Farming Group, whose next meeting is on July 13, contact Doeke Dobma on 01502 470749.**

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