



FARMING IN THE SHROPSHIRE HILLS: CASE STUDY SERIES



Hare Hill Farm

Market gardening in the Shropshire Hills: Veg Boxes, Markets, Fresh & Dried Flowers, Hogget & Mutton.



INTRODUCTION

Liam and Alice O'Brian run Hare Hill Farm on 7.5 acres in the Shropshire Hills National Landscape. They have built up and diversified their business by combining a market garden, and a small flock of sheep for hogget and mutton. This is a family-run venture, which also involves Alice's mother who works alongside growing flowers for cut and dry arrangements.

BACKGROUND

Liam and Alice had long-aspired to having their own land and running a market garden. Liam trained and worked as a tree-surgeon for many years, while Alice worked in child-care. They saved up to buy their plot, and spent over a year commuting to their fields to tend their sheep while balancing their existing jobs to finance their transition to living at Hare Hill full-time. A static-caravan on site allowed them to move onto the land and set up the market garden, while being more present for their livestock and starting a family.

They sell across several regular markets, including in smaller local markets ('Local to Ludlow', Presteigne) and at Harborne and Moseley Markets in Birmingham, as well as a veg box delivery loop in their area.

EARNING A LIVING

Horticulture in the UK has been in decline for decades, and small-scale producers often struggle against the economies of scale that large retailers hold. Liam and Alice have taken several strategic approaches to ensure the viability of their farm: diversification of their income streams, their sales outlets and knowing the value of their product and pricing accordingly.

In their experience, the early drive to Birmingham for Moseley Market is worthwhile, since a large customer base means higher sales volumes than are possible at smaller rural markets closer to home.

Their prices are set based on the Soil Association pricing range. As a small grower who knows their customer base, the feedback has been that the preference for 'local' outweighs the need to certify, and that they are transparent about their process and values in a way that satisfies customers. They also do not want to increase their prices as a result of certification as this impacts the affordability of their veg.

SUPPORTING COMMUNITY DURING CRISIS

Like many small-scale producers, Hare Hill responded to the challenge of the Pandemic by scaling up and supporting their community. They increased production in the market garden to support increasing demand for local produce when supply chains were disrupted, and adapted their business to include a delivery service to those in isolation, with surplus shared within their local community of Edgton.



HARE HILL FARM

A nature led smallholding in the Shropshire Hills National Landscape.

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CHALLENGES FOR LANDWORKERS

The O'Bian's worked for years to get planning permission for permanent housing for their site. Their first application to build was rejected, keeping the couple in their static caravan for longer than planned, particularly as their family grew. This is an all too common reality for many new-entrants who are in need of housing on the land that they work.

A second application was successful in early 2023 after a significant community response to the planning consultation in support of Liam and Alice's submission.

They intend to begin building their family home at Hare Hill in 2025.

WHAT'S GROWING

"Grow things that you like, and freshness is key" Liam

Unlike many other small market garden operations, Liam and Alice do grow potatoes, onions and carrots based on customer demand.

They will occasionally source staple items like root veg from other (organic) suppliers when they can't meet demand or sell out earlier than planned and they are always transparent with their customers about what has been bought in from elsewhere. Bagged greens such as mixed salads, along with bunched greens are very popular with customers.

Hare Hill Farm aims for diversity in its veg offer, but when it comes to veg boxes, Liam believes in the power of the humble tuber:

"Build it around the potato... they're easy, people buy them, and no one complains about too many spuds".

FARMING IN PROTECTED LANDSCAPES

Thanks to a grant from the Farming in Protected Landscapes Programme (FiPL), Liam and Alice have been able to enhance their farm by fencing along a watercourse and planting it with bank side trees and shrubs. By excluding their livestock, this will improve riverbank stability and help to keep the water clean. This new riverside habitat will provide food and shelter for a variety of plants and animals.

They also received funding to install rainwater harvesting and irrigation infrastructure for the market garden, which has been invaluable during unpredictable summer months.

"Being small scale producers, grants like these are vital. They allow us to improve not only the infrastructure of our farm, along with its biodiversity, but also the sustainability of our business. Financially, we would not be able to do this without the FiPL programme. A tributary of the Clun river also runs through the foot of our farm, so it was of great importance to make sure this was protected for future generations."



OUR FUTURE FOOD SYSTEM

As a vision for the future of food in Shropshire, Alice believes that we need to see more funding put into educating children in schools about seasonal food, where it comes from and how to use it. Local produce should be accessible to all from community hubs in small towns around the county.

Liam feels that it's important for new producers to

"start small, do the basics well and build from there."

Only after several years in production has the family now rented an additional piece of land to increase the growing operation.



**Shropshire Hills
National
Landscape**

