

Chris Murray and Sustainability

My love of farming began back when I was a child being brought up between the Devon and Spanish countryside and London's Belgravia. I was able to witness enormous differences in lifestyles and values.

The Spanish farmers wasted nothing and had a completely sustainable lifestyle, living on the principle of grow your own, exchange and share. While fiscally they had very little, they were rich in their generosity supporting their families and enjoying what we would now see as a high standard of living with a Mediterranean diet and grapes to produce their own wine.

As a young man, I had enormous fun working alongside the farmers in their co-operative where we all mucked in together working in gangs. The farmers gave their labour to the co-operative and the co-operative paid us. When I worked on the grape and corn harvest in my school and university holidays I was paid more in Spain as a farm student than in England. Admittedly, we did start at 5am and finish at 8pm.

In Devon we always seemed to work alone or with just one other person. Whether it is due to our climate or just the way our society works, there wasn't the comradeship and joviality and there was a lack of many hands to make light work. Despite the Spanish farmers being poorer by UK standards, there was a far greater sense of poverty on the Devon farms where I worked.

In contrast, I had always felt a little uncomfortable with the opulence and consumerism that we had in Belgravia which even as a 14 year old, I found an inappropriate way to live, hence my leaving home at 17 to go farming!

One big advantage for me was my family having a publishing company, publishing agricultural, technical and medical books which meant that from a young age, I met many authors who visited our London home for a meal. I was always keen to be at the table as there was always amazing conversation.

There were people like Lady Eve Balfour, Bob Waller, Sam Mayall, Arthur Hollins, and Humphrey Wilson, all founders of the Soil Association and protagonists for organic, sustainable farming.

Then there was Schumacher, famed for his book 'Small is Beautiful,' giving a fresh way of looking at economics, especially in the way businesses are run. I also met Hertz who wrote the Engineers manual, a tome of considerable proportions, as well as meeting Andre Voisin, a biochemist who wrote a very forward thinking book called Soil Grass and Cancer. His theories made a direct link between cancer in humans and how we look after the soil. Bearing in mind everything, even ourselves, came from the soil, his

warnings are still very relevant in how we carry out our agricultural practice and steward God's creation.

There was also another great soil man called Commander Blake who wrote a book on the significance of the carbon nitrogen ration. He was the first farmer to grow 3 tonnes to the acre of wheat and I had the wonderful experience of visiting his farm in Hampshire. I saw how he followed his seed drill with a stick which he would keep pushing into the soil to see how the soil was flocculating and what it's moisture was. This would then give him the information he needed as to the drilling depth to ensure each seed had the perfect 'womb' in which to be nurtured, achieving maximum germination and evens ripening etc.

Later on whilst studying agriculture I visited several organic farmers, a tiny bunch of stalwarts, who had to add value to their produce to survive. The organic methods didn't give the high yields yet cost the same if not more to produce. Hence the need to get the higher margin by adding value and direct selling such as the More-Molyneux dairy at Loseley Park near Guildford where a friend of my mothers , Daphne Holloway set up ice cream manufacturing.

My own farming skills were gained at Bicton before studying for the Royal Agricultural Society diplomas at Seal Hayne. While taking a post graduate farm management year at Seale Hayne, my dissertation was on farm diversification. I became involved at Riverford Farm and with John Watson introduced the UK's first guided visits to open farms.

Working at Dartington with Maurice Ash, we set up Dartington Farm Foods offering local produce. We began a farm partnership keeping sheep and beef cattle, innovatively marketing organic meat by post. I also manufactured sheep skin products and organised farm visits for schools.

Passionate about farming and rural issues, I lectured at Seale Hayne and Bicton, while producing and presenting a weekly farming programme 'Down to Earth' for Devon Air, Devon's new commercial radio station.

In 1987 I became senior lecturer, farm manager and Head of Section in Farm Management at Coleg Howell Harris in Brecon but the dream of having my own farm meant taking a risk. In 1989 along with my wife Nicky, I invested in a bare field site in the South Hams which we named Pennywell.

The site had no buildings, grass, hedges, mains power or water but we had a dream and were determined not to look back at his life and say, "If only".

Pennywell Farm opened on 22nd May 1989, with one animal barn, a small shop and catering unit.

Surviving the early 1990's high interest rates and foot and mouth in 2001, Pennywell flourished and was the first attraction to introduce hands on, half hourly activities, a formula repeated by attractions nationwide.

26 years on, we have welcomed over 2 million visitors and Pennywell has won numerous awards over the years, the latest being 'Best Sustainable Business' in the South Devon Tourism and Hospitality Award.

Pennywell is a founder member of the Green Tourism Business Scheme and is the only farm attraction in the SW to hold its Gold Award.

I served as Chairman of Devon Association of Tourist Attractions (DATA) for six years and I am a Director of Visit South Devon, driving Devon tourism forward. I also have the pleasure of being a patron of Children and Families in Grief, a trustee of Time for Families and Chairman of the Battsborough Trust and Choice Words.

In 2011 I was made Associate of Royal Agricultural Societies, in recognition of distinguished achievement in the agricultural industry as well as receiving an Honourary Doctorate in Business from the University of Plymouth for my work in sustainable tourism.

In 2014 I was honoured to receive a Commendation from the Chief of the Defence Staff, the professional head of the British Armed Forces, in appreciation of the complimentary visits that Pennywell has provided for Service families at Pennywell.

I have always asked two questions in every area of the business, "Is it simple? Is it sustainable?" Nothing is added to Pennywell that cannot answer yes to both. I want an attraction that inspires and demonstrates a better way to live, putting sustainability at the heart.

We do this with our visitors through sustainable activities like plant-a-pot, willow weaving, pond dipping or catch a tiddler.

One area of sustainability often overlooked is financial and Pennywell has never relied on grants or charitable status to operate.

My real passion for sustainability and responsible stewardship came alive after becoming a Christian and finding that sustainable farming practices were written up in the Old Testament section of the bible....there's nothing new under the sun and it's amazing to think that nearly 5000 years ago in Deuteronomy and Leviticus they knew how to be both 'green' and 'sustainable!!'