

# Local food case study

# Dragon Orchard Cropsharers

A community-supported agriculture (CSA) initiative run by farmers, near Ledbury, Herefordshire. Incorporated as a company limited by guarantee with simple members' agreements.

### **Summary**

This is a cropshare scheme, where cropsharers pay for a share in the yearly apple harvest in the form of apples and pears and products made from them. They are also invited to seasonal weekend visits. The enterprise is run by farmers and provides opportunities for members to enjoy and understand the local landscape and culture.

# History

The Stanier family has a long history in the area and an affection for the landscape and orchards that shape it. They used to supply a wholesaler with their fruit, but this market dried up in favour of large cheap suppliers because of the short season of the Staniers' particular varieties. The Staniers have no cold store and so cannot supply fruit continuously. They also used to supply a local cider maker with a small portion of the harvest, who took the apples when they were picked. The cider maker was taken over by a larger company, whose inflexible processing schedule did not fit with their apple varieties. The Staniers said, "The market collapsed and the orchard began to feel like a millstone round our necks."

Meanwhile, visitors to the farm confirmed that the flavour of the apples and the experience of staying on the farm were wonderful. The Staniers had heard of box schemes and CSA from us, and they say "suddenly the millstone lifted from our necks. We thought 'yes'!" To begin with, they spent about 12 months discussing the project with various people such as a solicitor, a bank adviser and an accountant. They then designed and printed a brochure, and set up a website. They spent most of the setup costs on the brochure (£2500), with the rest on the website (£1000). The family paid these costs themselves. The cropshare CSA was then launched at the Ludlow Food and Drink Festival in September 2001.

## **Organisation**

The farm welcomes cropsharers as visitors and trades with other small local businesses. The Staniers are happy with the way the scheme has run and have not had any problems. However, they are considering changing the structure of the scheme to allow further developments such as working more closely with local people. They recognise that not everyone has the income available to become a cropsharer at current prices (although existing cropsharers consider the cost to be extremely good value for money). As the Staniers do not want to leave people out because of their income, they are considering a workshare scheme where people could pay for a percentage of their share through work. This idea has not yet been made formal, but it's something they are working towards.

The Staniers are also hoping to encourage more local groups, such as schools, to visit.

This has started informally with, for example, a group who educate their children at home spending a morning visiting, and helping with the harvest and seeing how the apples are juiced in the afternoon. Making visits like this formal will involve deciding how much to charge, which is currently being considered.

In 2002, Dragon Orchard Cropsharers reached the final of the National Farmers Union Countryside Competition. Recently, they have appeared in Rick Stein's Local Heroes book, in which they are described as 'superheroes'. Now in their third year, they are fine-tuning their set-up and working to involve the wider community.

### **Finance**

Cropsharers pay £300 a year (or £275 for existing cropsharers) for weekend visits and a share in the harvest made up of:

- eating apples (two x 30lb boxes of different varieties);
- cooking apples (two x 30lb boxes);
- pears (a 10lb tray);
- single-variety apple juice (12 bottles);
- table cider (12 bottles); and
- home-made apple chutney and plum jam.

The scheme has been adjusted so that it can be more flexible in what products people receive, so cropsharers can now arrange, for example, to have less fresh fruit and more cider or juice.

About half the share price goes towards the orchard produce, and the other half is spent on the four weekend visits a year (one of which is a three-day Bank Holiday weekend) at which a main meal and tea and coffee are served each day.

In the first season there were 30 cropsharers. This number has risen towards 40, which represents about 120 to 125 people, and the ideal number of cropsharers to grow to will be about 100. As numbers rise there will need to be some adjustment to the weekend visits if the Staniers are not to be overwhelmed. This may mean running six events a year and letting

cropsharers come to any four so as to spread the load involved. Numbers will eventually be limited to protect the quality of the experience.

Almost all of the cropsharers renewed their membership after the first year. Members are very mixed, with lots of families and retired people. Single cropsharers tend to share their produce with a friend, relative or neighbour. The oldest cropsharer is 95, and the youngest are babies. Membership is wide-ranging, with 18 retired members, 30 family members from older families (teenagers tend not to go to many weekend events but do use the produce!), eight adults with eight to 10 children from younger families, 10 couples and seven single people. Around half of the cropsharers live within about 30 miles away, while the other half live further away (for example, Shropshire, London, Manchester and Leicester).

In the first year, publicity was created by going to shows and over the radio. They have had a lot of coverage locally, but have not gained many new cropsharers locally as a result.

The scheme takes about five hours a week to run, except during the weeks where there are visits, when the work becomes full time. The more cropsharers there are the more time needs to be spent preparing for and running weekends. The food for the weekend visits costs about £1000 a year (about £45 is spent on lunch every day during a visit weekend).

### **Activities**

The Staniers expected the cropshare CSA to attract mainly people who live in towns and cities, who would appreciate a taste of country life and belonging to a farm. In fact, many local people have also become cropsharers, wanting closer involvement with the land around them.

The 22-acre orchard grows several varieties of eating and cooking apples, as well as apples for producing cider. They manage pests, use sprays when necessary, and allow the fruit to ripen on the trees before being hand-picked and hand-graded.

The Staniers are considering making the farm organic, although it seems unlikely at the moment because it would mean having to spray the crop about 20 times a year, whereas currently it is only sprayed about five or six times a year. They have not made a final decision, and may discuss the subject with the cropsharers.

The Staniers plan to replant an orchard with unusual and late varieties. To choose which varieties to plant, they consulted the cropsharers informally at an event and through a leaflet. The Staniers will use this input to help them make their decision.

Cropsharers receive a newsletter every three months with information about growing fruit and recipes. Cropsharers' involvement in the farm and local culture is an important part of the project. There are farm weekend events four times a year, in which up to 80 people take part. These tie in with local events such as a harvest festival and a dance, and a poetry trail through the orchard as part of the Ledbury poetry festival. There are seasonal celebrations such as wassailing, pruning and orchard walks, wildlife talks and workshops with local craftspeople. Food is provided from the farm, including rare-breed pork for the barbecues.

Cropsharers have taken an interest in things beyond the orchard itself, such as the reed-bed sewage system and ecological farm building. They go and visit the cider maker, local ice-cream maker, charcoal maker and apple juicer. They stay in local bed and breakfasts and use local restaurants. As a result, the cropshare CSA supports several small local businesses. They are also investigating the possibility of supplying fruit to local schools.

For updated information, see www.dragonorchard.co.uk