



localfoodworks



Farm sets up a successful farm shop and processing units

From small beginnings supplying supermarkets with cauliflowers and an honesty box at the farm gate, Gear Farm in Cornwall has developed a thriving business using converted pigsties to run a farm shop and also processing units for local producers both to supply the shop and develop their own businesses.

This case study outlines the origin, development and day-to-day running of this successful venture.

1. Background
2. Setting up the shop
3. Development and diversification
4. The processing units
5. How it works
6. Outcomes for the producers
7. Information

CASE STUDY

1.

Local Food Works is a partnership project between the Soil Association and the Countryside Agency providing practical support and information for the development of local food networks.



Gear Farm Organic Shop and Processing Units

1. Background

Gear Farm is situated off the beaten track, on the Lizard Peninsula in Cornwall. For 20 years they grew cauliflowers for supplying the supermarkets and, in addition, sold a small selection of other vegetables through an honesty box system outside the farm gate. They found it a struggle to keep up with the demands of the supermarkets and had noticed that the sales through their honesty box were increasingly healthy. Both factors led to their decision to start a farm shop.

They also decided to convert to an organic system, both for habitat conservation and for the positive health benefits of eating organically grown vegetables, particularly for one family member who suffered from allergies.

In addition to vegetables, Gear Farm rears poultry for meat and eggs. This is not yet organic but will be once the remaining land is through its conversion period and feed crops can be grown.

2. Setting up the Shop

Some old pigsties on the farm had been redundant for 20 years and, with the aid of a small European grant, one was renovated for the shop premises. They did the work themselves, which took 4 months, and the shop opened in July 2000 offering a whole range of vegetables. Sales were good and they almost ran out by September. David Webb of Gear Farm says, "If it's growable, we'll try it. Some lines don't make any money but we need the variety to attract the customers." Quality is important: "We are fussy about what we put in our shop," says David. Vegetables are picked every morning and a surplus grown to ensure that only the perfect ones are put out. Production went up to 11 acres, including ½ an acre under polytunnels.

3. Development and Diversification

As the farm shop had been so successful, David Webb decided to increase the range of produce stocked, and also extend to a 12-month retailing period. Despite knowing nothing about livestock farming or meat processing, he decided selling meat would complement the shop produce and, in addition, would help to cover the 'hungry gap' of vegetables during the spring.

Some local organic farmers, already supplying David with parsnips and carrots on a small scale, approached him to see if he would sell some of their beef and pork. They had previously been selling their animals at market but wanted to add value and increase their return by having their animals killed and selling the cuts of meat, sausages, etc. They had also decided to diversify into apple juice and cider production but had no premises or facilities for this or the meat processing. David decided to convert the other redundant pigsties into processing units that could be rented out to local small scale producers. The organic meat producers took two units, one for meat processing and one for making apple juice.

The farm shop also sells fresh fish and shellfish. It is surprisingly difficult to buy fresh fish in Cornwall as most catches landed for the English market go directly to Grimsby for processing, before returning packed and frozen. But a local fisherman, who has 2 boats operating out of the nearby creek in the Helford River, approached David about selling his catch - which was mostly ending up in Spain - through the shop. He also took a unit at the farm for processing.

4. The Processing Units

The units are big enough to process enough produce for the farm shop plus a little for local businesses such as shops and restaurants, a couple of which are supplied on a regular basis. The rental for the units is purposely low, enough to cover the investment made in converting the units (electricity and water are extra, and tenants have to supply their own equipment). The low costs mean everyone can continue to maintain a unit and supply the shop, ensuring an excellent variety of high quality produce is available for customers. One of the units has been kept for making chutneys from Gear Farm's vegetables and also as a joint kitchen where products can be developed and made using a combination of the produce supplied to the shop.

5. How it Works

The four producers supplying the farm shop have agreed to work co-operatively, although they have not formally constituted as a co-op. The arrangement benefits them all as the running costs of the shop are split four ways and staffing and cleaning of the shop can also be shared. Problems can be dealt with as they arise as they see each other daily. As no one knew what to expect, they all agreed at the beginning to monitor progress through monthly meetings. They also vet each other's produce and new lines. There is an agreement that anyone can develop and produce a new line as long as it does not compete with anyone else's.

As a result of the development of the farm shop and processing units new life has been brought to the farm. Working together doing similar things means that previous feelings of isolation experienced by the producers no longer exists. What could potentially have led to local opposition to the shop from other producers (if David had decided to stock it by buying in from outside) has been turned into co-operation, support and mutual benefit. There is a commitment to supplying the shop with their own produce and to educate people about seasonality, and in the near future they are hoping to produce a newsletter. There has been a very good customer reaction to the shop and it is clear that people want local produce that they can trust.

6. Outcomes for the Producers

a. Organic meat producers

They now have control of their own livelihood. Their animals are slaughtered at the local abattoir and they kill between one and two pigs a fortnight to meet the demand but cannot keep up with the demand for beef. They buy in organic lamb from the livestock market and cut and process it in their unit, in order to provide a wider meat selection. They so impressed Objective 1 (part of the European Agricultural Guidance and Guarantee Fund, covering Cornwall), that they have been selected as a showcase for project application.

b. Fisherman

Of his two boats, all the catch (shellfish) from the smaller one goes through the shop, along with some of the fish from the bigger boat. His partner prepares the fish in the unit and runs the shop for two days, resulting in a full time job whereas before she also worked as a part-time chef but only on a seasonal basis. They now have control of their business and have seen a definite improvement.

c. Gear Farm

The farm still cannot keep up with the demand for vegetables, however they have decided not to over produce to avoid having to sell any surplus to wholesalers. They have had to take on two new staff, one full and one part-time.

They have all noticed a difference in the control that they have over their businesses and are looking into expanding their product lines and taking on new staff.

7. Information

- a. Farm Retail Association, PO Box 575, Southampton, SO15 7ZB,
Tel: 023 8036 2150 email: fra@farmshopping.com
web: www.farmshopping.com
- b. England Rural Development Programme Grants, e.g. Processing and Marketing Grant. Information from DEFRA – www.defra.gov.uk
- c. Plunkett Foundation for advice on how to set up a co-op: 23 Hanborough Business Park, Long Hanborough, Oxford OX29 8SG, Tel: 01993 883636
email: info@plunkett.co.uk web: www.plunkett.co.uk or try your local co-op development agency.
- d. Soil Association, Producer Services, 40-56 Victoria Street, Bristol BS1 6BY
Tel: 0117 914 2400 email: ps@soilassociation.org
web: www.soilassociation.org Training events – various topics including Direct Marketing and Collaboration.
Organic fact sheets (£5 each or free to producer members – to join contact as above):
 - Marketing information for farmers (meat, milk, eggs, grain)
 - Marketing information for growers (horticultural crops)
 - Direct organic meat marketing (notes from SA training event)
- e. A centre for local food has been developed by West Dorset Food and Land Trust to provide space for local food businesses and community food initiatives. For more information contact: West Dorset Food and Land Trust, The Old Library, 51 East Street, Bridport, Dorset DT6 3JX, tel 01308 459050

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