JULIA AND STEVEN'S ADVENTURES
DISCOVERING THE WORLD OF ORGANIC FARMING
Thursday 3.30 p.m. The kids are eager to get home...

OK, we need to pick a lead story before we decide on the page layout.

...Voices can be heard behind the door. The “Express” school newspaper editors, Julia and Steven, are planning the next issue.

Express Editorial Office

Mmmmh, we thought we might do an article on organic food. Lots of people don't think about what they're eating.

That's a good idea! Perhaps we could do a feature on an organic farm.

Great idea. Let's get started.

Found one. Fir Tree Farm. It's quite close to us.

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...Would it be OK if we came to see you next weekend? Great! See you on Saturday!

And that's exactly what they did. The following Saturday, the two reporters set off to Fir Tree Farm.

Great! I think we have to get off at the next stop!
Welcome to Fir Tree Farm! I hope you're going to send me a copy of your newspaper so I can read the article when it's published. Promise! But we can't write the article until you've shown us around so that we've got something to write about.

Feeling much better after the food, the young journalists get down to work.

The most important thing about organic farming is the closed loop principle. It's probably best if I show you what I mean. Let's start off in the barn. The soil needs fertiliser so that the crops always have enough nutrients.

Our cows aren't tied, they are free to move around. Although that means I need a bigger cow house. It's more natural for the animals to be able to move around. The stalls have straw on the floor. You can see fresh straw being put on the cows' sleeping area over there.

Some of the excrements are collected down here when we hose down the floor. We use it as liquid manure and spray it onto the fields. Smells good, doesn't it?

That's where the rest of the dung ends up. It's a mixture of excrements and straw. The dung heap is just a compost heap, like the ones you have in your gardens.

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Stop moaning. You said you were glad that the weather's so nice earlier.

It's a very remote place to live.

The apprentices are busy mucking out.

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That's where the rest of the dung ends up. It's a mixture of excrements and straw. The dung heap is just a compost heap, like the ones you have in your gardens.

Yes, we've got a compost heap. But it doesn't smell as bad as yours.

The bus stops and Julia and Steven get off. Now it's only a short walk to the farm.

All we have to do is follow that sign.

Stop moaning. You said you were glad that the weather's so nice earlier.

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Hello, pleased to meet you.

Did you find the farm OK? It's quite a walk when you come by bus. I'll bet you're pretty hungry after all that exercise.

Come on in, then.

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This fresh air's lovely — and the animals need it too, so organic farmers always ensure that their livestock are put out and grazed outdoors regularly. Cattle, sheep and goats have to have the possibility of being on pasture whenever the climate allows it.

The amount of livestock that I keep depends on how much land I have and how much fodder I can grow on my arable land. I have to grow most of what I feed to the animals myself. Otherwise I wouldn't have an organic farm. If you consider that a dairy cow feeds on up to 75 kilograms of fresh grass per day in summer, you can imagine how much winter fodder you need for a 60-strong herd. I use some of the crops that I grow as animal fodder. The straw from the crops is used in the cow house. And this straw, mixed with cow dung, is used as fertiliser on the fields. That's what I mean by closed loop. I hardly have any waste products.

Julia notices that hardly any of the fields have the same crop growing on them. What kinds of things do you grow?

Corn, potatoes, cereals, turnips and vegetables. We grow a different crop on each field every year. That's called crop rotation. It's another system that makes good sense.

Mmm delicious...

It's a very old breed of cows. A few hundred years ago, they would have been the only type of cows to be seen in this region. They're smaller than the black and white cows that you probably know. Their milk and meat yields are also lower. But they're better suited to our local climate. My cows are hardly ever sick, and all the calves are born here outside. They're free to roam around as they like, and they can eat as much as they want. They stay healthy because they get plenty of exercise and roughage.

If you rotate the crops, it keeps the soil and crops healthy and reduces weed and insect problems. The pigs love it too, because it means they get all kinds of feed.

Pigs? Where are they?

In a small sty behind the cow house. They're usually outside, too. But we're just building a new shelter, and it isn't finished yet. That's why they have to stay in the sty today. If I put them outside in this weather without any shade they'd get sunburnt.

Peter, what kind of cows are they?

I've never seen any like that before.

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... mumph ... mumph ... mumph ...
Peter was only pulling Steven’s leg. You don’t need any lassoes and horses on an organic farm. The cows know they’re going to be milked, and they’re looking forward to it. Each one of them has got between 15 to 35 pints of milk in its udder.

Sam, the apprentice, manages to keep the cows heading for the cow house all on his own. Steven is visibly relieved. There is a problem, though.

Peter, there are only 27 cows instead of 30.

You heard it. The milk truck is already waiting. We’re going to have to milk the cows in record time. Do you want to wait at the farm for me?

You’re very welcome to help if you want. Would you like that?

Thanks Peter! Let’s see how good Steven is at being a cowboy!
Oh dear! The milk truck is already there!

There you are. Did you find the runaways?

Of course. You can depend on us!

Watch this, then, if you want to find out how cows milk gets into the cartons you buy at supermarkets.

The milk goes from the milking machine into the milk tank from where it is collected once a day to be brought to the dairy.

... and the truck takes it to the dairy.

Come on! Hurry up! They're waiting for you at the cow house!

We're going to have to drive them back on foot and then walk back again in this heat!

They obviously wanted more freedom than they'd already got!

Where do you think they could be? I think you'd better walk along the perimeter fence and look for the place where they've escaped. I'll get started with the milking...

That's how they escaped! A fallen tree! It must have happened when we had that thunderstorm last week.

What's that over there?

That's how they escaped! A fallen tree! It must have happened when we had that thunderstorm last week.

They obviously wanted more freedom than they'd already got!
The two reporters are going to spend a night sleeping in the hay.

It wouldn't be a proper weekend on the farm if you didn't get the chance to sleep in the hay barn. It's organic hay, by the way. So if it makes you itch tonight, it's nothing to do with chemicals ...

I've already told you that I produce everything I need for the livestock here on the farm.

That closed loop thing?

I've already seen one half of the loop. The animals produce the fertiliser for the fields. The straw you see here is what is left of the wheat harvest. It's stored here so we can use it for bedding in the cowhouse and pigsty. Then it goes from the cowshed to the dung heap so that we can use it as fertiliser on the fields.

Let's imagine that I was using mineral fertilisers or synthetic pesticides. The rain might wash them down into the ground water. Our drinking water would eventually contain a lot of nitrates or even nitrites and residues of the different pesticides or even worse combinations of pesticides. Our vegetables, the corn, the cereals and the food for the animals would contain residues of the different pesticides applied. We would be able to produce more, but we do not know whether our cows would be as healthy as they are now.

Oh dear, you do look tired. It's all that healthy country air. Shall I show you where you can sleep tonight?
This is the only organic dairy for miles around. That's why there's a queue. The milk cartons only get an organic seal if the milk comes from farms like mine. There are very strict controls.

The man who drove the milk truck yesterday has seen the car and comes forward to greet the three of them. Our important visitors have arrived! So it took the press to persuade you to leave your farm, Peter? Welcome both of you. I'm glad you could make it.

One of the dairy's staff has agreed to show the junior reporters around the dairy. Hello there. Would you like to come along with me?

We don't just pump the milk out of the trucks into the cartons. This is our laboratory. We use the instruments to analyse the milk and see how much fat and proteins it contains and whether it is healthy. We can see how hygienic our milk is and we can see at first glance how well the cows are being looked after.

The next stop in the tour is the cheese dairy. This is the cheese dairy. We're really proud of it. Our cheese has won lots of awards. And I think it deserved them, because it comes from happy cows who spend the whole day outside in the sunshine feeding on juicy grass and herbs. The cheese that their milk produces has to be special…

The day gets off to an early start on the farm. Did you sleep well?

No, that's one of the secrets of organic farming. There's nothing in the food that shouldn't be there. You'd simply had a long and strenuous day. And I've got more of the same for you today…

Oh, thanks Peter! You're brilliant!

Thanks for that compliment, young lady. Eat up, then, so you've got plenty of energy for our excursion!

Did you always want to be an organic farmer, Peter?

Did you always want to be an organic farmer, Peter?

Does your milk always go to the same dairy?

What if a cow has a calf? Do you still milk it?

Cock-a-doodle-doo!

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The next stop in the tour is the cheese dairy.
No, there are still plenty of questions for the drive back from the dairy.

Peter, what do you do if you get insects in your fields that eat up the crops.

The first thing I do is think about the problem. Obviously, I can’t attack them with chemicals. There are a few tricks I can use, though. Biological insecticides, for example. Or I declare war on the insects and let their natural enemies destroy them.

The journey is short, and they’re soon back at Peter’s farm.

When does your bus home leave? Shall I drive you to the bus stop later?

Oh, yes please! I’m glad I don’t have to walk all that way again.

Go on, then, pack your things …

It’s time to say goodbye.

Thanks Peter! We really enjoyed our weekend.

You’re always welcome to visit me whenever you want. Why don’t you come back in a few weeks’ time. I might have some calves to show you by then.
Julia is already writing the article for the school newspaper in her head.

It’s going to be great. And it’s easy to see which products are organic. You just have to look for the logo.

That’s enough research. Now it’s time to write the article.

I’d write that the logo simplifies everything. Just imagine you’re in the supermarket and there’s hundreds of yoghurts on the shelf. Now you can tell which of them are organic at first glance…

Getting the OK from the editors’ conference is the last hurdle that the article has to overcome. The conference is a test of how good the article is.

…and at the beginning of 2007, 36,000 products from 2000 companies already had the EU’s organic seal. And new products are joining them all the time… Errrm, that’s it.

Well done!

I’ll second that. We haven’t had an article as good as that one in our newspaper for a long time. It’s exciting and informative. Just the kind of article I like…

The next issue of the “Express” school newspaper is published two weeks later. Steven and Julia’s article has got a two-page spread.

…Julia and Steven toast with organic milk to their success.

To us! The school’s new star reporters!

And what shall we write about next? Green electricity?