

# SECURING LAND FOR FARMERS

NEIL RAVENSCROFT reviews the remarkable work of *Terre de Liens* in France, and asks whether land trusts on such a scale could ever work in the UK.

Concerns about access to land for landless and land-poor farmers have been prevalent for years, in the UK and beyond. As Richard Munton observed in a recent paper on landownership in the UK, agricultural land is ‘... increasingly valued for its provision of multiple rather than single goods and services’, meaning that land prices bear little relation to agricultural production, certainly anywhere within commuting distance of urban areas, and small scale farming is effectively squeezed out.<sup>1</sup> Maintaining access to land has thus become a burning issue, certainly here in the UK, although attempts to address it have as yet been relatively small scale and piecemeal.

In contrast, the situation in France has begun to change in the last decade, thanks to the work of *Terre de Liens* (TdL), a nationwide initiative to acquire and hold land for small scale organic and peasant farmers. With over 100 farms now in its care, TdL offers genuine opportunities to landless and land-poor farmers in France, both to farm and to connect with their local communities. Building on a recent paper by Martin Large<sup>2</sup>, this article seeks to address the intriguing question of whether a similar approach to land ownership and administration could yield similar results in the UK.

## The Origins of *Terre de Liens*

*Terre de Liens* (translated as Earth Links) is the brainchild of Sjoerd Wartena, a former university librarian from Amsterdam who moved to farm in southern France in 1973, having acquired land from a retired farmer who couldn't find anyone to take over. As Sjoerd observed, the land was ‘at risk of disappearing from agriculture’ and it was at this point that he decided to ‘... make sure that the chain remained unbroken, from farmer to farmer’.<sup>3</sup> True to his word, some 30 years later, he realised his commitment by making his farm available to a new generation of farmers.

He also founded TdL, as an alliance of citizens and farmers who could maintain local, organic, peasant farmers by facilitating their access to land.<sup>4</sup> Since that time, TdL has engaged over 10,000 citizens in supporting local organic and peasant farmers, and has helped nearly 200 farmers get established on over 100 farms covering some 2,300 hectares.<sup>5</sup> With nearly one farmer per 10 hectares, TdL's farms involve three times the average labour per hectare found in European farming.

## Organisation

*Terre de Liens* is a co-operative membership organisation comprising one national and 21 regional associations as well as 1,700 individual members. Rather like the Co-operative Group here in the UK, the national association takes the lead in the strategic direction and development of TdL, with the regional associations working at grass roots level to support TdL initiatives. The regional associations have representation on the board of the national association, and also employ the majority of TdL staff. There are approximately 20 paid staff in



Terre de Liens

Sjoerd Wartena, the godfather of *Terre de Liens*, came with his family to their 25 hectare farm in Vachères-en-Quint (Drôme) in 1973. After farming it organically for over 30 years, latterly in association with younger farmers, they sold the farm to TdL with tenants in place, ensuring that the land would continue to be worked organically. Sjoerd explained, ‘we found children other than ours to continue, and at the moment four small farms are earning their living and fulfilling their ideas in Vachères-en-Quint’. The farms now produce sheep's and goat's cheese, aromatic and medicinal herbs, and beef cattle. Most of the produce is sold locally, keeping the supply chain as short as possible.

the national association and its operational arms, and around 30 staff in the regional associations.

At the core of TdL are two financial vehicles operated by the national association. The first is an investment company, *la Foncière*. The second is a land trust, originally known as *le Fonds*, but since incorporation in 2013 known as the *Foundation*.

*La Foncière* was established in 2007, in co-operation with *La Nef Bank*.<sup>6</sup> In French fiscal terms, it is a mixed liability community benefit (solidarity) organisation with charitable status at law, which allows investors – both private individuals and companies – to offset some of their income tax liabilities.

There are approximately 6,500 (mainly individual) shareholders (commanditaires) in *la Foncière*, who have between them invested over 23 million euros. The number of shareholders continues to increase, despite a recent change in the law meaning that *la Foncière* no longer enjoys all of its former tax advantages.

The purpose of *la Foncière*, which is managed by TdL and *La Nef*, is to acquire and manage farms that have strong connections to their local communities. To qualify, a farmer must submit a business plan that identifies the land required



Terre de Liens

La Ferme du Marazeil, Ispagnac, Lozère: this traditional mixed farm is run by a collective, one of whom discovered it abandoned in 2001. Produce is sold at local markets. It was recently bought by Terre de Liens, securing its future. Yes, they do take wwoofers.

and demonstrates considerable community investment in, as well as benefit from, the proposed farming activities. The business plan must also demonstrate that the farmer can afford to pay a suitable rent as well as running a viable business. If accepted, la Foncière will handle the land acquisition and the relevant regional association will support the farm and community to get started. The regional associations also have a responsibility for finding new shareholders, and for collecting money from shareholders.

Le Fonds was set up in 2009, although it has only recently been incorporated as the Foundation, a trust for public benefit that can receive legacies and donations. While currently much smaller in scale than la Foncière, the Foundation is seen as an integral part of TdLs' approach to managing land:

“While the Foncière collects investments and uses them for social objectives, the [Foundation] collects donations and resorts to not-for-profit statute and tools to decommodify land in the long run. Its stated mission is to protect agricultural land as a common good and to improve it in exemplary fashion ... It has three main activities: informing and mobilising individuals, local authorities and companies; collecting donations; and managing land and farm properties to protect and enhance them in the long run.”<sup>77</sup>

### Agricultural Land as a Common

As this suggests, the role of TdL goes far beyond that of the traditional landowner, to encompass what it sees, with justification, as the stewardship of agricultural land as a common.

This includes training new farmers in agriculture and business, engaging communities to support farmers, and helping farmers to develop viable business plans, as well as acquiring land (either through receiving gifts or by generating capital for land purchase), removing it from the commodity market and investing in the infrastructure required to establish viable farms for new tenants. In pursuing these objectives, TdL works across all sectors of French civil society, government and business.

In particular, it has developed a strong collaborative relationship with a number of SAFERs (Sociétés d'aménagement foncier et d'établissement rural), the regional government bodies responsible for land management. TdL can help these bodies discharge their responsibilities to protect the environment and maintain sustainable agriculture. This has led, in some regions, to the SAFER pre-empting the sale of land in favour of TdL. (SAFERs must be notified of all rural land sales, and can intervene to determine the purchaser of the land). Elsewhere though, the relationship with SAFERs has yet to reach this level of co-operation, often because some are dominated by a lobby of conventional farming interests that are antithetical to the objectives of TdL.

Collaborations with local authorities are also growing in importance following the incorporation of the Foundation. These tend to focus both on supporting TdL tenant farmers through training and the development of associated projects, and also on the safeguarding of rural land and farms.

### A New Role for the National Trust?

Could the success of TdL be replicated in the UK? At one level the answer is 'not really', because France continues to enjoy considerable public control of land use and farm tenancy, which combine to keep agricultural land prices lower than in neighbouring countries – including the UK.

Yet the components of the “TdL formula” do exist in the UK, although we lack the grand collaborative vision, ambition and drive of Sjoerd Wartena. It remains a mystery to Sjoerd how a country that had amassed an extensive county farm estate and continues to embrace the National Trust – surely the most ambitious and comprehensive approach to land management anywhere in the world – can fail to see the potential for replicating TdL's mode of operation.

While the integrity of the county farm estate is being undermined by short term financial pressures, the National Trust does now recognise community supported agriculture and boasts four schemes on its land.<sup>8</sup> However, it is really

# Three Case Studies



## Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch

This co-operative started in 1995 when a group of people connected to Emerson College in Forest Row sought to save the college's home farm (Tablehurst) by raising funds to create a farm business that could rent and farm biodynamically the 250 acres of land and buildings. Two families came to run the business and soon proved that the community-owned farm, with its local market of co-operative shareholders, could be financially self-sufficient. This allowed the co-operative, in 2000, to acquire a second business (Plaw Hatch Farm) with land rented from St Anthony's Trust, a local charity whose aims included the training of biodynamic farmers. Not long after this, St Anthony's Trust acquired the Tablehurst land (as a gift from Emerson College), to ensure that it would remain permanently in biodynamic farming. More recently the Biodynamic Land Trust purchased an additional 38 acres of land adjacent to Tablehurst, to ensure that more land is protected for the future. As a result, there is now a mutually supporting set of relationships that underpin the long term continuity of biodynamic community farming in Forest Row, involving the community (the co-operative), the land (St Anthony's and the Biodynamic Land Trusts) and the farmers (Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Farms).



Grass-fed cows at Tablehurst Farm

## Terre de Liens Doesn't Provide a Solution for Everyone

Jean -Yves Bousserieu has worked as a shepherd and goatherd in the South of France for 40 years. In 1989 he bought a 45 acre farm in the Bordeaux, for about £60,000 together with his wife. When the couple divorced, he was allowed by the courts to carry on living at the farm until he reached retirement at the age of 66, when his wife gained the right to force a sale.

When the time for retirement came in 2013, Bousserieu wanted to ensure that the farm was passed on to a younger farmer. He contacted Terre de Liens who were interested and visited the farm three times. However they eventually declined to buy it because they could not afford the market price for the property— and because the house and buildings, now valued at €400,000, (£330,000) represented more than 75 per cent of the value of the entire property. Bousserieu would like to lower the price, but cannot because his ex-wife would not agree to the sale.



Jean Yves Bousserieu

Bousserieu is worried about the way TdL is going. "Since the economic crisis, they have less money coming in with a large number of farms to manage and too many salaries to pay."

He is also concerned that young farmers taking on TdL properties would be saddled indefinitely with sizable rents: he was told that the rent on his 45 acre farm would have to be set at €9,600 (£8000) a year — a reflection of the inflated value of the buildings. "I'm afraid TdL will only be able to afford properties where the buildings are run down and need repairs," says Bousserieu. "Young farmers will invest time and money in such properties but as tenants what will they come away with? I would like to see an arrangement where the farmer who improves the property and pays rent builds up some equity over time."

the smaller land trusts, including the Soil Association and Biodynamic Land Trusts, that are currently replicating many of the ideals and practices underpinning the Foundation.

There are also a number of co-operatives that are connecting farmers with their communities. One arrangement that is broadly similar to TdL's approach can be found in Sussex, where the Tablehurst and Plaw Hatch Community Farms Co-operative has 600 members and owns two farm businesses, each of which rents land from a number of owners, including St Anthony's Trust and the Biodynamic Land Trust.<sup>9</sup>

With a greater collective will there is little reason to suppose that more land cannot be brought into trust, and more farmers found who are able and willing to connect with local communities. There is also no reason to suppose that land investment vehicles cannot benefit from tax incentives. Indeed, the Ecodynamic community benefit co-operative has been established by the Biodynamic Land Trust as a means of contributing to financing the operation of the land trust through receipts from community energy projects.

Yet there remains an underlying problem in the UK. We can no longer count on local authorities or any part of the public sector to work as active partners in achieving access to land, or in supporting communities to connect with farming, while the operation of the land market exacerbates the price differential between the agricultural and development values of land.

This means that even relatively well funded trusts such as the Biodynamic Land Trust can acquire only a fraction of the land held by the Foundation in France. Farmer to farmer succession is also constrained, both by the tax implications of high-value transfers and by the opportunity for beneficiaries to realise considerable wealth by selling farms and land to the highest bidder.<sup>10</sup>

However, while the situation in France is considerably better than in the UK, it should be recognised that the cost of acquiring some farms is still beyond TdL's resources, particularly where substantial residential values are involved. This has led to some criticism of TdL's approach, on the grounds that it only purchases properties that have limited use (and thus value) beyond agriculture, and it expects farm tenants and local communities to invest their time and money in improving the farm buildings and land, which remain TdL's assets.

This is well understood by Sjoerd Wartena, who has cautioned that TdL has yet to change the politics and economics of land access; it has provided examples of a new approach to securing and occupying land, and it has attracted attention in France and beyond, but the land market and conventional agricultural thinking continue to dominate, as they do in the UK.

With this in mind, the experience of TdL gives us two clear messages. Firstly, addressing the politics of access to land for sustainable, local and community-connected farming is a priority throughout Europe. Secondly, practical steps can be taken in the short term to support sustainable farms and farming.

In responding to these messages, we need to start by ensuring that we secure the best deal for the land that is already in trust, and in public or quasi-public ownership. This certainly means engaging with local authorities, the National Trust and others



Terre de Liens

Marazeil: the collective

to look at the community benefit that can be generated by a redistribution of land away from large agri-business tenants towards smaller scale farmers. It also means learning from Terre de Liens, and from the Community Land Trust movement, about how to engage local communities in supporting local farmers. Of course there are more lessons to be learned, particularly in terms of ensuring that future successions can take place without endangering the land and impoverishing farmers and their local communities. But the key lesson from Sjoerd Wartena and Terre de Liens is that local action to secure land and support sustainable farms and farmers is a responsibility that we all must shoulder.

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