





# Christine's aim is to grow the Co-op's business organically

It's a little-known fact that the Manchester-based Co-operative Group is the country's biggest farmer, with 50,000 acres of land under its control. **Pamela Welsh** talks to the woman in charge of the £50m-turnover concern

**A**BOVE the heads of the thousands of shoppers, bankers and travel agents who populate the Co-op's current home in central Manchester are signs of the company's influence.

Look up, and you'll see that the buildings around Balloon Street, the heart of the Co-operative movement, are emblazoned with the names of towns and cities across the UK.

These are also the locations of the farms which make up a large chunk of the Co-op's farming business – a hidden gem among the group's portfolio.

The company turns over £50m a year, farming 50,000 acres of land, employing hundreds of people – making it Britain's biggest farmer.

Its managing director, Christine Tacon, was drafted in 10 years ago to turn around what was an ailing business, and has succeeded in making the farming arm a profitable organ in the Co-op's body.

Tacon oversees 17 farming units right across the country – from Aberdeenshire to Kent – and is intimately acquainted with the issues facing modern farming today.

She says: "People have the image of a guy in a flat cap – but I can show you scientists."

"If you look forward, we've got to produce twice as much food off the same amount of land, with less damage to the environment, and we're only going to be able to do that through technology."

Tacon's expertise in agricultural earned her a CBE in 2004, and she is frequently asked to share her knowledge at major conferences in farming circles.

Her wide-ranging experience – in both business and agriculture – means she regularly gets up to 50 speaking invitations every year. Her dexterity at navigating the more complex issues facing the industry has also earned her favour with *Continues overleaf*





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## Austin 7 gave Christine her driving ambition

**N**OT only is Tacon in the driving seat of Co-op Farms, she's also known to be in a different type of driving seat.

Tacon has a secret passion for vintage cars and took part in this year's Paris to Monaco Rally.

She said: "As a family, we're into vintage cars. My father gave each of us an old car when we were 17 and we learnt to drive in it.

"He gave me a 1929 Austin 7, my sister got a Morris Minor convertible and my brother got a Morris as well. "I think he thought we would sell

them and get a modern car with them, but none of us did!

"My sister had the idea that we should do the Paris to Monaco rally for women drivers.

"We planned it for a year, and spent a long time getting the car up to the right standard for doing it.

"I thought it was going to be a leisurely drive, stopping at a few spas and staying in chateaus and things but my sister became a really aggressive driver."

The team won three cups - topping their group and picking up seventh place overall.

**People are saying, 'I want to have a stake in the business, if there's any money to be shared out then it should go to people who are part of the business, not external shareholders!'**"



**Continued from page 15** politicians. She says: "We have a reputation in being leading edge in what we do, so we often get drawn into government initiatives.

"There's a tendency to want to protect the small family farm and this sort of idyllic way of life.

"Everybody seems to want to think that's where their food comes from. But they forget that the majority of the food - particularly the cheap food - comes from very large commercial farms."

The farming business changed substantially when the Co-op farming arm was integrated with the food department last August.

When the company's new 400,000 sq ft headquarters opens in 2012, the two will work even closer together.

The Co-op aims to have a quarter of all fresh produce sold by the retailer grown on its own farms.

Tacon has had to make some diffi-

cult decisions since taking charge of Co-op Farms more than a decade ago. In 2003, the Co-operative had been one of the biggest dairy farmers in Europe, supplying 30m litres of milk every year. But she realised it was impossible to make a profit, and withdrew from dairy farming altogether.

Now, the farms produce a range of produce - strawberries, potatoes, broccoli, flour and even cider - but at a much higher rate of return.

**T** rue to the Co-operative's image, the company gives generous terms of employment to its 200 farmers - a number that rockets to 700 at harvest. All are on pension schemes and get a living wage for farming the land.

But even though the group is the country's largest farmer, it seems it is

shy about proclaiming where the produce comes from in its packaging. Tacon, who has a background in marketing, is now pushing the group to change this.

She says: "We are revisiting the packaging to try and get a stronger farming presence in-store.

"The flour packaging bears no relation to the potato packaging, which bears no relation to the cider packaging."

The group is also embarking on a substantial education programme to teach children about the land and where their food comes from.

Around 45,000 pupils from schools up and down the country are taken onto farms for the day to learn about the provenance of food.

The initiative, 'From Farm to Fork', is another way of pushing the Co-op Farms brand.

Tacon was thrust into product development while working at Mars.

She was the brains behind the Tracker bar, managing its launch and co-ordinating the advertising.

A Cambridge graduate, with an MBA from Cranfield, she became marketing director for Anchor Foods, before being poached by the Co-operative Group in 2001.

A woman in a man's world, her contemporaries as the heads of other major farming businesses in the UK are mostly male. But sexism has never been an issue in her day-to-day role.

She laughs: "I have never experienced any sexism from within our business.

"I think it was a huge shock to people in the business to have somebody come to run Co-op farms, who was not only female but also had no knowledge of farming.

"That was the thing that was different, not so much that I was female, but that I wasn't a farmer."



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But despite the lack of women farmers on the ground, Tacon joins a female elite which is dominating the major organisations which represent the land - Helen Browning, director of the Soil Association; Dame Fiona Reynolds, the director general of the National Trust; and Baroness Byford, the President of LEAF (Linking Environment and Farming).

So what's the secret to her success? "I'm not afraid to ask stupid questions," she says, matter-of-factly.

Her eyes sparkle when she speaks about the history of the Co-op group.

She tells how the Rochdale Pioneers transformed farming and notes, for example, the spirit in which the co-ops took over some major farms in the aftermath of the First World War, when many of them had been left to ruin.

"The time of co-ops has come again," she says. "People are saying,

'I want to have a stake in the business, if there's any money to be shared out then it should go to people who are part of the business, not external shareholders'."

She adds: "In the year that RBS lost its money, Co-op Bank made £28m more profit than RBS, because we believed in only lending money which people had deposited with us. Yes, we looked old-fashioned, because everyone else was being far more entrepreneurial and doing all those risky things, but when the pigeons came home to roost, we were still the stable business, which was doing business the right way.

"During the Bob Dylan campaign (an advertising campaign featuring the singer's track, *Blowin' In The Wind*), at a time when businesses were cowering from the effects of the financial crisis, the Co-op was marching forward with a confidence that it hadn't had in decades."