

## DARTINGTON HALL ESTATE (DHE) VISIT July 13<sup>th</sup> 2019 [www.dartingtondairy.com](http://www.dartingtondairy.com)

Some 11 members under the auspices of Devon Churches Rural Forum (DCRF) were hosted by Jon Perkin, the principal tenant on DHE farmland, with 480 of the 750 farmed acres. Valuable input was also given by Harriet Bell who is Community Resilience (Food & Farming) Manager, helping Dartington to explore new ways to feed ourselves sustainably. Previously, she worked at West Town Farm, an organic mixed farm near Exeter, and at 10:10, an organisation that encourages schools and businesses to cut carbon emissions.

Dartington Hall (Grade 1 listed) has a country estate that is the headquarters of the Dartington Hall Trust, a charity specialising in the arts, social justice and sustainability. The estate dates from mediaeval times, was gifted by Richard II in Plantagenet times, and was owned by successive generations of the Champenowne family from 1560 to 1925. Totalling some 3,200 acres, it was then in a parlous state when bought by Dorothy & Leonard Elmhirst.<sup>1</sup> She was born in 1887 and her birth was celebrated in the USA national press since her father William Whitney was i.c. the US Navy. He was wealthy, being a major investor in British American Tobacco. Leonard Elmhirst (1893-1974) was a Yorkshire parson's grandson who had studied at Cambridge and became Secretary to Rabindranath Tagore, the poet and leading member of a 'Merchant Prince' family in India. Tagore stayed at Torquay and advised the Elmhirsts to buy an estate in Devon to explore their ideas for creating an utopian society. As an heiress, Dorothy had to spend a substantial portion on education and founded the controversial school, among many other initiatives – including to this day a 'Forest School'. Leonard studied agricultural economics at Cornell University (Ezra Cornell had founded that establishment based on his 1880 visit to The Royal Agricultural College in Cirencester). Leonard later founded the International Association of Agricultural Economists, and was also Vice-President of Devon Trust for Nature Conservation. He had always believed that there had to be a balance between economic, environmental and social viability. They tried to revive the whole rural economy, and had buildings they put up in the 1930s at the main holding – Old Parsonage Farm – which were 'state of the art' then (though with ugly concrete and asbestos as now perceived!). The Trust currently runs 16 charitable programmes, including Schumacher College and the Dartington International Summer School. In addition to developing and promoting arts and educational programmes, the Trust hosts other groups and acts as a venue for events.

Our much-appreciated trailer ride driven by Jon Perkin and co-described by Harriet Bell, took us past the dairy cows (Some 90 Jerseys + a couple of token Guernseys). They are owned by Sharpham Estate tenant Mark Sharman, and all their milk goes at a premium for their Sharpham cheeses and other dairy products. Calves were seen 'at foot' and Jon finds this confers immunity on them, which imparts better growth rates.

We viewed tree-planting of diverse trees (including hornbeam, ash etc) to provide browse for both cattle and goats so that they can 'self-medicate'. They are trying to develop balanced grazing and conservation leys. We also saw agroforestry with 'hedges' of elderflower and dwarf apples (for *Luscombe* drinks nearby) – this provides a model of 'local business-supported agriculture'. The land between these 'hedges' is in hemp for medicinal seed products and for its fibre used as horse bedding etc. That field now drains more slowly and does not lie wet at its lower end as it did when in forage maize hitherto. We viewed heritage wheat, grown under the auspices of John Letts, who grows these older varieties around England. On entering the Deer Park of fallow deer (restocked from Powderham), the public access and educational aspects were displayed on a wayside board. The diverse forestry areas reflect the Elmhirsts' pioneering work and passion for trees.

Main income is from the 350 goats (140 currently in milk). There are Toggenburgs, Saanens, cross-breeds, a few Anglo-Nubians. Average milk yields are 900 - 1,000 litres. Mating is from late July to March. Once kidded, the nannies (so named because our forebears used to nurse babies directly on them) can give milk without further conception (unlike cows). Some 5 goats can be kept instead of one cow but goat-milk is worth 65p/litre (cf cow's milk at half that price). It is made into ice-cream, kefir and yoghurt. Kefir (Turkish *keyif* = 'feel good') – especially the honey and cinnamon flavour is a top seller – and delicious!

EJW, 13.7.'19.

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<sup>1</sup> Please see: Young, Michael (1982) *The Elmhirsts of Dartington: the Creation of an Utopian Community* (Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 381 pp.).