

Summary of first collective farm visit.

6th November

Fourteen people joined Peter and ourselves on a mild, drizzly November day at White House Farm for the first Collective farm visit. We designed the day to give us time to get to know each other and learn more about the context of our field and the foundations of farming – the soil.

Tom Lane, local archeologist, folklorist and collective member guided the first part of our journey onto the field. As we walked across dark, spongey soil prickled with vivid green shoots, Tom pointed out the barely visible undulations of the field that indicated its history as a network of creeks and meandering tributaries of the River Witham. He explained that this meant that our field had a number of different soil qualities due to the deposits of silt and alluvium that underlay some areas. Peter added that these ancient river patterns also influence the quality and growth of the crop across the field.

Then we heard from Tom Powell who gave an animated history of the evolution of the earth and life on earth, using the length of the field as a metaphor to explain that only in the last few metres has soils formed on earth. He explained the importance of the carbon cycle in understanding soils and the ebb and flow of life on earth and our complete dependence on the six inches of topsoil which is rapidly eroding.

We walked back down the field and came to a cross drain or ditch and a wooden pole, made for the project by Aldous Everard. In the flatlands in the past, poles were used as a practical means of passing over obstacles (dykes and drains) to avoid roundabout journeys. Many of the collective members decided to have a go at vaulting the ditch – all successfully!. Aldous then read an account of the *Fen Slodger* to give a sense of the wilder freedoms and hardships endured by the the original fen dwellers who occupied these lands before they were drained for ‘improvement’ and agriculture. (see artists pages)

Back at the farmhouse we looked at three samples the Tom’s had gathered from the field as examples of the different qualities of soil that exist within our 22 acres. These include the dark fenland peat, formed when the fens were flooded marshes, sticky clay soils deposited by ancient tidal rivers, and lighter silty soils that mark networks of slow moving creeks.

We then shared a delicious home cooked meal made by Rosie, Peter’s wife and shared reflections on our morning on the field as well as asking Peter the farmer questions. Ruth and I shared more information about the project and how it will evolve including a description of the Collective Enquiry and we all had a chance to introduce ourselves to the group. We also recorded a greeting to those collective members who couldn’t be with us.