

Nuffield Organic Study Group 2008

“Organic processes, products and people across Shropshire”

Led by Tim Downes, the Nuffield Organic Group met in Shropshire in June for a series of fascinating visits - including Belton Cheese, Peplow Organic Angus Beef, Bachelldre Watermill and Ludlow Food Centre.

First port of call was the **Sansaw Estate**, Clive, Nr Shrewsbury, with a visit to the organic pig business run by Nick Taylor. In keeping with the Estate's move towards organic farming methods, the Estate owner, James Thompson, teamed up with Nick in 2006 to create Sansaw Pigs, their very first organic pig herd. Every year, the Estate aims to sell 3,000 pigs to many different markets from Daylesford Organics to Sainsburys own label, as well as locally.

Next on the itinerary was **Peplow Organic Angus Beef**, part of the Rhug Estate, courtesy of Phil Hughes NSch, Estate Manager and MD of Rhug Estate Leisure & Farm Retail, as well as Mike Williamson, Peplow Manager.

The Rhug Estate, in Denbighshire, is one of the largest organic farms in Wales, covering 1050 hectares all managed to stringent environmental management principles. The Estate produces and sells a wide range of high quality organic meat, and other organic and non-organic foods through the farm shop, where they also have a shop and an award winning cafe, or online.

Hosting his very own tour, the afternoon visit took in **Tim Downes** organic dairy and beef farm based at Longnor, Shrewsbury. Tim farms in partnership with his wife Louise and Tim's parents, John and Chris. They farm 700 mixed acres near Shrewsbury, Shropshire, milking 170 cows and finishing 100 Aberdeen Angus beef each year on an organic system. All milk goes to OMSCo, with beef going to Waitrose via Meadow Quality. They grow virtually all of their own feed and buy in some protein.

Moving north to Whitchurch, in the afternoon the group donned hygiene hats and coats to look around **Belton Cheese**, where the owners, John Beckett NSch and his son, Justin, have created a real success story.

In the early 1920s, Stanley Beckett left the family textile business in Manchester to work at Belton as a farm student, before taking on the tenancy and eventually buying the farm. John Beckett, his son, has farmed Belton since 1970 when Traditional Farmhouse Cheshire cheese was made at one end of the farmhouse from milk produced on the farm. Belton Cheese Limited was founded in 1973 when the first phase of the modern dairy was built and further modernised in the last five years.

Now, Justin and his team carry on the tradition of excellence in cheesemaking, to innovate and produce a range of prize-winning English Territorial cheeses, including an organic range. They sell to all of the major supermarkets, as well as export customers in Canada, USA, Australia, Europe and elsewhere. They also have an on-line shop.

Travelling south once again, the next visit was to **Bachelldre Watermill** where Matt and Anne Scott produce a range of multi-award winning organic flours using traditional equipment. Set up in 2002, the watermill produces the traditional Bachelldre from local wheat grown at Bachelldre Farm, as it would have been done hundreds of years ago. Most of their flours are strong and are excellent for bread makers and for hand baking.

Bringing the programme to an end, the ambitious **Ludlow Food Centre**, on the Earl of Plymouth Estate, at Bromfield, provided the final destination.

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Established as a regional centre of excellence for farm-based retailing and food processing, the Centre features a number of artisan food production units, and offers training in farm retail and food processing aimed primarily at farm-based operators. The retail store sells home and locally produced food and drink produced or processed from within Shropshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire or Powys.

The Centre supports Carlo Petrini's aim of providing food that is good (healthy and delicious), clean (produced sustainably in ways that are sensitive to the environment) and fair (produced with respect for social justice). Carlo Petrini is president of Slow Food International.

The visit was hosted by Sandy Boyd, who was responsible for developing the Chatsworth Farm Shop, and who was enlisted by Viscount Windsor to develop and run the new Centre.

Our thanks go to all our many hosts, and to **Bonzo Robertson NSch**, who engaged and entertained the group and its guests on the second evening of the event.

Visit to Belton Cheese, Whitchurch, Shropshire

