

# OXFORD REAL FARMING CONFERENCE

## START-UP FARMING WORKSHOP

**Speaker: Richard Boothman**

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**Venue: Turl Street Kitchen, Oxford**

### Introduction

Our small business supported the Start-up Britain campaign on their tour of Universities and Colleges in the autumn of 2012. From Plymouth in the south west to Edinburgh and Glasgow in the north and about 40 venues in between, we advised on environmental and land-based opportunities.

The tour was to promote entrepreneurial opportunities to young people studying at A level and beyond, to demystify the business start-up process and to offer help and encouragement to those with business ideas. The tour touched around 8,000 students, recent graduates and a few older entrepreneurs. Whilst we spoke to a number of young entrepreneurs who were interested in food businesses – selling home made soups on the campus in Plymouth; 5 a day pre-packs of fruit and vegetables in Oxford; and street food in Nottingham – we did not meet one person who was interested in farming or food production!

At a time when we desperately need new blood into farming and food production it is disappointing that few young entrepreneurs are aware of the opportunities in this sector and the rewards available from being involved in it. This report is the outcome of the workshop we led at the Oxford Real Farming Conference to question whether we need a campaign to encourage this exciting new generation of entrepreneurs to learn about farming and food production and to become enthusiastic about the opportunities available.

## Do we need more entrants to farming and food production?

- Without new entrants, corporate farming will take over completely
- Yes but is farming attractive since it is a huge risk for an individual and the wages are low
- Co-operatives can spread the risk
- The Soil Association apprenticeships are currently over-subscribed (500 people on the waiting list and who want their own business on the land) but the scheme provides farming and growing skills, not business and entrepreneurship skills. This could be an element that is missing
- Yes but it is hard to train whilst earning the minimum wage
- Yes, there is a huge opportunity as there will shortly be a tidal wave of retiring farmers, but it is very difficult to buy land to get started.

## Who should we be targeting to bring onto the land?

- University graduates? Not sure. Are they, generally, looking for practical, hands on work?
- We need to look beyond existing farming families and communities
- Soil Association works with 10 and 11 year olds in primary schools and get them to run their own farmers market. If we begin education early to develop proper life skills such as how to grow, eat, preserve, we may persuade more people of the importance and the opportunities
- Need to provide better and more opportunities for training – e.g. more apprenticeships
- Need a recognised route for people to become farmers which overcomes the known barriers (e.g. access to land). But we cannot wait to overcome the barriers before finding the new entrants to food and farming.

## Should we target ethnic minorities and women?

- Ethnic minorities generally link success with achievement in the urban environment (and escaping the land) – though not true for everyone
- worldwide, 70% of food production is generated by women, but what is the situation in the UK?

## What is the future of farming

- We need to restructure how we think about farming and look at more part time farmers and food producers
- It is agreed that we need many new farmers but in reality, how many and over what time period?

- Mainstream farming wants fewer farmers and more mechanisation and automation
- We need to reverse this trend and displace fossil fuel energy by bringing people back on the land
- Incentives for farming are towards reducing numbers of people rather than increasing the numbers. Why subsidise agriculture to take people off the land? We should be subsidising employment not depopulation
- There needs to be a bridge between individual entrepreneurship and collectivism
- Social entrepreneurship could be an important part of the 'new farming'.

## Schools

- If we explain the barriers to becoming a farmer to schoolchildren and get them involved in a discussion, it would be interesting to see what solutions they came up with. Involve them in the discussions before they develop any preconceptions
- It would be great for schools to link with small businesses on the land so the schoolchildren can see how they can make it happen, get hands on experience and work out what is possible.

## Barriers to entry to farming

- Most of the barriers are financial
- Financial barriers are being addressed by innovative solutions such as collective lending and co-operatives
- Access to land is the other big barrier. Land auctions only provide 6 weeks notice, so it is difficult for communities to react and get organised to provide a social/community response (e.g. it takes more than 6 weeks for a co-operative to be formed with sufficient funds to bid successfully at the land auction)
- Can communities get together to form co-operatives now, so they are in place for when a land auction is announced?
- Perception of farming – which is portrayed by the media as unattractive and with poor financial return. Need to collect evidence to support an alternative view that might help to attract new entrants.
- We do not currently have relevant data available. For example, what would a healthy farming and land based business community mean to the local area?

Do we need another body or campaign such as Start-Up Farming?

- The Land Partnerships model matching land owners & land entrepreneurs is worth expanding.
- If we stay as diverse bodies then we have no voice, we duplicate effort, discuss a lot, can cause confusion and achieve little
- If we collaborate it raises questions about who leads and how you incorporate all views
- We need to develop a dialogue – what does food and the countryside mean to people?