

PACE visit to Old Hall Community, East Bergholt, 2nd September 2025.

The PACE visit to the Old Hall Community in East Bergholt was very well attended and very rewarding. From the start, with the series of sign posts from the gate, and the refreshments in one of the beautiful rooms of the old manor house, we were made to feel incredibly welcome. Naomi and Helen were our guides, and started by telling us some background information about the history and ethos of the community, keeping this brief so that we would have time for an outdoor tour before dark, since the September nights were drawing in! There would be more time for questions later indoors!

As we walked around the grounds in the vicinity of the house (which are just a part of the 65 acres owned and farmed organically by the community) we were fascinated to learn about the different aspects of producing the food for around 60 people: the large scale vegetable and fruit cultivation, the milking and dairy production, and more. We were impressed by the very long rows of beans of different varieties, many of which would be dried and stored for winter meals. There was a lot more that we didn't have time to see: - the chickens, pigs, sheep and dairy cattle, the bees, and the fields of arable crops. They are clearly a hard-working group of people, with everyone committing some of their time to this work, but there were also signs of a more relaxing side of life, with some beautiful garden, an outdoor entertaining area, play areas for the many resident children, and a sauna.

By then it was dark outside, and we had a look at some of the indoor communal areas: the big kitchen and eating area, cheesemaking room, laundry, and of course the lovely old ballroom, sitting room and library and the beautiful former (deconsecrated) chapel, from the building's time as a convent then a friary – in which events are now sometimes held. The maintenance of all these old buildings must be a constant challenge.

Throughout our visit, Naomi and Helen answered a stream of questions, and they couldn't have been more open and forthcoming with their answers about how the community functions and their personal experiences of being part of the community. It is impressive to know that it has been going for 50 years, making it one of the oldest and biggest such 'intentional communities' in the country.

Before we left we asked them if we could do anything to thank them, and they pointed out that they have volunteer days, so we will share this information with our PACE supporters and I'm sure some will wish to participate in them.