



## Regional treats: *Cambridgeshire*

# Living the Good Life

**Clarissa Porter** discovers a surprisingly diverse county

I never imagined I would like Cambridgeshire. I have dream places in my head that I can picture in my mind, and imagine living there. But I'm pleased to report that after spending just one day travelling around the county my opinion has completely changed.

The universities have attracted a large amount of suburban development and commuters. There are parts of Cambridgeshire that seem to be composed of bungalows and boot sales, and offices that wouldn't be out of place in California. Not for nothing is the area south of Cambridge known as 'Silicon Fen'. But there are also miles of Fenland, and areas of quintessential rolling English countryside.

### Return to family roots

I began my day meeting a young couple who are demonstrating to us all how the future should be lived. Self-confessed 'techno-peasants' Simon and Jacqueline Sagers are quite literally living the good life on their smallholding, 'Guilden Gate', in Bassingbourne. They met at university and then for two years travelled the world ending up (in 1997) working in Hong Kong for a year. Simon in PR and Jaq in IT.

Simon's family farmed in Bassingbourne – the Sagers can trace their family back to the 1600s in the village – and Jaq and Simon were homesick to return. "The land is in your blood," says Simon, "There was no green in Hong Kong, we lived in a high rise block and from our window we could see a solitary tree planted in a concrete tub, 'There's the tree!' we'd shout to cheer ourselves up." Returning to Bassingbourne they asked Simon's dad if he'd like to sell them the land; it would keep it in the family and Simon's dad could retire. And so their great adventure began.

Living in a mobile home they battled with the planners trying to get permission to build their dream eco-friendly home on the site of old chicken houses. "We worked the smallholding, intending to be self-sufficient. You had to show you earned a living from the land in order to build a home on it. The planners weren't impressed that we earned less than the minimum agricultural



**Jaq and Simon Sagers, with Maddie and George.** Guilden Gate Smallholding is open to visitors

wage, but because we were self-sufficient we spent less and needed less!" Eventually the laws changed, they got their permission and Simon started to build the house. He did it all by himself in stages, seven days a week for nine years.

Now they have a light, bright and spacious modern eco-friendly home, complete with composting toilet! They collect rainwater in underground tanks, recycling dirty water to irrigate the land. They generate their own electricity with solar panels and a wind turbine, selling the excess to the Grid. There's no gas, a single wood burner heats the impressively insulated house. The windows are arranged for 'passive solar gain' as Jaq puts it. But it is hard work, and

Simon is always on the go. The day I visited he was tending to the beehives, but he also writes about efficient garden design, and about running a smallholding. He gives talks to colleges and schools about green technologies, and finds time to make woodland products like hazel hurdles, and take a course in hedge-laying. The couple gives very successful guided tours of the smallholding, and run an organic box scheme from May to December. Simon observes ironically that just because organic vegetables are more expensive, it isn't going to make them rich!

Once upon a time, every village in England had smallholdings run by self-reliant people like the Sagers, a way of life that Jaq and Simon think is likely to return when the oil runs out. But also a way of life made almost impossible by the weight of bureaucratic interference.

### Sandy and Black

Leaving the Sagers, inspired, and wishing I could be as self-sufficient; I headed for Isleham, near Ely and the Cambridgeshire Fens. At Cambria Farm I found Jane Wilton-Clark and her free-range, rare breed, and traditional pigs. Jane came here from Oxford six years ago, because at the time land was cheaper here. On her 30 acres she keeps 200 happy pigs, her horses and her show greyhounds and whippets.

"I worked for a big computer company, but I wanted to have somewhere for my dogs and horses," she says. Jane began with a livery business, adding sheep and cattle because they fitted in with the horses. "But sheep are very labour intensive, and in the soft peaty Fenland soil the fences didn't stay up! Someone suggested



**Jane Wilton-Clark** holding an Oxford Sandy & Black piglet