Self-sufficient living

Last Updated: 12:01am GMT 22/03/2008

If you were a mountaineer,

Simon Saggers and his family risked everything to realise their dream of turning their farm into a self-sufficient smallholding, complete with wildflower meadow, orchard, vegetable beds and bees. Now he plans to set up a village farm network. By Harriet Lane

Not a bad commute, all things considered. After breakfast, eaten at the table overlooking the orchard and the wildflower meadow, Simon Saggers laces up his boots in the utility room, says goodbye to his wife and children, steps outside into the sound of birdsong, and he is at work. Perhaps he will spend the morning in the sharp-smelling heat of the polytunnel lean-to, where he tends to the aubergines, peppers and a fine collection of tomato plants (Green Zebra, Pink Brandywine, Moneymaker) that shimmy, as sinuously as tiny burlesque dancers, along the lengths of blue string tethered between overhead beam and soil.

Perhaps he will spend it in the potting shed, where infant parsnip seedlings are thriving in improvised pots made from old loo rolls. Perhaps he will head up the soft, grassy path towards the vegetable beds, sheltered by hedgerows he planted a few years ago (now sturdy windbreaks of hawthorn and blackthorn, creamily threaded with Guelder rose and dotted with birds' nests), where he will administer to his brassicas, runner beans, French beans, potatoes, rhubarb and Jerusalem artichokes.

Beyond the vegetable garden, beyond the cobnuts and filberts, lies the coppice. An open field until Simon and his wife, Jacqueline, planted 2,000 knee-high whips of ash, hazel, oak and beech in 1999, it is now a sturdy baby wood, a source of firewood, timber for gates and hurdles, and a nest-egg for their children, George, six, and Maddie,

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four. There are plans to keep pigs there too, with an eye to sausages and bacon. As Saggers says, 'It is wonderful, walking up to the woodland, and remembering that first hard winter of planting.'

Simon Saggers working in the polytunnel

It all sounds jolly romantic, the idea of taking a little corner of East Anglia back in time and restoring it to its ancient status as a five-acre smallholding (albeit accessorised with 21st-century green technologies), supplying the needs of its inhabitants and the 25 local families who subscribe to Simon Saggers's box scheme. It looks gorgeous, too: the bees weaving to their hive, the laundry flapping from the line in the open-sided barn, the wildflower meadow illuminated by dazzling bursts of sunshine. But life on the Saggerses' smallholding is extraordinarily hard work.

Financially, things are tight ('There's no debate, it's definitely a tough existence in terms of the amount of money you can expect to earn from a smallholding,' Saggers says). Physically, it is full-on; there is not much time for lolling back and admiring the view. And Jacqueline worries that as she endlessly bottles and stews and Simon endlessly digs and plants, they are providing their 21st-century children with some rather retro role models. So, there are anxieties. But on the upside, Saggers says that in comparison to the business of getting the planners to accept their proposals for turning a few empty fields into a small organic farm, the matter of running the smallholding is simplicity itself. Nothing has been more difficult, nothing has demanded more time, money, effort and bloody-mindedness, than getting that official thumbs-up.

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Judging by the statistics, increasing numbers of Britons share the Saggerses' green dream. In 2002 the Smallholder and Garden Festival attracted 5,000 visitors; last year there were 25,000. According to the Horticultural Trades Association, recent years have seen a 31 per cent increase in sales of vegetable seeds to householders, while flower seed sales have dropped by 32 per cent over the same period. In the past decade, the nation's perceptions about food, about production methods and transportation, have shifted quite dramatically.

Yes, at one end of the scale 22 per cent of adults questioned in a recent survey did not know that bacon and sausages originate from farms, while 47 per cent did not know that farms produce porridge's main ingredient, but at the other an enlightenment of sorts is kicking in: people who 10 years ago were happy to buy their Kenyan green beans and Spanish strawberries at Sainsbury's are now subscribing to a vegetable box scheme or shopping for seasonal produce at local farmers' markets, while inching up the allotment waiting list.

Supermarket monopolies, air miles, food additives, childhood obesity and even plastic carrier bags are hot topics, feeding into broader, more global concerns about energy shortfalls and climate change. Most of us are troubled by these issues, and some of us might even lie awake at night worrying about them from time to time; but Simon and Jacqueline took things one step further. They decided these matters were of such importance that eco-friendly, organic self-sufficiency was the only answer.

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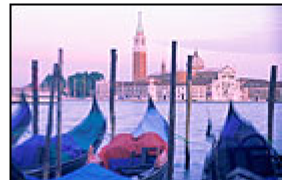

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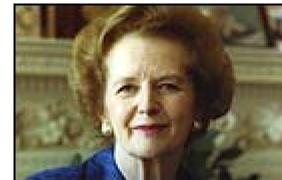

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Members of the Saggers family have lived at Guilden Gate in Bassingbourn, Cambridgeshire, since the 17th century. Simon grew up in the white farmhouse where his parents still live, a stone's throw from the home that he and Jacqueline have built. When he was a boy, his father kept 10,000 chickens in battery sheds on the site. 'The chicken houses didn't bother me particularly,' he says as he, Jacqueline and Maddie - George is at school - sit down for a lunch of homemade bread and hummous and a vibrant coleslaw made with just-picked cabbage mixed with beetroot, carrot, onion and apple from the winter store.

'It was life on a farm. You don't question what you grow up amongst. That was my landscape. The chicken houses were surrounded by the fields, the orchards at the top, and those were the bits that spoke of how this place was in Grandfather's time, when my dad was growing up, when it was a genuine mixed holding and they delivered milk round the village and sent fruit to London and had flocks of free-range chickens... a bit of everything.'

Potatoes are dug. The smallholding creates its own electricity and sells any surplus back to the National Grid

After the war, intensification was hailed as the solution to national food shortages - 'Everyone assumed it was the future' - and during the 1960s, 70s and 80s, Guilden Gate moved fast in the same direction (though Saggers's father, Peter, always grew his own vegetables and fruit). 'Over the past 50 years we've seen huge changes in the way the countryside runs, and it hasn't been for the best, as far as I'm concerned. That's partly my inspiration, to get back to the way it was when my grandfather ran it as a smallholding.'

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After studying geography at Manchester University and campaigning for the Green Party, Saggers, 39, joined the Charities Advisory Trust in London and, in 1995, met Jacqueline, 40, who was also working there. Together they spent two years backpacking, beginning in India - her mother is Indian - before visiting Thailand, Malaysia, New Zealand and Australia, where they stopped off for a working break on an organic eco-farm. This, along with John Seymour's The Complete Book of Self-Sufficiency, provided the inspiration for the way they wanted to live.

When they had first set off on their journey, the couple had had a hunch that they would not be returning to settle down in a city; by the time they ran out of money in Hong Kong, they knew that their future lay with the reinvention of Saggers's family farm in Cambridgeshire. Hong Kong, 'the ultimate city', seemed like a good place to raise some cash towards their rural dream. Jacqueline got a job with an American communications company; Saggers joined a PR firm. 'We lived in Discovery Bay,' he says, 'and I'd commute on the ferry, doing sketches for the smallholding, writing out plans. It was the only thing that kept me sane.'

'He aged about five years during that year,' Jacqueline agrees, laughing. 'You look at the pictures when we'd just arrived in Hong Kong, and he's young, freshfaced, and by the time we left he was haggard and grey-looking. But the plan was to save money big-time, for this.'

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Saggers had always sensed that this corner of Cambridgeshire held all the answers. 'Even though I couldn't wait to get away when I was 18, I always knew I wanted to come back. It's like a big anchor, really, in the middle of Guilden Gate. I went off, and it slowly drew me back in.' His father, who was coming up to retirement, agreed to sell them the land, though he was 'terrified' by their plans. 'It didn't seem safe to him,' Jacqueline says. 'It wasn't secure, or understandable, really.'

'Dad would always have preferred me to work in a bank, earning lots of money,' Saggers says. 'Edwina Currie finished him off in a few sentences,' he adds, referring to the salmonella debacle of 1988. 'He knew farming was a hard life.' But Peter Saggers was also alarmed that the couple planned to invest all their savings in the site without knowing for sure whether they would get planning permission to build on it.

Soon after returning to Britain in mid-1998 with £20,000, Simon and Jacqueline were married at Cambridge Register Office. The photographs of the small party afterwards - a budget do in the garden at Guilden Gate, the centrepiece of which was a wedding cake baked by Saggers's grandmother, decorated with meadow flowers sugared by Jacqueline - are a curious historical document. They show the site in transformation: the battery sheds have been taken down, and all that is left in the empty field are two huge concrete bases. 'We were very naive,' Saggers admits. 'We took down all this ugly factory infrastructure, huge bulk bins, chicken houses. And we thought the planners would think that was great because we were taking away something horrible and planning to replace it with a modest barn, a modest cottage, and on another blank open field we were going to put in 5,000 trees and hedgerows, an orchard, a wildflower meadow, vegetables, bring the bees in. And at the time the political rhetoric was all about local food, low-energy lifestyles...'

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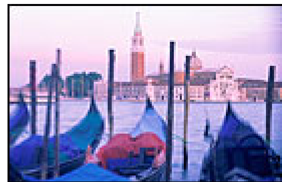

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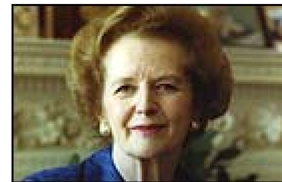

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'We thought they'd welcome us with open arms,' Jacqueline adds. 'We thought this could be their showcase.' Of course, the planners did not see it quite like that. Saggers says that the official response to his proposal was widespread narrowing of eyes and sucking of teeth. Now that the holding is up and running, the planners come round by the coachload and express their admiration. The contrast is funny, Saggers says - but not that funny. 'We've had a very long and painful experience with the planners. It has been quite scarring, very emotionally draining. I had always assumed that smallholdings were a fundamental part of the countryside; little did I know that setting one up was almost illegal. So we got stuck in the huge gulf between political rhetoric and the reality of planning. Local policies and national policies need to allow smallholdings back in the countryside. It would be wonderful if somehow we could find some way of making smallholdings around villages a reality again.' To that end, Saggers would like to set up a village farm network, a charity to bridge the gap between aspirant smallholders and planners, to ease others through the process.

Things might have gone more smoothly, they realised too late, if they had put in a planning application while the battery sheds were still standing. They finally received permission to erect a house on the plot three years ago, by which time Saggers, whose optimism possibly borders on recklessness, had already singlehandedly built the home in which he and Jacqueline were living with their two small children. 'To get the holding to where it is now has probably cost us £100,000, in stages, over the past nine years,' he says. 'I did the building myself and the only reason I've been able to do that is because I worked seven days a week on it. We risked everything. Six years with no security, no certainty we would be able to stay here. We'd staked everything on it, blood, sweat, tears - the lot.'

It is a simple and efficient building, a comfortable timber-framed house clad in black-painted larch and roofed with reclaimed tiles, with south-facing windows for hoovering up sunshine and warm-cell insulation so competent that the woodburning stove, which heats the interior, is only lit between October and March ('I do feel the cold, but this really is a very warm house,' Jacqueline says). The Spanish chestnut floorboards, like the oak used for doors and the built-in cupboards, were sourced from a local timber yard; even the ladder for the children's bunkbed was recycled, from an old playground climbing frame.

The smallholding meets its water requirements through rainwater harvest

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and a borehole. Tanks are heated by solar panels and there is a compost toilet (though the planners insisted on a conventional loo as well, much to the relief of Jacqueline's mother when she visits from Essex); greywater is recycled through straw and bark filters and a horizontal reed bed. And since erecting a 12m wind turbine halfway down the holding - its papery whistling turns into a low thrumming hum if the breeze picks up - the Saggers are now able to sell their excess electricity to the National Grid.

The Saggers's box scheme supplies local families with fresh seasonal produce between Easter and Christmas

'The holding was always intended to be something a family could manage, to cover its needs,' Saggers says. 'That was the guiding principle. And that's what we try to achieve not only through the veggie boxes but also through income substitution, putting in the renewable energies, trying to close the energy cycle, the water cycle on the holding. We're off mains water, we're off mains sewers, we generate more energy than we use, all of those things contribute to the holding's income, effectively.' As Jacqueline says, 'If you live lightly, you need less.'

So, how much do the Saggerses live on? Saggers reckons that in an average year, the vegetable box scheme, which runs from Easter to Christmas, brings in between £5,000 and £7,000. In low season, a weekly box costs about £12; in midsummer more than £30. 'If you use a national box scheme, it's so tired,' Jacqueline says. 'Yes, it's organic, and some of it is British, but none of it has been cut that day. That's why we'll always have a market. Customers arrive at 4pm to pick up, and Simon will have cut it all some time after nine that morning.' This week, subscribers will be getting chard, broccoli, mizuna, rocket, pak choi, cabbage, rhubarb, leeks and eggs, plus honey, onions and garlic from the store. During the winter, the coppice brings in some extra cash through sales of willow and hazel hurdles. In addition, Saggers has started to work as an eco-consultant and runs guided tours of Guilden Gate for gardeners and people interested in ecological living. Jacqueline works two days a week at Cambridge University, where she is a marketing officer in the department of engineering, and these additional bits of income go towards what they call '21st-century perks': a car which they use sparingly, treats for the children, train tickets to France once a year.

As Saggers says, 'We don't grow wellington boots. We do have to import a few things. The key concept is: what do you need to live on? It's about needs, not wants. We always set out to cover our needs, and the holding has been successful in doing that, but we don't

necessarily cover our wants. I might earn £150 a week; a jobbing builder would earn that in a day. And I have no problem with that, but there needs to be a rebalancing: food has to be priced differently. I've always looked at it in the very long term. When there isn't cheap oil any more, when we as a society are having to grow more of our own food and use less energy, when our expectations no longer include flying off on holiday, then society will start to be a bit closer to where the holding is. Often people think, "Oh, it must be a tough life," and there's no doubt that without Jacqueline working at the university or me doing the tours, it would be very, very tough.'

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The Litlington Gardening Club is booked in for a tour this afternoon. Saggers judged the produce show last autumn and now members want to see what he has to offer. As they disembark, busily swapping shoes for walking sticks, waterproofs and wellingtons, they look as if they might be rather hard to please, but by the time they are shown around the potting shed, they are starting to melt. A reverent, churchy hush falls as they file into the parchment-coloured warmth of the polytunnel. Once they have seen the lush productivity of the vegetable fields, admired the wildflower meadow (cowslips, ox-eye daisy, matweed, scabius and pyramidal orchid) and wandered through the orchard (apple, pear, plum, damson, quince, medlar, 'a good spread through the fruit season'), they are starting to whisper: 'How the hell does he do it all?' 'I see the benches here aren't for sitting on...' 'It's beautiful, isn't it?' 'When does he sleep?' 'The hedges alone are a fulltime job.' 'I must admit, I'm completely flabbergasted.'

By the end of the tour, Saggers and the holding have charmed them so completely that they are even asking to see the end result of the compost toilet. Reaching under the house, Saggers opens a small door and pulls out the compost box which is on standby, ready to go into use.

'Just like the lovely friable compost you'd get from a garden centre!' he says, raking his fingers through it. 'And it's all your own,' murmurs a lady in lilac wellies, admiringly. After a couple of hours, they reluctantly shed their wellies and waterproofs, and say their goodbyes. 'You've given us lots to think about,' someone calls out of a window as the cars proceed down the drive. As far as Saggers is concerned, this is probably not a bad start.

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