



Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust

The Jill Willows Award

**Collaboration and Alliances
within Agriculture**

Rob Bebbington

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Introduction

I am an arable farmer with a keen interest in sharing machinery and resources. Having graduated from Walford Agricultural College in 1997 with a National Diploma in Agriculture, I returned to the family farm in North Shropshire where we were farming 500 acres of combinable crops and potatoes. As a third generation farmer it became obvious to me that the future of our family farm was in jeopardy if we did not take drastic steps to become more efficient throughout our entire business.



After a summer harvesting for one of our neighbouring farmers, Peter Taylor at Lea Hall Farm, it was clear that we shared a lot of common ground and that there was a certain degree of duplication of machinery. As a result, in 2000 we formed a company called Fieldfare Farmers Ltd whose role it was to work as the machinery operating business for the two farms; Dearnford Hall and Lea Hall, which had a combined acreage of 750.

Fieldfare Farmers is responsible for employing the necessary labour required, replacing and maintaining all machinery and is run as an independent contractor. It soon became clear that we were not alone in our desire to become more efficient. Once the 'jungle drums' had started beating we were contacted by a number of local farmers who could not afford to invest in costly new machinery independently, but who were still relying on their farms for a source of income and did not want to relinquish control of their own land.

Our acreage has since risen to 1400 and we deal with eight different farms over a twenty five mile radius. Initially we found that our problems were logistical, each of our farms was growing up to five different crops and it was inefficient both in time and costs to work each of these areas separately. We decided to bring all the farms under a single crop management scheme, whereby each farm became a block but the farmer concerned had a percentage share of all the crops grown within the group. We saved 35% in fuel costs in year one alone. All our customers have embraced this management method, despite it being a very

different model to their existing strategies because they realise that to survive they have to become more efficient.

In the past, we had individual meetings with each farmer every three months. We found these meetings very constructive and an excellent way of maintaining communication channels with our clients. However we also found it very time consuming. Therefore, we decided to invite all our farmers to quarterly meetings instead. We still see them as often but in a group environment rather than on an individual basis. As you can imagine this often leads to lively debate and is an excellent platform for our farmers to raise any concerns or issues they may have. They also know that we are only on the end of the phone if they would like to make an appointment to see us to discuss any private matters.

As well as farming our own 1400 acres we have also developed a further machinery sharing option with another neighbouring farm, and now the machinery is worked over nearly 4000 acres. This has not only reduced our costs but has allowed us to use better technology in the form of GPS on the large tillage tractors, and also on the sprayer which is now fitted with boom switching controls.

We farm in the west of the country against the Welsh hills which can result in a very varied rainfall pattern and also soil type. With mobile phones we are now able to stay in close contact so that if the machinery is stopped due to inclement weather it can soon be moved to another site where work can continue in drier conditions.

See page 5, Figure 1: My fiancé and me at the time of writing this report. Christina will become my wife on New Years Eve 2010!

DISCLAIMER

The views expressed in this report are entirely my own and do not necessarily represent the views of the Nuffield Farming Scholarships Trust, or my sponsor, or any other sponsoring body.

Scholarship Objectives

As a young farmer in an industry where most of my contemporaries seem to be abandoning rural life because it simply does not generate an adequate income, I wondered how many other farmers were combining forces in order to cement the future of their farms.

With my Nuffield Scholarship I wanted to see if there is a blueprint for farmers to follow to establish a collaborative venture whilst avoiding many of the pitfalls that I have found.

I wanted to witness collaboration within other industries and see if lessons that have been learnt within these industries can be applied to agriculture. I feel that external influences would be a benefit to the UK agricultural industry. It is easy to get too complacent in what we are doing and by looking at how other industries address the problems they face and how they solve them would be beneficial to all of us. I wanted to find relevant industries that I could apply to my own business models.

My initial aim was to produce a paper that would be relevant for years to come, rather than basing it on policy or the exchange rate or anything else that can change rapidly in today's market. I wanted to understand the ways in which people think and react, and to understand if there are ways in which systems can be put in place to mitigate against them.

I wanted to see first hand why some collaborations succeed and others fail. Without understanding where people have failed, it makes it a lot harder to understand why some are very successful. I also wanted to see if it was the best way forward for my own business. Having farmed collaboratively over the last ten years and believing in it passionately, I wondered whether this method of farming could work on a larger scale across the UK.

Observations from countries visited

Canada

My travels started in the east of Canada where I was fortunate enough to attend the Canadian Nuffield Conference. Whilst visiting various businesses in and around Toronto and Ottawa I came across a farm producing biogas. Fritz and Paul Klaesi had emigrated from Holland to set up their dairy and at the same time brought a lot of the latest technology from Europe with them in the form of a biogas plant. They have increased the number of cows to about one hundred and twenty in milk all year round. However the milk produced from these cows is not their primary source of income; electricity is.

The cows had almost become a secondary concern for the Klaesis; if the biogas plant was to work well it needed the purest muck they could find. It was important that it was not mixed with any foreign matter; for example bedding material or feed. This was achieved by keeping the cows chained up in stalls (*Fig 2*) and by giving them electric shocks if they did not step back into the passageway to excrete. Although I found this quite an antiquated farming method, all the animals had food, water and were warm. This pure cow muck was then mixed with food waste from Ottawa and a gate fee of \$30 per tonne was charged for this to be tipped on farm.

The methane process I witnessed was very simple; one tonne of food waste was added to fifteen tonnes of cow muck which is then placed in a covered slurry store known as 'the gas bubble'. (*Fig 3*). Each day this would produce approximately six hundred M³ of gas, which in layman's terms, is about enough gas to be burned through a generator in order to produce sufficient electricity to power about three hundred homes every day. The price of electric to sell back to the grid was sixteen cents per unit and the payback time was seven years on this \$1.2 million investment.

Although what I saw here was very impressive in terms of what had been achieved, I couldn't help but think that if plans for an 8000 strong 'super herd' of cows in Lincolnshire had caused so much controversy, how on earth would the type of establishment I was witnessing here be viewed within the UK? I'm sure there could be a compromise somewhere, but with ever-reducing resources on the planet this may have to become a viable option for renewable energy some day. I would hope we would be able to achieve something similar in this country whilst maintaining our high welfare standards.



Fig 1: Christina and me at the time of writing this report. Christina is to become my wife on New Year's Eve 2010



Fig 2: Cows tethered with their tails tied up and note the electric shock bar above their shoulders to keep them near the passage



Fig 3: The cow shed and food waste towers in the background with the gas bubble half inflated in the foreground.



Fig 4: Richard and Cliff telling me to hurry up and take the picture. It was -28 degrees though.

I then travelled to central Canada and, with a thermometer reading of -28, you needed to be very keen and very resourceful to farm there. I met with Richard Crew, an ex-pat who has been a regular contributor to the Farmers Weekly for

many years. Richard and his neighbour (*Fig 4*) had put together a gentleman's agreement whereby they shared harvesters to enable them to cover their total acreage. It became apparent that this was a most agreeable arrangement to both men whilst they were in their present situation. When I probed them with further questioning it became apparent that nothing had been put down in writing between the two parties. In their current situation, this agreement suited them both and I got the feeling that they would probably feel a little restricted if they were to formalise their agreement. However, I wondered what would happen if one of their situations were to change and what sort of contingencies they had in place to prepare for this.

America

I then flew south to Fresno, California and was kindly shown around for four days by John Koretoff and Lawrence Preston, (*Fig 5*) whom I can't thank enough for their time, help and generosity. They showed me some amazing businesses and the plethora of crops being grown in so many different ways throughout California. Without their help I would not have seen a fraction of what I did. I was astonished at the size of everything and the landscape that surrounded me; they were working on such a vast scale compared to anything I have witnessed in the UK. To see land that had been divided into square mile blocks with an irrigation channel surrounding each one, without a tree, a hedge or even a weed for as far as the eye could see, was truly mind blowing.



Fig 5: John Koretoff, explaining the intricacies of almond harvesting with Lawrence Preston and Stan Nelson of MidlandsTractors, Madera, California

At J.G Boswell's near Fresno I couldn't understand why, when you asked a member of staff a question, they would only be able to give the answer if it was linked to their department. If you were to ask anything else in general terms the individual would not feel qualified to give an answer. The point was made clear to me when I saw a fuel truck pull into a field to attend to a tractor. The tractor driver stayed in his seat and took his break while the mechanic fueled up the tractor, greased the implement on the back and checked it over and then cleaned the windows on the tractor before leaving. I was dumbstruck at this but then it was explained to me that it was not the driver's job to do these things. He was employed to drive the tractor and the mechanic was there to make sure that everything worked as it should. It took a while for me to understand this but when you have built up a business where you are the biggest single producer of cotton and tomatoes in the world then you are obviously doing something right. It was just a very alien concept to me when, at home, we tend to get involved with every aspect rather than just having a particular specialty. Maybe this was something that we needed to address?



Fig 6: A pump by a dyke at J G Boswells just after it has begun flooding a quarter of a square mile of bare land in preparation for sowing

One of the most jaw dropping sights that I witnessed was when I visited a beef rearing ranch in California. (*Fig 7*). The day I arrived there were ninety eight and a half thousand head of cattle in a square mile, all outside, some with a shade but most without. At one corner there was a feed mill with an abundance of trucks buzzing in and out all the time and then, at the other corner, was an abattoir with a killing capacity of eight hundred and fifty animals a day. The statistics about this place were just phenomenal. The animals would gain about 3lb for every day they were there. The feed trough was thirteen miles long; they produced eighty thousand tonnes of farm yard manure and fifty thousand



Fig 7: A square mile of beef cattle with the feed mill in the distance

tonnes of compost each year. There was only one vet on site and the mortality rate was less than one percent. Can you imagine seeing this in the UK?

I came away feeling very mixed about the methods of production that had been adopted and whether or not I agreed with these particular methods. However it was not just the welfare issues that shocked me, I found the environmental impact the most concerning.

The message that came back to me from everyone I had visited so far was that water is essential for everything. With the ever increasing demand for water from our growing population, I began to wonder how long world wide agriculture will be allowed to use water so freely. When in the San Joaquin Valley I was reminded just how powerful the water factor is when, out of eight hundred thousand acres of some of the most productive farming land in the world, only six hundred and eighty thousand were cropped last year due to the lack of water allocation for the remaining land. The message couldn't have been starker; if you haven't got water, you haven't got a crop.

Australia

From California I flew to Australia and zigzagged my way from Sydney to Adelaide and then down to Melbourne followed by a week in Tasmania. I enjoyed Tasmania more than anywhere else that I travelled, mainly because I saw such a wide range of businesses including: parathyroid production, cabbage seed production, bio fuel plants run on waste poppy seeds, essential oil refining, dairying, poppy production, seed potato production, onion and carrot farming; Tasmania seemed to have it all in such a small area compared to mainland Australia.

My favorite visit had to be to Bennett's cheese run by Jane Bennett near Launceston in Tasmania (*Fig 8*). We very soon established that Jane had learnt to make cheese in Whitchurch, Shropshire, with Jill Hutchinson-Smith, whom I know from home and who had also given me lots of encouragement to apply for my Nuffield, being a Nuffield Scholar herself. Jane is running a cheese making business, and has recently expanded into the fresh milk market. Her family has seen vast expansion in this sector of their business over the past twelve months due to one of the multi nationals having to have a product recall. Jane also runs a farm shop through which she sells locally sourced produce and her own cheese range. Her shop is located just beside a main road.

One of Jane's biggest strengths is her natural ability for marketing; I spent three very short hours in Jane's company and could happily have spent many more! We sat outside her shop for about an hour having a coffee whilst Jane showed me, like a conductor to an orchestra, how she subtly manipulated her audience. Traffic driving down the road towards the shop would see six brightly painted plastic cows which were placed in the field which sits between the road and the shop. On seeing this unusual sight, customers would then turn in to the shop out of natural inquisitiveness.

Jane then explained how important it was that her customers were welcomed into the shop by a member of the Bennett family who was also a representative for the cheese making business. Bennetts' desire was for the consumer to meet the producer directly and to build a strong relationship with him. This was to enable the consumer to understand why and how the product is so much better than a competitor's, how it is made, and for the consumer to see directly where his food was coming from. This direct marketing and customer service approach is one that we are sadly losing in the UK mainly due to the decline of the High Street and the expansion of the supermarket; it was refreshing to witness first hand this traditional method working so well. Jane explained that once you had done this the sales in the shop would go up fourfold because consumers would want to buy into part of the quality and the brand. Once the public understood why Bennett's cheese was better than any other, they would continue to support the product whenever they saw the brand again, whether they saw it in Jane's shop or in other retailers' shops.

The shop had recently been redesigned and given a 'face lift'. The purpose of this had been to update it and also to provide the visitor with a more cohesive 'journey'. Whereas previously the customer would enter directly into the shop itself, coach parties and the general public would now enter and have to walk through an exhibition that would show them the whole process of cheese making prior to getting into the shop itself. The customer is being led, subtly and subconsciously along a journey and, through the story of the Bennett family's cheesemaking history; they were then exposed to the retail area where they could take a little bit of that history away with them. By re-designing and re-

thinking the customer experience the business had seen a dramatic increase in sales.



Fig 8: Bennett's Cheese farm shop entrance and painted cow

China

From Tasmania I traveled north to China. I began my Chinese trip in Shanghai where I visited some plant research centers. I then journeyed along the Yangtze River by boat and up through the Three Gorges Dam (*Fig 9*) to Chongqing. I found the Dam a fascinating insight into a vast feat of engineering. 1.6 million people had to be re-located in order for the dam to be built. However it now produces 3% of China's electric consumption. Although this doesn't sound like a lot, when you have a population of over 1.3 billion as China does, this electricity meets the everyday demands of millions of people.

From Chongqing I flew into Beijing where I had some very interesting visits around Louis Dreyfus, a Global Commodity Trading business. I also visited the British Embassy in Beijing. What struck me the most in China was how the wealth of the nation seemed to be concentrated along the east coast and, for a country with a population of 1.3 billion, this means that there were a tremendous amount of poor people living in the rest of the country who were on the breadline. However, these poor people, as I describe them, do not see themselves as poor, due to the fact that they are on average earning approximately \$2 per day. This sounds terrible to you and me, but if you put yourself in their position, where only two years ago you were only earning \$1 per day, life is good and is getting better

by the day. It is still a long way from perfect though. Whenever we see China in the headlines it is usually for human rights issues. However the vast majority of people in China are very happy with what they have and pay tribute to their government for it.



Fig 9: The Three Gorges Dam power station

Attitudes to Collaboration

The concept of collaboration appears to be predominantly alien within the UK agricultural industry. Farming is traditionally a solitary occupation, although this has not always been the case. In 1939 there were almost half a million farms in Britain, most of which were less than 40 hectares in size and these farms employed 15% of the population. Since then, Britain has lost over a third of its farms and the agricultural industry has been in long term decline. I believe that many of these farms could have survived if they had adopted a collaborative approach. The industry is still adopting this solitary attitude but in order for farms to survive and for collaboration to work, farmers need to change their attitude towards working together for the 'greater good' and learn to communicate and cooperate more.

Other industries appear to be much more open to the concept of collaboration and make it work to their advantage. The pharmaceutical industry and the banking industry all use alliances on a daily basis and without these alliances they would not be able to function. All these industries have seen the need for operating within an alliance.

However, farmers want the benefits of collaboration but still seem very reluctant to adopt it as a method. If you asked a farmer whether he would like to earn more money, whether he would like more free time or whether he would like to bring back some of the enjoyment into farming, I'm sure that the answers to all these questions would be a resounding 'Yes'. However if the way to achieve all these goals was through collaborating then the majority of the times it would sway the answer to a 'No' because historically farmers predominantly see their neighbours as a threat rather than an opportunity.

Different types of collaboration

I have witnessed many different types of collaboration through my travels, from the most simple of agreements that consisted of a handshake over a beer, right the way through to family members all having the use of a nucleus of machinery that was divided up and allocated at the end of the year. The following case studies are a few of the most inspirational examples of working collaborations and alliances that I have found.

British Airways

An alliance is essentially a partnership in which you combine efforts in projects, whether it be:

- getting a better price for supplies by buying in bulk
- building a product together under one umbrella
- running machinery more efficiently
- or creating a marketing or advertising strategy together

The goal of each of our alliances or collaborations is to minimize risk while maximizing our leverage and profit. With this information in mind I met with Roger Maynard the alliance director at British Airways. (*Fig 10*)

Aviation is a multi billion dollar industry with the three main alliances: Sky Travel, Star Alliance and Oneworld, taking 73% of the market share combined. It's interesting to note that all of these alliances were started after 1997. I decided to look at the 2nd largest of these: Oneworld, which, after a decade of trading, had an annual turnover of nearly 90 billion dollars. Through its eleven members Oneworld transports 335 million passengers a year to over 700 destinations in almost 150 countries. (*Fig 11*)

You may find it odd for me to draw similarities between this global industry and our eight farms in Shropshire. However, I could see various comparisons between the ways that our respective businesses operate. Roger and I were both operating machinery (mine somewhat smaller and a lot less fun) but nevertheless the same principles apply. Some of it we would own and some we would hire in for a particular period of time. This gives you the flexibility to be able to increase or decrease your operations without increasing your fixed costs. Roger liked this approach too, as British Airways can be susceptible to outside influences such as strikes or even volcanic ash, which had a serious impact on their operations earlier this year. It allows BA to be less rigid in their approach and therefore more profitable.

Roger Maynard and I discussed alliances at length and I really thought that this could be my blueprint for collaboration! However, Roger also made me aware of the similarities between the issues that we both faced. He used an example of the first item they tried to buy as a group which was the in-cabin blanket. You would think it was a simple item that nobody really notices on a flight and usually ends up screwed up on the floor anyway. However, they had realised that if they bought these blankets together, as a group they would be able to save a considerable sum. Between the group, each airline had a nominated representative, and they were sent away to come up with a design. It took the committee eighteen months to finally decide on a mutually agreeable design for these blankets. Each party was so eager to reinforce their own particular branding on the product that no decision could be reached and no-one would back down. The situation finally reached a critical point and for two days the committee was locked in a room with a brief to come up with a design or the project would be scrapped altogether. Thankfully, they did, the order was put out to tender and they saved eleven million dollars. This is a staggering amount of money to be saved on an item as simple as a blanket and there were huge lessons for me to learn here. This 11 million dollar saving was almost jeopardized due to each individual company's desire to reinforce its own brand.

This is also something that we ourselves come across when discussing collaborative farming with potential new clients. They like the concept, but they don't like the idea of losing their individuality. However with the block cropping system that we have more recently developed this is less noticeable as everyone is now very much seen as their own farmer. It was clear that the key to creating effective and efficient collaborations or alliances was to be able to maintain channels of communication and to have the ability to see the bigger picture and compromise. With such vast savings at stake these are issues that cannot be ignored.



Fig 10: Richard Branson alongside Roger Maynard, British Airways



Fig 11: The alliance make up of Oneworld



Fig 12: David Cook sitting on the drill which was the first purchase of the joint venture

David Cook and Peter Jeffery

I visited David and Peter while in Shepparton, Victoria, Australia. (*Fig 12*) I had heard that they were running one seed drill over two farms and thought that it was definitely worth paying them a visit to hear their views on collaboration. Upon my arrival I had a brief discussion with David and I learnt that not only were the two men sharing a drill but that they had expanded their shared machinery to a harvester, fertiliser spreader and a sprayer too. This was music to my ears as I had not been able to find many Australians with this sort of mentality. David and Peter have been on family farms all their lives and their fathers farmed next to each other before them, and their parents also used to share some machinery many years ago.

As I started to dig a little into how the arrangement was set up it soon became clear to me that the rapid expansion of the shared machinery had been done in somewhat of a rush. For example the drill was needed for sowing and so quickly they rushed out and the drill was bought between the two of them so as not to miss a sowing window. The same seems to have happened with the harvester as harvest came around. They took the opinion that sharing machinery was working for them and so why not expand it further? A harvester was bought between the two parties that would easily manage their joint combined area.

The two businesses were still running their own individual businesses separately and then re-billing out any parts that had been bought for the machines in the pool. I was very impressed with what I saw that David and Peter had achieved and how far they had ventured down the collaborative route. It was definitely a situation that was working well for both parties at the moment. However, the two individuals were each very different characters and I became concerned that their collaboration had been formed as a knee jerk reaction to a problem and that there had not been enough dialogue between the two of them to establish where each party would stand should their current situation change.

David seemed to be the sort of person who would sit and work out the running costs of the machinery, look at what it is worth and make a decision on whether or not to change it for a new one. He had worked as an agronomist and has good grasp of the science in agriculture and can see the benefits of controlled traffic. David is of the opinion that sheep will never graze on his farm again after the damage that they can cause in an arable rotation. He is also a bachelor and his five year goal is to expand the business.

Peter seems to have a very different perspective on agriculture. Peter would perhaps look at a machine and work out how he would be able to justify running it for another two years without having to replace it. He runs a sheep flock over his stubbles and is quite happy to do this. Peter is married with children and his five year goal is to be able to put his children through school.

There is no right or wrong way of farming, just different opinions along the way. David and Peter did seem to have quite contrasting opinions but at the same time they could both see the benefits of collaboration and were making it work for them.

The two parties each possessed a willingness for the arrangement between them to succeed but had nothing written down on paper nor any agreements drawn up. This is fine when everything is going well. However, should you have a disagreement or one of the party's situation alters, then the whole thing can be thrown into disarray and all of a sudden you are perhaps dealing with the executor of an estate rather than the person you had made an agreement with, and this executor may have a very different viewpoint to you. I enquired how the venture would be terminated if they were to have a disagreement. And their answer was, as I had thought it would be, that all jointly owned equipment would be sold and divided between the two of them. However, neither party had discussed this and there was nothing in writing to confirm it.

Although I'm sounding quite negative about what the two of them are doing I'm sure that there are a lot more positives than negatives to be had out of what they are doing. All the issues that I have mentioned can be addressed in the future. Without that willingness or ability to collaborate and compromise you would have nothing to work with in the first place.

Bulla Burra

Whilst in Australia I specifically sought out examples of collaborative farming and found a company called Bulla Burra in Loxton, South Australia. It was set up and run by 2007 scholar John Gladigau and his business partner Robin Schaefer (*Fig 13*). Bulla Burra is probably the best example that I have found of a working joint farming venture.

In 2008 Robin and John were farming approximately 2000 hectares each of dry land farming. Each shared concerns over market volatility and their inability to expand individually. With less than ten inches of rainfall a year for the past five years, this certainly seems to concentrate the mind. Rainfall for the previous ten years would have been higher but you can only farm in the current situation.

When discussions first started about the forming of a joint venture there had to be some very frank and open conversations between the Schaefer and Gladigau families. They made sure that the outcome of these discussions was that everyone was fully aware of the situation and of the business plan going forward.

The businesses were valued by an independent valuer on the same day by someone whom John and Robin both trusted. Each individual business was split into two parts; the real estate side, i.e. the land and property and the operating capital, i.e. the machinery. Robin's property commanded a slight premium due to

its location bordering the local town Loxton, and also its proximity to the local grain terminal. The final split for the real estate worked out at 45% to John and 55% to Robin. The operating capital was also valued and was put into the agreement on a 50% - 50% basis. This then formed the basis for the company going forward which would trade as Bulla Burra, an aboriginal saying meaning 'Blue sky coming'. From this point forward Bulla Burra would be the farming company. Like any business it needed to have a structure and from day one John and Robin seemed to naturally fit the positions that had been created rather than the other way round.

John is definitely an office person with his finger on the pulse of all the key decisions that concern the business from forward planning and strategic decisions, marketing, administration and more of the financial aspect of the business. Rob, by contrast, is of a more practical nature and has a better understanding of the logistical side of the business, and he also has some experience of no-till drilling. Rob oversees all the staff and the day to day managerial and logistical organisation.

With drought comes a new way of farming and a different mindset (*Fig 14*). There are new technologies that have been directly linked to improving yields, such as no-till direct drilling and Real Time Kinematic (RTK) satellite navigation. However these come at a cost. The yield data proves that the key these days is not to disturb the soil other than at sowing time. Sowing is carried out on row widths of up to 10 inches, so that the following year you can re-drill the next crop between the rows that had been planted the year before. To do this you need a no-till drill. This technique of no till establishment is the complete antithesis to what previous generations of Australian farmers have been taught and know as commonplace. The use of burning and cultivations to prepare the seedbed has been the norm in this area of Australia for generations.

Today the use of RTK satellite navigation gives the farmer the necessary accuracy of drilling that is essential - to within a 3cm seed placement. However these two main items don't come cheap. There was a need for the equipment listed above just to be able to grow a crop in this drought affected area so the next question that needed addressing was how to reduce production costs whilst still being able to invest in the new technology that was needed.

By bringing their businesses together Robin and John have been able to invest in larger equipment whilst combining the new technology which was available to them previously. It had simply not been viable to them to use this technology when each was farming his own acreage. By coming together within Bulla Burra this has allowed them to make decisions as businessmen first and then as farmers second. Through Bulla Burra, John and Robin have been able to secure their futures through a joint venture arrangement that provides opportunities to increase land capacity, reduce unit costs and boost sustainable production.



Fig 13. John Gladigau and Robin Schafer holding the new Bulla Burra Signs



Fig 14: The sort of soil type that is available on John Gladigau's farm near Loxton S.A

I learnt that by merging the properties under one business umbrella, farmers with similar goals and values can make joint decisions and take equal responsibility. Under this structure, participants take equal risks and rewards, profits and losses.

I believe the key to Bulla Burra's success has been the ability of Robin and John to put aside their own attachments to the land and focus on the 'greater good'. They make important decisions together for the sake of the business rather than as a knee-jerk, emotional response to a problem.

This process has been greatly aided by the introduction of an independent chairman to sit on their board. This mediator ensures that all personal agendas are removed and that the decisions that are made are in the best interests of all parties. Although I was unable to meet this person whom Robin and John had appointed, to me this was the final part of the jigsaw being completed. Here I saw a way of addressing some of the issues that can cause people to be turned away from joint ventures. John explained to me why he was so passionate that all joint ventures should have an independent chairperson.

However open minded you may think you are, there will sometimes be a part of you that is pulled in a different direction based on a multitude of reasons. This is not always in the best interests of the business, because when you start to include opinions from more than one person rifts can sometimes occur. The independent chairman is there to make sure that these molehills don't become mountains.

This person is also there to question what you are doing, and to push you to find out why you do things in a certain way; to suggest that maybe there are other ways to achieve a better result and prevent a form of 'tunnel vision' occurring.

Also query the people within the business:

- are they the right person for the job?
- are their skills being used to the best of their ability?
- is their salary too high for what they are doing?
- or even vice versa
- should they be encouraged more to drive the business forward?

These are issues that, when you are involved in the constant running of a business twenty four hours a day, seven days a week, can get overlooked as we nearly all tend to focus on the minutiae and the day to day running of the present day rather than the bigger picture and the future.

People's strengths and positions

For collaboration to succeed it is best to have a mix of personalities within the management structure and for each party to possess the ability compromise. It soon became very noticeable that on arrival at different collaborative ventures, there was always a definite leader who would be very clear and concise as to the direction that their business was taking. At each successful collaborative venture I witnessed, this appointed 'leader' was always incredibly motivated and driven. It would normally be this person who had managed to drive the venture forward, into the situation that they were now in.

Then there always seemed to be a quieter person in the background who would be much more willing to compromise and was normally the 'hands-on' type or 'working-type' manager. They would have a better understanding of the day to day practicalities of bringing the two businesses together. In the best cases this had been done very well. The group had seen this happening naturally and had drawn up job descriptions for each position so that there could be no confusion about what was being asked of them and what their roles were. It was this recognition and acceptance of an individual's strengths and weaknesses and their clear role within the structure of the operation that had aided the smooth running of the business without conflict or obstruction. Both roles were equally important.

Returning Home

I have been committed to the issue of collaboration over the last ten years and am very thankful to the Nuffield Trust, John Stones and to Jill Willows, who have all supported me in everything that I have chosen to do. My scholarship has taken me to new areas that I had not thought to explore before and has given me a great insight into the successful workings of collaboration.

I had thought that doing a Nuffield Scholarship would provide me with all the answers. However, with my studies now coming to a close it feels like I am left with even more questions to be answered and I look forward to exploring these in more depth in the future.

Conclusions And Recommendations

I believe that there is much duplication of machinery in the industry that could be eliminated. There are many existing bodies who are promoting collaboration within agriculture; however I do not feel that they are doing enough to change farmers' perceptions of collaboration. In order for collaboration to work and to end the downward spiral which the UK farming industry appears to be in, there needs to be a shift in attitude towards the benefits of collaborative farming. This can only be achieved by respected bodies promoting collaboration as a commercially viable alternative to having to sell up and leave the family farm.

Throughout my study I have predominately been looking at the farm-to-farm collaboration rather than large scale agri-businesses, as there is a real need for good advice in this field. With wheat just less than £200 per tonne as I write this, I can't help but think there was never a better time to be farming in the UK. I am also aware that as I reduced my production costs to be able to compete at the bottom of the market five years ago, I am now in a very fortunate position to be able to capitalise on these high prices. But like all fortunate positions that we find ourselves in, it has come through working smart and hard. With high or low commodity prices there has never been a better time to collaborate.

In answer to my objectives, where I set out to find out if there was a blueprint that farmers could just follow to make the whole process easier to navigate, then the answer has to be a resounding NO. I now know this to be a good thing as there are no two people or businesses the same. However I have found that there are principles that, if followed, would make the whole process easier to navigate. These suggested principles are as follows:

1. **One Umbrella:** The key to creating a successful collaborative venture is the ability of the people involved to be able to join beneath one umbrella, in order to put aside their personal agendas to be able to focus on the bigger picture and to realise the savings that can be made. This does not mean surrendering control of the family farm, just focusing on the wider opportunities that are available to bigger companies. For me everything stems from this: if you are able to include your own and other businesses under this 'one umbrella' approach everything else will become so much easier to implement and all of my other recommendations will automatically become easier to achieve.
2. **Principles:** I would like to make it clear that I do not think collaboration is the answer to everyone's problems, nor is it the answer to stopping the decline of the small UK farmer. However, I passionately believe that in certain circumstances, where there is a genuine desire to

collaborate, it can, and has, worked. There are no hard and fast rules to collaboration, as no two farms, or farmers are the same.

3. **Independent Assessment:** To give all parties peace of mind it is important to start with an independent assessment of each of the proposed businesses to be involved in the new joint venture: for a value to be attached to them that can be agreed by all parties and for a legal agreement to be drawn up to state, from the outset, how the new business will operate. For example what should happen if there were to be disagreement or if the joint venture were to fail.
4. **Job Descriptions:** I have found that clear and distinguished roles give less confusion and better results within the business. It is also very important to have an exit strategy so that all parties are aware of their full situation should circumstances change. *Without* this exit strategy in place you will always have anxiety as to what would happen should it fail. *With* this strategy in place you will always have peace of mind and personal reassurance, whatever the outcome of the business may be.
5. **Compromise:** A venture cannot be achieved without the ability of all parties to compromise; it is automatic for an individual to want to protect their own interests. However when there are also the interests of other people at stake, the ability to be flexible and compromise is essential. This can sometimes be a very hard thing to do but, by following the other conclusions I have listed, such as putting the business under one umbrella, you naturally seem to pull together rather than in opposing directions.
6. **Communication:** The maintenance of communication channels between all parties is essential. Without regular communication, molehills can quickly become mountains if not dealt with and resolved quickly. Maintaining channels of communication is vital to any business; this is especially true in agriculture where there are so many factors which are outside our own control. On my travels there were groups that stood out as being better than the others and all of these had systems in place where dialogue could flow and was encouraged, right from the top of the employment structure through to the bottom. Meetings were arranged every month for all stakeholders. It seemed to be able to bring the slightest of issues to the fore so that they can be altered and systems changed and improved before any ill feeling or rifts appear.
7. **Independent Chairman:** The appointment of an independent chairman ensures that all personal agendas are left at the door so that the best interests of the business as a whole are considered. This

should be someone who has been chosen by all parties involved in the joint venture and should be neutral in all aspects. For the position to be filled suitably, I believe that the Chairman should be very active in questioning the directors about the business, such as why they are partaking in certain enterprises and not in others. It may be that all these questions have acceptable answers, but it is always good to have a fresh approach with new ideas coming forward and for you to justify your decision making process.

Personal statement

I have decided to take a step back from the hands-on farming operations of Fieldfare. Nuffield has given me the confidence to be able to concentrate my efforts on building another business alongside our farming operation. I am in a very fortunate position in that I have a very strong support network around me, which has enabled me to seize the opportunity and explore new business ventures based around our family owned lake. The lake is situated in a very prominent position alongside the A41 where it links to the A49.

As I now carry on with life post-Nuffield I can't help but reflect on my conclusions and recommendations. I feel that these lessons learnt are not merely appropriate for an agricultural application, or for anything as specific as collaboration, but can be applied to any successful venture within its own business model.

Rob Bebbington

Dearnford Cottage
Tilstock
Whitchurch
Shropshire
SY13 3JJ

rbebbington@yahoo.co.uk
tel : 07803050397

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Peter & Sue Taylor: When I said I wanted to do a Nuffield Scholarship I didn't think that I would get it, so the ten weeks off that I wanted was never going to happen anyway. Sorry about that. Thank goodness that you have had the coldest winter for thirty years and you couldn't do much anyway. Ten years of Fieldfare has gone in the blink of an eye. I just hope that the next ten will be as enjoyable as the last.

Jonathan Bradbury: As always Jonathan has been left to do all the work, which he always does to a very high standard, and this time has been no exception. Hopefully my Nuffield will generate some new challenges of its own, which I'm sure you will enjoy getting your teeth into.

Mitchell Allen: Well at least you now know first hand what an English winter is really like. Thank you for all of your help this year, or as you would say "too easy mate". I won't mention the crash in the truck, or the trailer in the ditch.

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