Cultivating young minds

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Jess McGovern, Project Lead for Farm Jersey at Jersey Business talked to Alasdair Crosby about the 'Cultivate' education programmes she has initiated as ways of educating young people in rural skills and knowledge



Could Jersey be a centre for education in rural skills and knowledge?

That question has been asked for years. Not only does Jersey have very fertile land for agriculture and horticulture, but there are world-class growers and farmers, with generations of knowledge, many of whom are retired, who would be excellent mentors for students interested in rural skills and who, with the right encouragement, might wish to circulate that knowledge.

Enter Jess McGovern. She is a Jersey girl, born and bred. Her family farmed at Cambrai, Trinity. Her grandfather, Michael Hickey, owned the Forget-me-not breeding line of Jersey cows.

‘I grew up with my sisters and I helping my father on the farm,’ she said. ‘Even though my father became a teacher, I have always felt very connected to the countryside. ‘Connecting back to food and farming as an adult, has shaped how I see community, responsibility and society.’

Jess’ path, however, led first into education. She studied criminology and sociology and then qualified as a teacher at the Institute of Education in London, worked as a teacher in the UK, then returned to Jersey to teach at De La Salle, and JCG.

‘Education has always been a real passion of mine,’ Jess said. ‘There are seven of us in my family and five of us are qualified teachers. My own interest in education links back into sociology and how to improve human society.’

After seven years teaching, she took up a role at the RJA&HS as Head of Education and Development, part-funded by the Howard Davis Farm Trust. And so the ‘Cultivate’ programme was born. She ran it for four years, until her contract came to an end. Farm Jersey has now taken on and relaunched Cultivate, and she has been running it for the past year.

‘This is something much bigger than my former role at the RJA&HS,’ Jess said. ‘When I worked there, I realised quite quickly that there were very limited pathways available for educating young people in agriculture and horticulture.

Within six months of joining the RJA&HS, she put on her first big Cultivate event. It was a very successful collaboration bringing together members of Jersey’s agricultural and horticultural sectors for 100 students aged between 14 and 15. An event that will be happening again this May in collaboration with the Rural Connections Programme run by Jersey Heritage.

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‘We had a whole day together with workshops and teaching. It was excellent, and the students were so engaged and interested. It was a real immersion into what life was like as a farmer or as a horticulturist, or environmentalist. There are so many more varieties of jobs that fall under those categories than they had understood.

‘On the whole, I think that young people don’t know what horticulture or agriculture mean. They often have caricatures of what a farmer is, something

along “Farmer Giles” lines.

‘Becky Houzé was there, demonstrating that farmers could be female as well as male. There can be young farmers, farmers with degrees, farmers that are soil health experts.

‘The event opened their eyes to different career possibilities. But although their interest was obvious, I realised that there was no pathway for them to pursue that interest for a career. There was nothing in Jersey to enable them to do that. That focussed my passion for education into countryside education.

‘At the end of the day we asked: “Who would want to know more agriculture?” 88 out of the 100 students said yes. To me, that was a clear message. They want to know more, so what can we do to help them? What can I do to create an apprenticeship scheme into which this enthusiasm can feed?”’

Her contract with the RJA&HS ended in its fourth year, after she had compiled a report following a survey of the farming industry and sent it to Government. Thanks to the work of the Department for the Economy (led by John Vautier) Cultivate was picked up as an ongoing workstream delivered through Farm Jersey and Jess was able to resume Cultivate, supported by Taylor Smythe and India Hamilton, as part of Farm Jersey, which now sits within Jersey Business.

There are two parts to Cultivate. One is ‘Cultivate Connection’ which communicates the message of healthy, local food through different sectors, such as the hospitality and the health sector. An event at Highlands enabled Island chefs to meet farmers and discuss what they needed in their kitchens.

‘It was a way of connecting the farming industry with sectors to which they are directly related but do not often meet. As a result, some chefs are now using certain farmers to supply them.’

Another event in collaboration with brain health physician, Juan Melendez, celebrated the role of food in health. Cultivate Connection also now includes a monthly meet-up at a different pub on the last Thursday of every month, open to everyone. Contact Jess for further details.

‘The meet-up is really a special moment every month for people to gather. There are such a variety of people there, of different ages, different

backgrounds, different priorities in terms of food. Some want to learn how to grow. Some have a passion project – chillies, for example – and some want to grow their business. Others just love the community of it and enjoy proper pub chats, about everything from mushrooms to politics.

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'I think food does that. Cultivate Connection highlights that food touches every part of our lives. Farmers work in the countryside and produce food, but there isn't always much connection between them and everyone else. Cultivate Connection aims to develop that, and it's been a really beautiful journey.'

The second strand is Cultivate Skills, which focusses on developing skills, education, and tangible pathways for people to learn more about the land. An example is the Cultivate Horticultural Apprenticeship scheme that was launched last September and was inspired by the highly successful Trinity Manor Apprenticeship that Cultivate helped former Estate Manager David Room to launch, an apprenticeship supported by Skills Jersey and Pam and Paul Bell. The qualified apprentice Wills Baker, is now a qualified garden designer and horticulturist.

This current scheme has again been funded by the Howard Davis Farm Trust, long-time supporters of environmental and land-based initiatives, whom Jess described as 'very understanding and very supportive.'

'I went out to certain employers and said: "Would you like to take on an apprentice?" and the first people I went out to said "yes – some even said they wanted two!

Apprentice employers include DG Studios, A1 Landscaping, LOMAH Farm and Jersey Trees for Life. Eleven people are currently enrolled on a Royal Horticultural Society course; some are apprentices others are just students who are doing the course out of personal interest. We hope the training enables the apprentices to work on larger estates and smallholder farms that require horticultural skills.

'We have lots of plans to expand upon that offering, and offer different apprenticeships and short-term courses. It's really about what people need. It's about building relationships with farmers and employers, not saying, "This is what we can offer", but asking, "What do you need? What skills do your staff

need? How can we help?

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‘The Cultivate Apprenticeship Programme is about celebrating the local experts and learning from them. The last such course was held at the Philip Mourant Centre 20 years ago; that was the last time the Island had something like this to offer.

‘It feels really special to be able to pass down expert knowledge from the Island’s passionate farmers and growers. It’s wisdom we have to respect, and it’s good to create a platform where that knowledge can be shared.’

Looking ahead, Jess hopes to develop short introductory courses for young people, or anyone, who wants to understand the breadth of farming life and gain a flavour of rural work.

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Asked if she felt optimistic about the continuance of rural life in Jersey, Jess does not hesitate.

‘I have nothing but optimism. I’ve always said that. It’s been so special to be part of the industry, and to be part of what feels like a renaissance, a growing optimism, a blossoming, a rise from the feeling of hopelessness – it’s full of hopefulness now.’

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