



Laverstoke Park

Jody Scheckter started his organic/biodynamic farm in Hampshire to produce the best-tasting, healthiest food without compromise for himself and his family. However, when he realised as a smallholder that it meant eating beef continu-

*By
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ously for eight weeks whenever a cow was slaughtered he decided to make the same food available to the public.

The farm's aim is to become self-sustaining and self-sufficient, producing the "best-tasting, healthiest food, without compromise"

Jody explains: "Everything we do stems from that. To achieve this we are creating the most ideal, natural, healthy environment that will enable our animals and crops to thrive. We follow nature strictly, but use the latest and best scientific research, techniques and equipment."

"To achieve a natural, healthy environment, biodiversity as well as slow-growing animals and plants are vital factors. This begins with the soil – soil is 90% of farming – there are more living organisms in a handful of good soil than people on earth! By enhancing the healthy bacteria and fungi in our soils, this aids plants to absorb the nutrients effectively and that is what gets the nutrients from the soil to the plant." The farm was certified as biodynamic in December 2005.

As if all of this was not enough Laverstoke Park is

committed to become self sustaining in energy by the end of 2010; we had the first tractor in the UK adapted to run on pure pressed rape seed oil. Becoming self sustaining in energy requires many changes in the way we operate our machinery to be more efficient, but also some fundamental changes going forwards. Left is a photo of our tractor which runs on biofuel.

However, Jody is not alone in his vision for Laverstoke. Clare, his wife, has a passion for farm based education. "It all started seven years ago when I invited my elder daughter's reception class to visit the farm on a lovely sunny day – we collected eggs, bottle fed calves, saw the pigs and piglets and visited the walled garden to taste some beans and peas straight out of the pods. However when I asked the children to tell me where food came from, they all named supermarkets! Farms were apparently "just somewhere for cows to live" and "where you drive about on tractors". I was really shocked and wanted to do something about it."

Clare contacted her local primary schools and gradually word spread and more and more schools began visiting. "I loved the primary school children – eager and interested, soaking up information like sponges. So when I was approached by a secondary school with GCSE students, I didn't think it would be much different. I was wrong – these students came off the bus kicking and spitting and generally disinterested. It was a cold, wet November day and the girls were wearing crop tops and stilettos – to walk across a bleak pig field! I began counting down to the departure time. They all complained as we walked through the muddy field but then suddenly, when they saw the sows and



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their piglets, they became “real people” again and asked intelligent questions, were genuinely interested and engaged. It was a revelation to me and I realised that it was my fault for not engaging them right away; so few young people have any idea what really happens on a farm and it was wrong of me to assume their interest.”

As a result, the first thing that you see when you enter the Education Centre building is a large sign saying “Match the Pool!” with photos of animals, their poo of course, for students to match with the diet for those animals. This is further supplemented by the display of “real poo” that Clare proudly shows off claiming that it appeals to all ages....

The success of the school visits, all of which are provided free of charge by Clare, her team of volunteers and more recently, a full time Educational Consultant, were such that a permanent “home” was needed. Cllr Kirk, Executive Lead Member for Children’s Services, was invited to the farm; he came and observed a primary school visit. A few weeks later he returned to say that HCC would provide a classroom facility in support of our educational goals. *“He was lucky that I was in shock at the generosity of his proposal or I would have burst into tears and kissed him at the same time! It was a dream come true!”*

June 2009 saw the long awaited education centre arrive. This has made a huge difference to visits, allowing the students to have a base from which to work plus somewhere dry for lunch (and holding chicks without risking them getting cold and wet) as well as the essential loos and hand

washing facilities. The ethos of the farm has been continued within the education centre as the building is recycled from its first use as temporary accommodation for office staff during the construction of Heathrow Terminal 5. The building was completely refurbished using recycled products and materials where possible and is now a purpose built educational facility.

With the aim of reducing the carbon footprint for Hampshire, a simple light sensor has been fitted in each room. These are calibrated to switch off if no movement is detected in the room after 10 mins. The lights will not come back on by movement alone; having to switch the lights on makes users think about whether additional lighting is really required.

Our classroom furniture is also sustainable; all parts used in the manufacture of our chairs can be disassembled and used in the recycling process. The manufacturer of our tables works with its major supplier of timber products to ensure that UK made MDF comes from government and privately owned plantations. The wood content used in the MDF is 60% preconsumer recycled and 40% reclaimed silviculture fibre.

After a long sourcing process, we now also have opaque cisterns in the toilets which allow users to clearly see how much water is used with each flush. The dual flush mechanism helps children choose to use less water where possible!

“Here at the Laverstoke Park Education Centre we are committed to teaching all generations the importance of ▶

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natural farming in today's world. We offer educational insights for all ages covering every aspect of bio-diverse organic farming both through the web site, and through visits to the Education Centre and farm" adds Clare.

"Over 7,000 school and college students have visited our farm since 2002. We are delighted to offer our farm as a resource for learning outside the classroom incorporating all aspects of the national curriculum. We have never charged for a school visit and never wish to, since we want it to be as accessible to as many learners as possible, and we are very aware of the ever increasing financial difficulties in taking groups out of school for a day.

"Visitors continue to be diverse in terms of age and subject area however we are able to work with the lead organizer to plan a day which suits them. Recently we have had English GCSE students, Culinary Arts University students and Year 15 learning where their food comes from, to name but a few!

"In the next phase for our education centre, we are planning to install an anaerobic digester to power the classrooms, and development is currently underway to create a conservation area which includes a sensory area and an example of our Green Fingered Entrepreneurs programme. This will also include the building of a recycled pop bottle greenhouse which a local school are coming to construct in the summer term.

"There is never a dull moment at the Education Centre – we sometimes almost wish there was – but there is nothing better than waving goodbye to tired, grubby young learners who have had their eyes opened in some way to farm life whether it is a simple connection with food, better understanding the environ-

ment, learning to plant a seed or going away thinking of career opportunities that had never previously presented themselves. The volunteers give up their time to help because they can genuinely feel good about what has been achieved at the end of the day and the visitors remember their experiences. If you think back to your own school days, the things you tend to remember are when you got into serious trouble, when you won a prize but mainly your school trips. If I am at a local school event, it never surprises me when kids say "I know you, you're that Poo Lady!". What more could I ask for...?"

If you are interested in hosting some school visits and sharing your knowledge with the next generation, Clare recommends that you get in contact with The Country Trust as a first port of call as they will hand-hold you through the process in terms of risk assessments, making contact with local schools and actually being present for the first couple of visits. They also provide their advice free of charge. www.countrytrust.org.uk/tel:- 01728 726540 ■

Laverstoke Park Education Centre is a registered charity (charity number: 1098108) whose aims are to promote bio-diverse farming and healthy sustainable nutrition.

LAVERSTOKE PARK FARM



"Known as The University of Organics"