



THE LAND BATTLE

Nearly half of the UK's land is owned by just 40,000 people (0.06% of the population).¹ For readers only too familiar with the difficulties in securing affordable access to land, this will not be a comforting statistic.

Such land ownership by the few tends to favour uniform, large-scale, mechanised agriculture, yet with the UK population having swelled by 4 million over the past decade, it becomes ever more pertinent that such farms have long been known to produce far less food per acre than smaller holdings (let's not even mention the relative productivity of grouse moors or golf courses!).²

This may seem counter-intuitive – we all know that many smaller farms have been forced out of business due to being economically uncompetitive – but in fact it is not a lack of productivity that causes small farms to suffer in our modern economy. Their first problem is that, although they can produce substantially more food per acre, the big farms can produce more of a given monoculture crop per acre, which suits the large-scale centralised buyers (the supermarkets, who, incidentally, reportedly receive planning permission for a new UK store every working day of the year). The greater challenge facing smallholders, however, is that their higher productivity per acre relies on higher employment. Just as the most productive parts of large farms famously tend to be the farmers' gardens, where more

An imaginative and exciting scheme was launched to provide would-be smallholders with affordable land and low-impact dwellings. But then it was blocked by a local council, and has now gone to appeal. The story highlights how our planning process can frustrate so many 'good life' dreams. Shaun Chamberlin, who helped launch the scheme, explains

time and attention is lavished on each plant among a diverse crop, smallholdings rely on careful human attention, which can be a major expense. Large-scale mechanised farms, on the other hand, have echoed other industries in taking advantage of fuel prices over recent decades to replace human care with cheap fossil energy, standardisation and monoculture. Yet with finite fossil fuel supplies depleting and oil prices having tripled over the past decade, the balance is shifting.

Smallholdings and horticulture, then, offer a crucial contribution towards higher employment, a reliable, home-grown food supply for the UK (rising energy prices are also a threat to cheap imports) and a diverse and

thus more ecologically healthy countryside.

Considering this alongside our Government's calls for more consumption of fresh fruit and vegetables and less dependence on state handouts, it is perhaps unsurprising to learn of the set up of a government-funded Land Settlement Association to provide over a thousand 5 acre smallholdings, and to train unemployed workers in the skills required to manage them.

Unfortunately though, this welcome initiative was launched in 1934, and was wound up – with all the holdings privatised – in 1983, by which point the LSA was producing around 40% of English home grown salad crops. The subsidies (and research funding) in place today are far more supportive of big agribusiness than of any modern equivalent of the LSA, but it nevertheless provides a practical example of what could be done.³

Back in the 1930s the primary motivation for supporting smallholdings in this way was to provide jobs, but the need for similar provision is perhaps more acute than ever today in the face of our profound environmental crisis. Industrialised agriculture is a major contributor to climate destabilisation, soil depletion and numerous other problems, while smallholdings provide an ideal context for diverse, low-carbon, localised lifestyles that could provide a desperately needed model for true sustainability.

Meanwhile, UK agriculture is suffering from a lack of new blood – the average age of a UK farm holder is now 58 – since private farms are

now generally far too large for would-be new farmers to afford, and the 'County Farms' made available to new entrants by local authorities (around 40% of which are under 50 acres in size) are gradually being sold off as the austerity funding cuts bite ever harder.

Productive smallholdings could thus represent a key response to many of our most pressing social, economic and ecological problems. And, as the popularity of *Country Smallholding* attests, there is also a great appetite for the lifestyle they provide. Yet extortionate land prices and the intricate absurdities of the planning permission system combine to make the simple aim of living on and working a piece of land seem an unattainable dream for most of us.

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

This collective plight led to energetic discussions in the spring of 2005 between members of Chapter 7, the ecological planning consultancy; Radical Routes, a secondary co-operative of co-operatives working for social change; Somerset Co-operative Services, a co-op development body; and farms and eco-communities like Landmatters, Lammas, Highbury Farm and Five Penny Farm.

We were yearning for a vibrant, living countryside in which humans flourish alongside our cherished landscapes and natural biodiversity, with small land-based enterprises providing meaningful employment while allowing residents to be rooted in rural communities and play a crucial role in ensuring food and energy sovereignty. We were longing for a proliferation of happy rural lifestyles, helping to maintain traditional skills and improve ecological literacy while providing access to local, sustainable crafts and food, as well as educational opportunities for urban visitors.

And, as so often when such breathy, passionate desires are unleashed, a child was eventually born – the Ecological Land Co-operative, a project created to provide affordable opportunities for new viable, ecologically beneficial projects to find land.

The basic idea of the Co-operative is that it buys land that has been, or is at risk of being, intensively managed, then uses its expertise and



experience to oversee the process of securing planning permission for low-impact residences on site. Once this is achieved, the land is made available at an affordable price to people that have the skills to manage it ecologically but who could not otherwise afford to do so. The money received when the new residents buy their land is then used to purchase another intensively managed site, where the same process can begin, allowing more land to be 'rescued' from industrialised agriculture.

Prospective residents of a piece of land are only asked to buy in once planning permission for their homes is secured, but they do have to sign up to a strict management plan which requires that the land is always managed so as to maintain and enhance habitats, species diversity and landscape quality, and to facilitate the provision of low-impact livelihoods. There are also conditions stipulating that if they ever want to sell up and move on, the land must be sold on at an affordable price, so that the land is never priced out of reach. Beyond that, the land will be theirs to run as they see fit.

THAT WAS THE IDEA. HOW ABOUT THE REALITY?

Well, as an informal group, we received some early funding from the Co-operative Group in the South West for scoping and feasibility work, and at later stages in our development from the Co-operative Fund, Business Link and the Polden-Puckham Charitable Foundation.

These helped us find our feet and put basic organisational structures in place.

In 2009 we sold community shares to finance the purchase of our first land, a 22-acre site on the Devon/Somerset border which we christened Greenham Reach. We have divided this land into three plots, in order to allow each of three 'clustered' smallholdings the independence to build their own dwelling and manage their land as they wish, while also enjoying the benefits of a small community for tool-sharing, sociability, mutual support etc. Accordingly, we also plan to provide some infrastructure to be shared between the three smallholdings – a timber barn with solar PV array and rainwater collection; improved access; a biological waste water treatment system and internal pathways linking the plots.

Unfortunately, shortly after our land purchase, the setbacks began, firstly in working with a planning agent who appears to have misled us and who failed to submit valid planning applications on our behalf on three separate occasions. This depressing episode set the project back by around a year, but we will definitely be wiser next time around.

Our original hopes to secure planning permission for the site before inviting applications from potential plottolders were also thwarted, as the district council informed us that they wanted to see individual business plans from the prospective residents before they would consider granting permission. Accordingly, we advertised and went through a selection process, selecting from the applicants on a number of criteria including their farming and horticultural experience, vision and plans for the land, experience of low impact living and connection with the locality.

Together with our new intended plottolders, we then submitted the full applications for the three plots at the turn of the year, doing it ourselves this time. They ran to over 400 pages of careful documentation, and more than 60 letters of support were also received by the council, including from experienced organic smallholders, local residents, the Soil Association, the Transition Network, Sustrans, Colin Tudge's Campaign for Real Farming, Food



Policy Professor Tim Lang and other academics, three MPs and even the Scottish Crofting Federation. A heartening letter came from a planner of over 30 years' experience, who described our work as "by some way the most carefully prepared applications for either an agricultural and/or low impact dwelling I have considered".

Nonetheless, much like every other similar low-impact proposal, in June we attended a hearing to witness the rejection of our applications by the councillors on Mid Devon District Council's planning committee. The vote for rejection (by a six to two majority, with three abstaining) was based on their vague statements that smallholdings are not "serious farming", that the business plans (despite being carefully reviewed by a number of agricultural experts) "do not stack up" and that off-grid renewables are "not practical". None of these are valid planning considerations, and we have good

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reasons to believe that we may win on appeal, as others have; not least because we are one of the few applications of this type to win the support of both the local parish council and the planning officers who spent the best part of a year carefully going through our applications. Going through the appeal process is, of course, more work and more delay, but it will all be worth it to ultimately see (quite literally) the fruits of our labours.

Our spirits have also been bolstered by grateful contact from others who have used and amended the documentation for our applications (available on our website) in their own efforts to secure planning permission. We have also produced the *Small is Successful* report, which examined eight existing smallholdings with land-based businesses on ten acres or less. These documented examples demonstrate that economically viable and highly



PHOTO: PAUL HOWARD



sustainable land-based livelihoods can be created on such smallholdings, without the need for the subsidies on which large farms so often rely. The Research Council UK showcased *Small is Successful* as one of a hundred pieces of UK research 'that will have a profound effect on our future', and we have also presented our message at the House of Commons, to the All Party Parliamentary Group for Agroecology.

All in all, it has been a long struggle since those idealistic conversations seven years ago, but we believe that we are now closing in on the great satisfaction of having something simple and solid to show for our efforts – smallholders living on and working the land who would otherwise have been unable to do so. Appeal inspector permitting, we expect to reach this landmark early in 2013.

It will be a small beginning, perhaps, but we are already looking to apply the invaluable experience gained to date by finding further suitable land to make available in future. We

dare to dream that it could be the start of a real solution to the thorny problem of land access here in the UK.

To find out more, see our website: <http://ecologicaland.coop/> or follow us on Twitter: @EcoLandCoop You can also join our mailing list by emailing: zoe@ecologicaland.coop Any offers of time or assistance also greatly appreciated, to the same email address.

¹ Kevin Cahill, *Who Owns Britain*, Canongate, 2001.

² See e.g. Peter Rossett (1999), 'The Multiple Functions and Benefits of Small-Scale Agriculture', The Institute for Food and Development Policy, 1999, <http://tinyurl.com/6fm5m5>

Gershon Feder (1985), 'The Relationship between Farm Size and Farm Productivity', *Journal of Development Economics* 18: 297–313.

Parviz Koochafkan, Miguel A. Altieri & Eric Holt Gimenez (2011), 'Green Agriculture: foundations for biodiverse, resilient and productive agricultural systems', *International Journal of Agricultural Sustainability*, <http://tinyurl.com/avazvpw>

³ Dr. Peter Clarke, The Land Settlement Association, <http://www.peterclarke.com/Land4.htm>

An idea whose time has come Comment by CS writer Alan Beat

My recent feature 'Smallholding can feed the world' (CS August 2012) outlined the wealth of scientific research and international studies that now strongly support the headline claim. It focused on the benefits of small scale organic agriculture to impoverished peoples of Third World countries, but a similar case can be made across the western world, including the UK. Wherever you look, organic smallholding benefits both people and the planet.

So this initiative by the Ecological Land Cooperative is to be warmly welcomed; and doubters should download and read their excellent research report *Small is Successful* before criticising. The report powerfully demonstrates that 10 acres of land or less can provide viable, environmentally-friendly livings where conventional

agrochemical farming cannot; it has become recommended reading to all students on my training courses in smallholding and self sufficiency.

Limitations imposed by the high cost of land and the built-in prejudice of our planning system are powerful obstacles to all those who dream of a smallholding lifestyle. I wish the EcoLandCoop every success in converting its commendable vision into reality, and leading the way for smallholders everywhere to build their own homes on affordable land. This is an idea whose time has come.

Alan Beat has a smallholding in North Devon, is author of A Start in Smallholding and has written for Country Smallholding for more than 20 years.

CS writer Stuart Anderson provided this photo of himself working on his smallholding



A planning consultant's view

By Clive Miller, of Clive Miller & Associates, Somerset

Sadly, the planning application experience described by the Greenham Reach group in Devon comes as no surprise to us as planning consultants. Obtaining permission for a dwelling (no matter how sustainably designed or whether low impact or not) on an established holding with a proven track record is not easy. To obtain permission for even a temporary dwelling on a holding yet to be established is much, much harder because it's always going to be difficult to provide concrete evidence that a new enterprise will definitely be viable and will require a permanent on site presence.

Partly this is because there have in the past been quite a lot of dwellings permitted on what subsequently proved to be unviable holdings, and where owners have successfully secured the removal of an agricultural tying condition. This results in what some have viewed as a cynical abuse of the planning system via a back door method, to obtain an open market house in the countryside which would not normally be possible.

The challenge as ever, remains to satisfy both the local community and the planning authority that one's particular proposal is definitely genuine, essential and viable. And this is compounded by the confusion which arises within the general public and the planning authorities about whether the main purpose of such applications is to achieve affordable, low impact dwellings or whether it is to establish a new farming enterprise? If it is the former, then there is an entirely different set of criteria to be met. If it is the latter, then it will be judged on the functional need and financial viability criteria regardless of how low impact or sustainably constructed a dwelling is proposed to be.

So, until the planning system officially recognises at the national level that there is good economic and environmental sustainability rationale for stimulating and permitting the setting up of more smallholdings incorporating low impact dwellings, it would seem that applicants will remain vulnerable to the vagaries of local decision making processes, unless they can pass all the essential agricultural need and viability tests at an appeal.

* Clive will examine these planning issues in greater detail in next month's magazine.

* Clive Miller offers FREE initial advice to Country Smallholding readers on planning matters.

He can be contacted on 01458 252 806 or email info@clivemillerassociates.com

About the author – Shaun Chamberlin became a director of the ELC earlier this year. He has also been involved with the Transition Network since its inception, co-founding Transition Town Kingston and authoring the movement's second book, *The Transition Timeline* (Green Books, 2009). His website is www.darkoptimism.org

* A shorter version of this article was published in the winter 2012 issue of *Permaculture magazine*.