



*The hamlet of Allaleigh, with the biddy settlement in the foreground.*

# DO WE KNOW HOW TO BE GREEN?

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Life at home has been dominated by various planning and development matters. A group of well-meaning environmentalist neo-peasants has fetched up on our own doorstep in the hamlet of Allaleigh, while in the neighbouring town of Dartmouth the pattern of retailing and food supply is about to be reconfigured by the arrival of three national supermarket chains.

It is no surprise to find that we are dead against both developments. This may be simple confirmation of the inherent conservatism of the over-sixties (or of the middle classes); or it may usefully demonstrate the dilemmas presented by change in the modern world. Whichever, I print below two of my responses to these threats to peace and contentment. At their conclusion, I add further thoughts on the wisdom, or otherwise, of our opinions.

First up, my leaflet on the 'hippies', as we call them.

The application from Landmatters Permaculture Cooperative for retrospective planning permission to erect 11 dwellings in virgin countryside at Allaleigh on the borders of Cornworthy and Blackawton has excited much debate. This leaflet is a contribution to that discussion. All the present residents of the hamlet have expressed reservations about the intended development, but each has his or her own particular take on the issue. Here, I express the views of one household alone.



*An aerial photograph of the settlement under construction.*

The 42 acres which the cooperative of 18 members purchased consists of grazing and woodland at the head of one of the most beautiful valleys in the South Hams. We, their future neighbours, were given to understand they wished to occupy their holding in as sympathetic and ‘green’ a manner as possible, in no way disturbing the very light touch (no chemicals, the grass maintained by bullocks and sheep) of the previous owners. It was somewhat arresting, therefore, to discover their actual intentions were to convert it into a small eco-village housing up to 11 households (given they are all young couples, that means a possible future population of fifty-two – allowing them the national average of children – and two babies have already been born to them in the short time they have lived there) and that they would be establishing a national centre of rural skills accommodating an indefinite number of visitors from beyond the district.

This grandiose plan was not to be publicized until such time as it was nine-tenths complete, when a self-justificatory and retrospective planning application would be submitted. As we all know, possession is nine-tenths of the law, and the Cooperative reckoned (with some reason) that if they built their houses before submitting their application, their removal would be the more problematic. It has indeed been the case. Permission was refused, enforcement proceedings were agreed, but due to the cumbrous appeal process, the Cooperative continues as if nothing had happened, importing diggers and dumper trucks to destroy the environment still further, building structures as if permission were mere formality.

The Cooperative's strategy may achieve its objective, but is unlikely to gain a sympathetic hearing from its neighbours, who have themselves complied with the planning process in due form over many years, or from farmers in the district who have had their applications for agricultural dwellings repeatedly turned down by the local authority. The Cooperative's way is anarchy. Planning exists for a purpose.

The sympathetic exploitation of the hilltop site for agricultural purposes is an admirable intention with which few would disagree. The land is part woodland, part grazing. It is not best suited for growing crops, the soils being generally thin. There is, as yet, no water. As some members of the Cooperative are strict vegetarians, animal husbandry is not part of their plan. Beyond some energetic hedging, planting of a few more trees and the construction of garden plots before their front doors, the agricultural intentions

seem modest. They certainly don't involve any form of self-sufficiency, nor much reliance on manual labour. To date, the Cooperative has shown as much enthusiasm for machinery and fossil fuels as the rest of us. They wield chainsaws with the abandon of loggers in the Amazon or Indonesia; they truck in diggers all the way from Bodmin to undertake earth moving; they hire farmers with their tractors to cut the grass (haymaking seems a skill they have yet to learn).

The agriculture (or permaculture as they call it) seems a screen for their residential ambitions. It is not on a scale that demands the constant presence of eleven households for, permacultural or not, plants grow in much the same way under their regime as for the rest of us, and trees do not spurt upwards because they are hugged more regularly. They make no secret that the viability of the settlement depends on regular injections of external finance and that Cooperative members must find work in the district to bolster their incomes. This smacks of the dormitory suburb.

In a description of their intentions posted on the main Permaculture Association website, the Cooperative makes little mention of any agricultural activity, laying more stress on their hopes to develop their educational mission (bimonthly weekends open to all-comers) and to create a viable residential community. This but confirms my suspicion that Landmatters Permaculture Cooperative is a lifestyle choice. A random collection of individuals (who were recruited after a small core had purchased the land), mostly apparently employed as musicians, teachers and video producers, descended on Devon (by no means

a majority are from the district) because they wished to live in the country. Unable to buy a house, and unwilling to rent one, they have taken the cheapest route possible to a country cottage by squatting on their own land. There is no possible agricultural justification for this act (the Allaleigh settlement is much larger than similar ventures in Somerset and on Dartmoor, although their agricultural aims seem more modest).

Our alarm at this development is prompted by thoughts of the future as well as the present. In the present, we cannot embrace the concept that settlement of this land is anything more than the rape of hitherto virgin countryside. How eleven dwellings can be more green and more ecological than empty fields grazed by fattening bullocks is a conundrum. In the future, what will such a new village mean to Allaleigh and its environs?

To begin with, there is the traffic on the roads – all single-track lanes, already overfilled with town commuters delighted with their rat-runs. The Cooperative takes great pains to minimize their road usage, but the constant flow of visitors (essential to their survival) can do nothing but increase the burden. The settlement is also sited far away from any schools, shops and other services. Every interaction with the outside world requires a trip of at least two miles out and two miles back again.

Then there is the future development of the built environment. At present, the benders and yurts are scattered along the field boundaries over several acres: a suburban rather than concentrated village layout.

Unlike many such communities, cooking and such functions are not communal. In time, these benders will surely be upgraded, to thatched cottages or timber houses, and certainly, as the number of children increases, the standard of accommodation is bound to improve.

These households will need services. They will ultimately require a metalled access road and a fire hydrant (what happens if one of these houses, filled with sleeping children, goes up in flames – there is no water on the site – has still not been explained to me); they will need an extra school bus to ship them to Blackawton; as time passes, the settlement will take on the attributes of all small housing estates. At no point has the Cooperative stated its intention to dissolve after five years of playing at peasants, so one must assume that it will inevitably join the rest of us as the years tick by. As yet, of course, they have avoided the sticky nuisance of paying Council Tax, but even that will come to them eventually.

In brief, what we have found difficult to accept is the residential dimension of this venture. So far as the agriculture is concerned, that seems estimable; limited, but estimable. That it justifies the building of eleven houses, no matter how green, how light of footprint, seems doubtful. We appear to be dealing with a group of disaffected town-dwellers who are seeking a fast track to a rural lifestyle at bargain basement prices. Were the rest of England to follow their example, the South Hams would be Surrey, but shabbier. They have claimed that their actions are helping the rural housing shortage. Insofar as they all had houses when

they first joined the Cooperative, they were not exactly the homeless.

A final concern is the future governance of the Cooperative. For all their protestations, there is no telling who will remain a member and who will join in the future. There seems no guarantee that the membership will remain wedded to a green and ecological way of life. The Cooperative may be hijacked by cultists, ravers or travelling folk; the rural studies workshops may become laboratories for much more wayward disciplines. Of such dreams are nightmares made.

The second instalment is the text of an article I submitted to the local paper on the successful planning applications of J. Sainsbury plc and Lidl plc for new supermarkets on the edge of Dartmouth. In the town itself, Marks & Spencer has established a new Simply Food store. I had intended a piece of much learning and *gravitas* for the pages of *PPC*, but this rabble-rousing is probably more enjoyable.

The news that South Hams District Council has given planning permission to build not one but two new supermarkets in Dartmouth has been greeted with cheers. For myself, I view the development with foreboding. Dartmouth is sleepwalking on a road to perdition. What was once a unique seaport in matchless surroundings with a history and built environment as intriguing as any in the country, is embracing with a wild and heedless passion the mantle of Anytown UK, supplied by the grocers to Everyone, devoid of character, bland and traffic-ridden. For some inexplicable reason, no-one agrees with me.

Dartmouth has always depended on the sea for its livelihood. A vigorous coastwise trade plus import and export from the west coast of France in the Middle Ages were succeeded by heavy involvement in the Newfoundland cod business and the triangular connection between Britain, Portugal and the New World (fish to Catholics, port to Englishmen, shoes and manufactured goods to Canada). After that, there were dreams of international passenger liners dropping their passengers off at the station in Kingswear and a lucrative business in supplying England's mercantile fleet with coal as it left the Channel for the open Atlantic. Then the Navy arrived, built the Royal Naval College, and the town was filled with midshipmen and their attendant instructors, lecturers and schoolmasters. Every day, the training ship would steam out of the river; every night the pubs would fill with jolly jack tars; and the town prospered.

When I arrived in the town in the early 1970s, intent on opening the Carved Angel restaurant, there were still plenty of relics of that prosperity. There was a branch of Gieves & Hawkes, tailors to the quality, fitting out the naval cadets; there were High Street giants such as Woolworth, Boots, International Stores and W.H. Smith, in miniaturized stores that coexisted merrily with local traders; there were four banks with proper managers; there was a grand old-fashioned grocery store that supplied every known sort of provision; there were four bakers, four butchers, four greengrocers and a couple of good ironmongers. I arrived just in time. Since then, much has vanished. We are down to one baker, one butcher and, for a moment

this winter, no greengrocer at all. Instead, the town can do a very fine line in T-shirts and leisurewear (times twenty) and can supply enough pictures to open its own branch of the Guggenheim. And that's it.

What happened? The maritime trade disappeared. There's a little fishing; there are lots of yachts (mostly moored as if in an NCP, once parked always forgotten); and the Royal Naval College is a wan vestige of its former self, sending cadets to train in small motorboats rather than minesweepers. Occasionally a cruise-liner shows its face, but the river is a dull place in general, with none of the brio of years gone by. The town has plumped for tourism: second homes, coach parties by the million, aimless crowds wandering up and down the seafront waiting to go home for dinner. Hence the picture galleries and T-shirt suppliers. The last thing they need is a nice bag of spuds.

It is understandable that Dartmouth has greeted J. Sainsbury with smiles. Deprived of choice, it takes what it can. And all of a sudden, Heaven seems to be raining supermarkets. The first to arrive was Marks & Spencer. The local Co-op, which had built a new store for itself not ten years ago, took the M&S shilling, shut up shop and we await ready-meals for the middle classes and chocolates the M&S way. Next came Lidl, a German chain that sells to the lowest common denominator of price and economy, which intends to build a small store with easy access to Townstal, the council estate at the top of the town (where, thanks to the District Council's housing policy, there are surprisingly high levels of social deprivation, according to all studies). And thirdly, in marched Sainsbury's,

announcing a shop big enough to employ 150 people, needing 10 articulated lorries each day to supply its groaning shelves (their estimate, not mine). All this for a town of 6000 people, with an average age of 44 (some 7 years older than the rest of Devon).

Who, you might ask, is going to eat all this extra food? A 44-year-old does not suddenly undergo a magic expansion of his or her appetite. You have to conclude that Sainsbury's is not seeking to feed Dartmouth, but to entice customers from outside to drive in for a little retail therapy. How else will they keep 150 staff happy and occupied?

If this is their true intention (and how many other towns of 6000 can boast a full hand of Sainsbury's, M&S, and Lidl?), the madness of the District Council gets madder. Wedded as it was to the sea, Dartmouth used never to think of the landmass behind it. Its highway network was exiguous, to say the least. Most goods travelled by packhorse or river boat. Nor did it have much of a commercial hinterland. While Totnes and Kingsbridge have fifteen or twenty parishes within their spheres of influence, Dartmouth boasts three. The town is at the end of a 13-mile cul-de-sac: one end is the bridgehead at Totnes, the other is the sea. Some might say there's the ferry: but after queuing for two hours on a summer's day, they may care to reconsider.

So what do our local authorities think a good idea? While banging on from day to day about their green credentials, their love of recycling, their readiness to tackle global warming with a fully frontal policy of Devon Carbon Days, sustainable tourism, green

businesses and organic food producers (that's the County Council's publicity spiel, not mine), they are encouraging three out-of-town food suppliers, none of which buys locally, all of which delivers via 44-tonne articulated vehicles, driving down a long road to nowhere, attracting as many people as they can from outwith the locality to drive down the same narrow track so that they can buy beans from Zimbabwe, potatoes from Poland, chicken reared in Holland, and bacon fattened in Denmark.

This is bonkers. A proactive policy of local business regeneration, low rents and encouragement of small food producers would have far greater benefits to our diets and our town.

So what should a middle-of-the-road, fairly well-intentioned person do about all this? I am struck, particularly in the case of the supermarkets, by the happy abandonment by the applicants, potential customers and planning authorities of any thought connecting their situation to that of the wider world. Proclaiming in stentorian tones their espousal of green principles, they ignore them in practice. We know the generation of traffic is a bad idea; they encourage it. We have recognized the difficulties which stem from intemperate economic growth, but none of the parties seems willing to pursue other avenues than simple expansion, whether of the town's envelope, the level of traffic, or the number of commercial premises.

In 1929, the town's population was 7500. Today, it stands at 6000. It is a measure of both increasing standards of living and the sloppiness of modern urban development that the town's built area today is nearly double that of

1929. Much of the inner zone has been hollowed out – so far as permanent habitation (not second homes or holiday rentals) is concerned – and there has been great expansion of working-class housing away from the centre. While this was of definite social benefit inasmuch as it removed many slum tenements from the river-front, it has created an apparent ghetto of social misfits and problem families occupying at least part of the council estate (hence the interest of Lidl, a firm that specializes in social and experiential deprivation).

I am not blind to the irony of objecting to the juggernaut of international capitalism on the one hand, while spurning hippy hobbits building their benders on the other. A classic instance of the late Nicholas Ridley's nimby in action. While the supermarkets seem to be merely ignoring our present predicament, it might be claimed that the hippies are offering alternative solutions. Their settlement may act as a beacon to others willing to embrace their low-carbon lifestyle. In fact, both are contributing to the irresistible (it seems) suburbanization of Britain. The gap between town and country becomes ever smaller. If hippies in their thousands did what our neighbours suggest, all the rough grazing between here and the border would be covered with benders. If Sainsbury's are given their head, Dartmouth will be drawn still further into the mainstream network making a nonsense of anyone electing to live there rather than in another town. It is a regrettable fact that most of us who live in the country treat it as if it were a fully functioning satellite of West London: we hop into cars for the slightest thing, a newspaper or a pint of milk; the weekly or the bi-monthly shop is a thing of the past; we demand the same services as our urban cousins. I think my contention is that these things should be made more difficult, not easier.

The general tendency of current debate is to increase access to the countryside; to allow, for instance, unstinting roaming round the coastline, and across wilderness. This may be good for democracy, but it is going to be mighty bad for the countryside. I listened the other day to a farmer on Dartmoor extolling the benefits to wildlife and the ecology that flowed from the restriction of public access during the foot-and-mouth epidemic. My view, I guess, is that the human ecology of small towns and the survival of relatively undamaged countryside are two sides of the same coin. Access to them has to be controlled, otherwise we will awake to a dull grey cloud smothering the whole country.

While writing these notes I have been reading Rosie Boycott's *Our Farm. A Year in the Life of a Smallholding* (Bloomsbury, May 2007, £15.99). This tells of her transition from high-flying editor, journalist and single mother to part-time smallholder (pigs, chickens and vegetables) near Ilminster in Somerset. Heartily espousing all things green: anti-supermarkets and all that, organic (I think), with lots of lectures on soil science, global warming, farmers' markets and general good causes (some of them quite informative, others a little bit of supplement-journalism just dropped in) I had to giggle as she drove regularly from London to Ilminster for her weekends in the trees not giving a thought perhaps (but that may be to impugn her) for the terrible and astonishing insult of her lifestyle (QC husband, homes in several places, driving like a maniac from pillar to post, earning money at an indecent rate – by contrast to the exploited masses of whom she writes so movingly) to the very causes she espouses. She is, as she should be, pretty switched on to the ironies of her situation. However, the solution to those ironies may be to give up the good life and start again. After reading this

book, with some enjoyment it has to be said, I don't think I have ever been so irritated. The idea that you can express solidarity with the downtrodden masses of Ilminster and Chard (two small market towns in south Somerset near her putative farm) while your husband is earning indecent fees for pleading in court (lawyers, of course, being the archetype of parasite on the body social), and maintaining two homes (since when does anyone require two homes? is this the answer to reducing your carbon footprint?) is of course nonsensical. And an insult to one's better nature.

The book has two big themes (although the largest, which I shan't talk about, is Rosie Boycott herself): their struggle against a Tesco supermarket coming to Ilminster and setting up their farm. Her account of the Tesco episode provides plenty of ammunition for those like me who wish to sink the supermarkets. Luck would have it, for her that is, that Tesco also had a wholly dedicated supplier in the neighbouring town of Chard, which was closing its doors and relocating, thus giving Boycott a nice example of the blind capitalist power of supermarkets as purchasers. One could not fault her arguments and perhaps I shall recycle them to the burghers of Dartmouth. There was an essential mystery at the heart of her account which the curious reader would certainly like to have seen resolved. Her eloquent descriptions of public and private meetings with embattled members of the town council on the imposition of a one-way system in the central district (to better facilitate access to the forthcoming superstore) omitted any reference at all to the district council. Habitues of English local government will know that town councils are fatuous talking-shops with no power over planning or transport matters. So why does she tell us all this about the town council? One has an awful

suspicion that the whole thing is a journalistic construct with little significance to the real affairs of Ilminster and Chard.

The same might be said of her farm. She has plunged with precipitate haste into writing an account of an enterprise that, when she first put pen to paper, cannot have been more than twelve months-old. Her profit calculations, therefore, have zero interest because an integral part of the revenue-raising is the book itself, and the agricultural information is extremely difficult to use because it's so short-term. Even so, I would have to take issue with her mode of pig-raising and more especially her concept of profit from sale of pigs for meat. On my calculation she was running at a loss of £20 per head, but there are insufficient figures to be sure.

That said, and once you have lived through your hasty outrage, there are plenty of nice points in a book written by the middle classes for the middle classes. Her asides often carry much information. However, if she wants to benefit the planet – which seems to be her intention – then she is going to have to look somewhat more closely at her lifestyle. As indeed are the rest of us. Why didn't she just send £100,000 down to Ilminster and give it to some deserving rustic? Did she really have to import her cook all the way from Norfolk in order to cook pork for the village? If we mean what we say, we're all in for an awful shock.