

## Greenprint Forum visit to Deben Community Farm, Melton

9 April 2022



On this Saturday morning bathed by spring sunshine 20 members of the Greenprint Forum, Greener Fram, Quiet Lanes Suffolk, Saxmundham Town Council, Transition Woodbridge, and others came together at Deben Community Farm to join Directors David Chenery and Heather Heelis for a guided tour and learn how this project tucked away on the edge of Melton is bringing farming into the community.

Having attended a Care Farm Conference in Diss a few years ago, Heather and David (along with third Director Heidi Dalby) were inspired to combine the care farm experience (the therapeutic use of farming practices) with community engagement and learning. Once this secluded site off Saddlemakers Lane was secured, and work to start creating the farm could be kicked off with an initial grant from Tesco's, the first big task they were faced with was the eradication of ragwort in abundance before any animals could safely be accommodated, tackled with the help of volunteers.

Any child will thrive in the right environment, and the farm helps children do just this by offering Forest School sessions, support for children educated at home, pre-school sessions, after school clubs, and Pit Stop Holiday Clubs (rated "Outstanding" by Ofsted in 2019) providing opportunities for children to be themselves and enjoy "risky fun" (supervised of course) in an outdoor setting exploring the farm, building dens, climbing trees, doing craft activities, and interacting with a range of animals, many of whom we were privileged to meet during our tour. The farm is fortunate to have access to a qualified carpenter in the form of Heather's son Cameron, who is building a new Yurt on the farm which when complete will be the new clubhouse for the farm's Forest School sessions.



The farm's work with young people also contributes meaningfully to their development of skills, with an apprentice honing their communication skills by producing the farm's quarterly newsletter and notices, and another young volunteer who having learnt animal husbandry at the farm is now going on to study veterinary science at the University of Nottingham.

The farm also works with adults, including adults with learning disabilities on Fridays, and also hosts prisoners as part of their community rehabilitation, with a team recently having dug out the ditch in the woods which has made a huge difference to drainage on the site. David has also arranged for "team building" days for colleagues from the Suffolk County Highways division to carry out tasks on the farm.

Although we didn't see the equines – the donkeys and ponies having been moved to a nearby field – we got to see their stables and heard the story of how the donkeys were donated to the farm following their rescue from Northern Ireland, and how the grooming of the ponies is one of the best jobs available for volunteers to do on the farm. The donkeys are the noisiest animals on the farm; they have had cockerels (who arrived on the farm following a call to the farm one night asking for help rounding up a group of escapees straying around the village) in the past, but in the interest of maintaining good relations with residents who neighbour the farm, the cockerels did end up having to be rehomed.

Then we met the ducks in the Quack Shack. The ducks help the farm generate a bit of income courtesy of the eggs they produce (£1.50 per box on sale at the gate).



The farm is also home to two highland cows, Heather and Cora, a mother and daughter pair. Heather was the first animal who came to the farm, and the pair are also the first animals that most passersby walking along Saddlemakers Lane see from the road.

In the centre of the farm are the two alpacas. They are kept away from the road to ensure that their diet is controlled closely, so that they are not tempted to nibble unsuitable treats offered by well-meaning passersby. One of the regular volunteers aspires to spin the wool from the alpacas.





There are only 300 or so breeding pairs of Oxford Sandy & Black pigs in the country, with Deben Community Farm being home to a boar and some sows of the breed which are known for their maternalistic nature towards their piglets. These pigs enjoy a varied diet supplemented by the national network of charitable food redistributors [FareShare](#) saving surplus food from the bin and helping ensure it gets to where it can be meaningfully used.



Cluckingham Palace is home to a flock of ex-battery hens who, like the ducks, help raise a bit of income for the farm through the sale of the 24 eggs that they produce each day.

Local family-run business Swann Nurseries supplied the end-of-sale fruit trees in the enclosure holding the ewe and her two lambs, and also constructed much of the fencing on the site. The father of the lambs, ram Frodo, was the second animal to arrive on the farm after the highland cow Heather. David explained how, when the farm took on a few orphan lambs from the Suffolk Wildlife Trust, they were colour coded with ribbons to help the team keep track of who had been fed and who was still waiting at tea times.

The farm has an ethos of repurposing resources, with the goats enjoying a pre-loved wendy house, the goose admiring himself in a salvaged mirror, and benches in the picnic area having been rehomed from the Riverside Theatre in Woodbridge, for example.



The farm also has solar panels around the site combined with battery storage in the form of old vehicle batteries, to help power the lights in the buildings. Local companies have donated plenty of woodchip which is utilised in abundance around the farm, and the farm welcomes donations of Halloween pumpkins for the animals to munch, helping to avoid food waste.



At the farm's community garden complete with polytunnel, children and young people are provided with the opportunity to learn how to grow fruit and vegetables, helping them understand the process food takes from field to fork, with green waste produced being composted and reused on the farm providing more opportunities for learning about the processes of composting and wormeries.

There can be no underestimation of the enthusiasm and passion for the community farm shining through from our hosts but there are clearly challenges to sustaining an enterprise of this breadth and scale.

Much of the construction and purchases as the farm has grown have been made possible by grants, but the nature of this form of income is that it is often only applicable to capital expenditure, whereas it does need considerable continuous time and effort to be put into managing and running the farm and its activities on a day-to-day basis.

They are optimistic that they can identify a source of funding that will enable them to pay for a three-year post for a part time Farm Manager to help with the day to day stuff and give the directors the breathing space they need to develop even more new ideas and projects to fruition.

The farm is open to volunteers and the public who have free access on Sundays from 12:00-16:00. New volunteers to help out are always welcome as are donations to help support the project. If you would like to get involved in volunteering at the farm you can contact Heather on 07732 681125 or email her via [heather@heelis.eu](mailto:heather@heelis.eu)

The regular weekly schedule of activities at Deben Community Farm is as follows:

- Monday – Forest School
- Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday – Care Farm
- Friday – Adults with learning disabilities and Forest School
- Saturday – Closed
- Sunday (12:00-16:00) – Open to the public and volunteers

[Bringing farming into the community » Deben Community Farm Project](#)

You can also follow Deben Community Farm on Facebook @DebenCommunityFarm

For more about Forest Schools and the principles of Care Farms and City Farms check out the following links:

[What is care farming? | Social Farms & Gardens \(farmgarden.org.uk\)](#)

[Worldwide Training | Forest Schools Education](#)

[Social Farms & Gardens | \(farmgarden.org.uk\)](#)

