

South West Group Visit

Cows, collaboration and consumers: Scholar visit to the South West

John Wibberley reports on the Scholar visit to the South West, starting on a wild and windy day in late August, after a characteristically hearty Nuffield lunch at the well-named Windwhistle Inn.

On a wild and windy day in late August, after a characteristically hearty Nuffield lunch at the well-named Windwhistle Inn, a group of 18 joined to visit Coombe Farm at 700 feet above sea level near Chard. We were hosted by NSch Anita Masters (Yeo Valleys *Waitrose* Account Manager) and part-time Farm Director of the A.H.Warren Trust, Andy King, who also farms in his own right on a FBT with an organic dairy herd.

Andrew Henry Warren began his own farming venture around 1942 also making farmhouse cheese. He died in 1983. The ensuing Trust (AHWT) aims to make the processing chain sustainable and to help others into farming. Milk quotas in 1984 plus the demise of the MMB in 1994 subsequently changed the dairying scene enormously.

The Trust farms some 10 farms (the first going organic in 1997) with a total of around 1800 ha, with 2000 cows. There are 350 cows at Coombe Farm itself, which is also a *LEAF* farm. They work with OMSCO/Milk Link. Further milk is brought in to the associated nearby Processing Plant from other Somerset and Dorset farms, plus Duchy Home Farm in Gloucestershire. All suppliers adopt Freedom Foods standards, are organic and, though not yet registered as such, get virtually equivalent treatment to *Waitrose Select* farms (all of which are still non-organic).

Andy King trained as a nutritionist and aims to maximise milk from forage. The arable is rotational with clover/PRG leys alternating with wheat for crimping or whole-crop, with some triticale as second cereal. There is some fodder beet planted, and some 40 ha of lucerne fed as hay pellets. Maize has been grown conventionally at Coombe but not yet organically. Andy reckons cows are typically under energy stress and manages them in low and high yielding groups. Lactation yields range from 6,600 to 7,400 litres per cow.

In 2000, Coombe Farm began milk packing, including for *Duchy Originals* only to *Waitrose*. In 2001, Coombe supplied *Waitrose* cheddar cheese (both conventional and organic). They helped Leckford to set up their factory. From 2004, *Yeo Valley* organic produce links were established, and in 2006 cheese-making for *Waitrose* ceased. Now organic liquid milk is the specialism of AHWT notably for *Yeo Valley*, *Duchy Originals*, *Waitrose*. They meet with *Waitrose* every two months to monitor progress and to develop initiatives. The total organic milk market in the UK is now worth some 170 million, of which *Waitrose* has some 18% market share (cf. 3.9% of all milk sales). *Yeo Valley* has an annual turnover of around 160 million (60% conventional yoghurt and 40% organic); they make some 8 million pots of yoghurt around 2,000 tonnes - per week, and have some 20% of the UK yoghurt market.

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AHWT runs farm walks and discussion groups for member suppliers. They conduct lameness scoring and research with Bristol University Veterinary School at Langford, and belong to Kingshay Farming Trust Costings Scheme and FWAG for their environmental health check. The farm hosts school visits for some 400 children in parties of around 20 between mid-February and mid-November excluding summer holidays. Appreciation of these visits, including the chance to milk their artificial cow, was evidenced by pictures and letters of thanks decorating the barn wall. Top of the milk to yourself as the Irish might say to these future consumers and well done AHWT for engaging with them!

John Wibberley

