



Appendix 10

Essay from a local smallholder

Essay from a local Smallholder

By
Dean Braithwaite

Rhyd – Dderwen
Glandwr
Pembrokeshire
SA34 0XX

Like so many people who came out to West Wales to live and work the land some twenty years ago, idealism was hot in my belly. Not that we were the first such incomers. Before us in the mighty wake of John Seymour and the incredible back to the land movement of the late sixties/early seventies he sparked many had trod a similar path.

While the idealism and basic beliefs has never left me, the road to a permanent life here has not been easy. In fact, so many of the wave of incomers of which I was part have long departed, I suspect back to the city and its brutish realities. There is a saying out here that incomers arrive in Rolls-Royces and leave on bicycles. Often, I might add, with marriages/relationships in tatters. Well, I've certainly had my ups and downs as far as relationships are concerned, but I didn't arrive in a Rolls-Royce and if ever I leave, it'll be on a tractor and it won't be back to the city.

Being a relic of a wave that has broken its enthusiasm on the rocky shore of reality can get to be more than a bit lonely. When I first arrived here, there were many more small farmers and smallholders pursuing similar aims to me. But, because we were all so busy doing it, there wasn't exactly a great social life to be had and it was a bit, well, yes, lonely. But it wasn't the kind of lonely that I feel now, where instead of being one among many ploughing the same furrow, as it were, where even if you didn't get the time to socialise you knew you weren't alone.

Something weird and woeful has happened to the countryside. The values that I first arrived here with, though they were a bit idealism-tinged, were at least recognisable to the indigenous Welsh population that had lived here for centuries and more. Nowadays, incomers to rural West Wales seem to have more in common with Martians than traditional farmers and even John Seymour-ish idealists. Lonely has assumed whole new dimensions and proportions as we fell between the cracks of the increasingly large acreage farmers and the suburbanite yuppies. Before 1947, three quarters of farms in England and Wales (and, yes, that includes the big-barley baron acres of East England) were under 50 acres. In fact, in some not-too-distant counties, such as Herefordshire, the average size was 20 acres! The holding that we moved to would then have been a perfectly respectably sized farm. Nowadays, agribusiness, even the local kind, laughs at the name

farm when applied to holdings the size of ours. These days, to loneliness, there is added a good measure of insanity for people like me who still cling resolutely to the ideal not so long ago of a reality of an unspoilt countryside teeming with wildlife and people working and living on the land.

In my early years in Pembrokeshire, I witnessed and, to a small extent was part of, the dying remnants of a mutuality and common goodwill that was once the norm. The kind of thing you read about in nostalgic local folk-history books. in nostalgic local folk-history books. Yes, amazingly, life here only 20 years ago seems another world.

Of course, my own experiences here are not unique and my story thus far could be told by many country dwellers the length and breadth of these lands. Neither is my bewilderment at the loss of true rurality and the encroachment of suburbanism and uncommon tale. To the litany of loss of once-common birds and flowers, can be added the loss of the true countryman and -woman and true farmer. Those idiosyncratic characters who, horror of horrors, cared more for the peas in their pottle than the aisle of plenty at the local supermarket. Even the village shop seems an anachronism these days, and we've just lost ours because it couldn't attract enough local trade that valued vibrant community above the vulgar apparent cheapness of the supermarket.

Either the world around me has gone mad or I have. When you consider that all these negative changes to the countryside I have described in the two decades in which I have been a country dweller have been fuelled by an energy source – fossil oil – and paper-money values with no substance in reality, I don't think it's my sanity that isn't up to scratch. The real tragedy is that people like me who only a few years ago could afford to buy a small farm on the proceeds of the sale of a two-bedroomed terraced house and a few years' savings, are now totally barred from the opportunity of such a small country living. There is a farm locally, around 200 acres, so by any sane measure, a big farm, that is for sale for £1 million. Now, you don't have to be Brain of Britain to realise that if you had the money to buy such a holding as a working enterprise, you'd be crazy to do it. Even sticking the money in the building society would give you a far-greater return on your money without any of the risk of farming or even agribusiness. By any rational measure then a 200-acre farm in

these parts, like the 50-acre farms before, is no longer a viable proposition in this crazy world of skewed artificial values.

So often, I have been told, sometimes by farmers who have been squeezed out by all this insanity, that you can't stop progress. Yes, they're quite right but, is all change really progress? What are we progressing to? The total destruction of the countryside and the true country people and their vales that once were its life? You might as well say that jumping off a tall building is a smart life choice. I don't agree. It's time for change and time for real progress.

I saw amazing things

Something amazing has happened and I can't believe that I'm living within the county whose council has bucked this trend of progress down the blind alley and has shown not only a belief in a saner future but a willingness to make it happen. In implementing its low-impact development policy, Pembrokeshire County Council has not only changed Pembrokeshire but has fundamentally changed Wales and Britain. For the first time since the Land Resettlement movement enabled ordinary people to stake a claim on a piece of land on which to make a living and build a house, an ordinary family with ordinary means can now do the same today here in Pembrokeshire. Of course, a policy is just fine words without people with the skill and courage to make it real. So, no, something amazing hasn't happened, *two* amazing things have happened. There's an old saying: 'Cometh the hour, cometh the man.' Well, it might be the eleventh hour, and it isn't just one man but a wonderful group of men and women led by a very special person, Paul Wimbush, whose name is Lammas, that are forging fine words into an even finer reality.

When Lammas was set up, its aim was to demonstrate that sustainable low-impact living was a reality, not just a politician's slogan. Its first objective was to bring into being a low-environmental impact land-based community based on the model of traditional smallholdings brought up to date with cutting-edge green technologies. In short, something that was the antithesis of our oil-fired technology-obsessed progress down that blind alley. Even this concatenation of two incredible things was not enough to turn words and good intentions into reality. Then the third amazing thing happened: A suitable piece of land was offered to Lammas

on which to make this idea real by a singularly enlightened woman, Sue Burke. Forsaking normality and the common sanity that is destroying what's left of the countryside, she offered her farmland at Pont-y-Gafel in my village, Glandwr, to make this happen. People say she's mad, she could have sold the land quickly at open-market prices but, like a true custodian of the land, she felt she had more responsibility than that. Without Sue Burke, even the two other amazing things that have happened would amount to nothing.

As I write this, the T's are being crossed and the I's dotted on Lammas's planning application for it's eco-village. It is the culmination of nearly two years' work by a huge number of people from all walks of life, who have given freely of their time and considerable diverse skills. During the last 12 months, I have met and worked with these wonderful people and have felt very privileged to have made my own contribution to the project so, by my reckoning, for me at least, that's four amazing things.

The planning application for this amazing (I know I keep using this word, but it is) project runs to over a thousand pages. This is no whim or dewy-eyed idealist's dream. This document is the blueprint for a paradigm shift, not only on our values as an industrialised modern society but in the very way we live and work and use the technology of our society. Oil-fired addictions are to be no part of this project – it must stand on its own without injections from the mains utilities. How wonderful and inspiring this fact alone is, even more so because it is our council's policy that has decreed it! Oh, how I wish our politicians had such courage and grasp of reality. Not only must the eco-village do without carbon crutches to support itself, it must, once again by our council's decree, use only the land as its support, since each of the nine smallholdings must account for 75 per cent of its needs directly from that land.

Though constrained by the realities of a finite earth through policies drafted with breathtaking clarity and courage by the council, this is no inward-looking isolationist project. From the outset, Lammas's vision was that the eco-village would integrate with and be an asset to the existing village and surrounding communities. It will do this not just by sharing its produce and products through local trading schemes but by sourcing those resources and services from local people and businesses not available internally.

In short, this project doesn't so much turn the clock back to a time not so long ago of real community and stewardship of our land and environment, but turn it forward well passed our current age of exploitative self-destruction, a time in which we can integrate the best of the past with the improvements of the present and those to come, in the future in a joined-up way where land, people and the whole of the web of nature that is life on this planet are at peace and accord.