

From the demise of April showers to global market events, Broadditch Farm Shop reflects on six generations of change and offers a model for how older ways may yet shape the future.

The day is hot and asparagus season ends in 48 hours, on the longest day. Slugs are into the newly planted crop, and farmer John Harris says he's not happy. But his smile says otherwise, "that's just farming."

Broadditch Farm Shop is part of Manor Farm, three miles south of Gravesend. John and his brother Mark Harris, the shop manager, are sixth-generation farmers, working the 470 acres passed down from their father Wilf and uncle Frank, and so on back to 1848.

BUSINESS

"We're not romantic about it," says John. "Farming is a business with peaks and troughs dictated by global markets."

They grow cereals and seasonal crops like beans and pumpkins, with wheat the main earner. "One man can farm 1,000 acres of wheat," says John. They sell through a 200-member farm co-op, which he calls "hugely beneficial for everyone."

"The tragic war in Ukraine saw wheat jump from £170 to £300 a tonne," he continues. "It gave us a boost, which we invested in a £100,000 tractor. But the next year, input costs tripled and we lost money."

The EU Basic Payment Scheme once provided a buffer. "I voted for Brexit because of red tape, but feel let down. That £35k annually kept us going. Now we get nothing."

Despite frustrations, regulation has improved both crop and farmer health. The farm is not organic and does not have irrigation. "We rely on rain. Yields may dip, but crops grow at their own pace. It gives them flavour." Spraying is tightly controlled, with annual certification. "Like any trade, you need training and checks."

FARM SHOP

"We used to grow all types of vegetables for the London market," says John. "But greengrocers were vanishing, while gate sales were rising."

The shop opened in 1990, run by Mark and a small team. It gradually expanded to include produce from other farms and local artisans.

The pandemic closed it, so deliveries and collections ran through the barn. "It was exhausting," recalls John's wife Kaz. "But it built loyalty." The business remains tied to Gravesend. "We're part of the town," says Kaz. They still make over thirty deliveries a week.

Broadditch also relies on events like trails, fairs, the Christmas barn and pumpkin PYO. 'Halloween Hauntfest attracted 20,000 visitors before the pandemic stopped it,' says John. 'These events are essential,' adds Mark. 'They help balance the books where farming alone can't.'

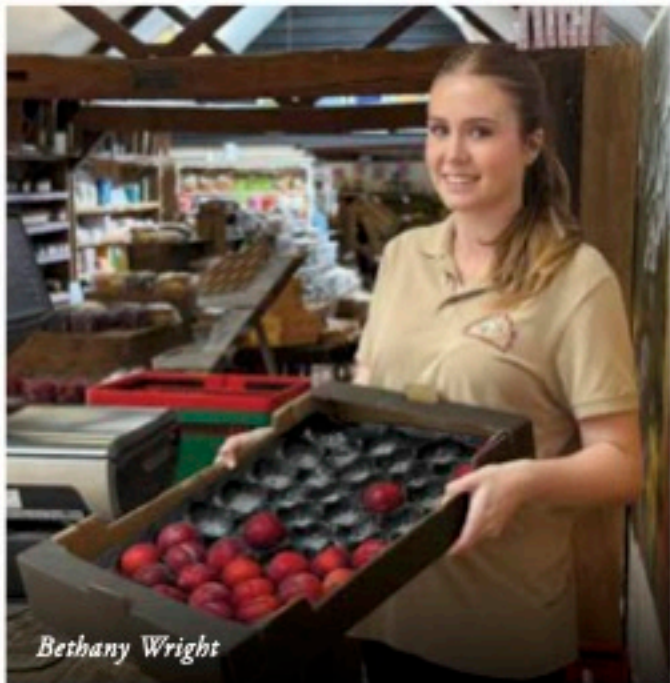
SUSTAINABILITY

"Smaller family farms won't survive without diversification. The shop and events keep us going." World markets and climate are unpredictable, making long-term planning difficult.

After forty years farming, John has seen the changes. "The seasons have shifted. No more April showers. It's long dry spells followed by sudden



From left: Mark Harris, John Harris and Kizzy



Bethany Wright

rain." Their Grade 2 land sits on loam over chalk, a droughty soil, and "roots of spring crops can't reach the moisture. A wet year is best."

Though not organic, they use minimal chemicals. Mechanical hoeing and crop rotation are standard, with nitrogen-fixing beans and pulses to restore soil health.

After harvest, asparagus crowns are left to fern, allowing photosynthesis from the leaves to feed the crown. A single crown can yield for up to 13 years.

A wild bird seed carpet, funded by a UK Government scheme, sees six crops left to go to seed, providing food and cover for farmland birds through winter.

TECHNOLOGY

GPS-guided tractors follow satellite-locked AB lines to harrow fields and apply fertiliser. Seeding adjusts



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to land quality, improving yield and saving money. "It's a real jump forward," says John.

AI is unlikely to appear in the fields. Although automation for sorting and autonomous tractors exists, they are still too expensive.

SUCCESSION

Looking ahead, they are cautious. "There's no succession plan. We'd like the farm to stay in the family, maybe let the land, but inheritance tax makes that difficult. We do this because it's a way of life, and you shouldn't have to pay to hand it on."

The steady flow of customers praising the shop's quality demonstrates demand, despite tough economic conditions. The stylish, innovative approach of John, Mark and the team proves family farms can work. However, they need support to keep flourishing and to remain attractive to future generations.

gov.uk/countryside-stewardship-grants/wild-bird-seed-mixture-op2

