

Note re translation

Some words are difficult to translate in that English has many more words than does Italian and therefore a more subtle shade of meaning. I have used the English words which seem to be suggested by the context.

I have been delighted to do this translation in the hope that it will be pleasing to you and have also learnt some new English words. It seems to me that it is a very positive article of which you can be rightly proud. May I add my congratulations and wish you continued success in your admirable venture.

TECHNO-FARMERS

The eco-family Saggars and the lettuce which will save the planet

By Barbara Placido Photography by Emma Hardy

Translated by Richard Roberts

Photo captions:

Guilden Gate The Saggars family smallholding.

An ecological oasis of 5 acres (20 thousand sq.m.) where everything, from the roof-tiles to the wood from which the main building is made is either recycled or recyclable. Completely self-sufficient, the Saggars meet all their needs for water thanks to the rain and produce electricity by means of a wind turbine.

Their power is independent of the national electrical network and they sell any surplus electricity to the State

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“I don’t know if you feel the same”, wrote Michael Pollan in the *New York Times*, the guru of the environmental movement of America and author of *The Omnivore’s Dilemma* (Adelphi 2008) and *The Botany of Desire* (Saggiatore 2005), “but for me the most distressing moment on reading *An Inconvenient Truth* was not when Al Gore put forward the incontestable theory that climate change is putting the survival of the planet at risk. No, the darkest moment was at the end, when in the face of disaster, he asked us...to change our light bulbs. Now that did fill me with despair. The lack of proportion between the enormity of what Gore was describing and the futility of what he proposed was enough to make me lose all hope”.

Because, maintains Pollan, to change our light bulbs is not enough. Instead we must begin to “grow a bit of our own food- even if only a small amount”. Is this an indecent proposal? Not for the English.

These days, anyone who wanders through London, or Manchester, or any of the small towns in the English countryside, will find themselves surrounded by balconies, terraces and gardens rich with greenery. In the most unexpected of places they will come across allotments, areas provided by the State (today there are 330 thousand allotments in Great Britain) which the local authority rents out to those who will cultivate them. The city of London alone produces 16 thousand tons of produce a year from these allotments. And, according to statistics provided by the Association of the agricultural trade, the sales of flower seeds have fallen by 32% recently, whilst those of herb and vegetable seeds have risen by 31%. These days, England is full of amateur farmers.

It is “no longer the need to economise, as was the case fifty years ago. Rather, it is the desire to have fresh food and a different lifestyle” that is the motivation, explains Mr. Stokes, Secretary of the National Association of Parks and Allotments. Ever more aware of, and concerned by, the effects of pesticides and fertilizers on what we eat and therefore on health, both our own and of the land, the English people are protecting themselves by resorting to growing their own.

But, although there are lots of Sunday gardeners, there are not many people dedicated full-time to agriculture. There are not many of them, but they are determined, like Simon and Jacqueline Sagers. For them window boxes and allotments were not enough. Instead they dreamed of ‘Guilden Gate’, a smallholding of about 20,000 sq. m. cultivated organically. Not in the least part-timers, the Sagers like to describe themselves as *technopeasants*, modern farmers who can combine traditional know-how with modern technology. They also wanted to create an ecological oasis.

‘Guilden Gate’ (www.guildengate.co.uk) in the flat, green East Anglian countryside, in the village of Bassingbourn, about 15 miles south of Cambridge, is exactly that: a traditional farm yet at the same time an innovative model of agriculture and ecological architecture. The main building, an elegantly modern, unobtrusive structure is, as Simon explains “the fruit of years of research and study”. Here everything – from the wood and roof tiles of the main building to the castle-shaped beds of their children, George 6 and Maddie 4 – is either recycled or recyclable. The thermal insulation is impeccable, the elevation perfect (south-facing of course) to the extent that Jacqueline, who says she feels the cold, has to admit that the house, although only heated by a single stove, is truly warm.

Water needs are met by the rain, collected in three enormous underground cisterns from which Simon nonchalantly, despite the effort, extracts the water by means of a hand pump. Dirty water is used as fertiliser. Also, now that a tall wind turbine rises from out the ground in the middle of the meadow in front of the house, the Sagers are independent from the national electricity network (also selling any surplus electricity to the network). To complete the picture, no phytopharmacological products or chemical fertilisers are used of course, only organic fertiliser and crop rotation.

But although modern and innovative, ‘Guilden Gate’ also represents a link with tradition. The Sagers family live and work at the seventeenth century property. The house in which Simon, Jacqueline and their two children live today has been built where until some ten years ago Simon’s father kept 10 thousand chickens.

For Simon, therefore, creating Guilden Gate meant returning to a familiar place. Yet a place which has changed profoundly in the last fifty years. “When I was a child, there

were twenty or so smallholdings. Today it's just us. For most other people, it is a case of commuting between here and Cambridge or London". "After the war" he adds "intensive and conventional farming methods were encouraged here in England as an answer to all the problems". This ended up creating "entirely negative changes and rural communities are simply disappearing".

In the face of such a reality, armed with his ecological ideals, Simon (a member of the Green Party since leaving University) decided to create 'Guilden Gate' – "the material expression of my convictions". Simon always knew that he would return here in the end. "It's indeed a cliché" he reflects "but one has the land in one's blood. And it is quite true. As a boy, I couldn't wait to leave, but I always knew I would come back in the end".

At the age of eighteen, Simon did go away, first to University in Manchester, and then to London for work. There in 1995 he met Jacqueline, and together they travelled around Asia (India, Thailand, Malaysia, New Zealand and Australia) for two years.

On their return, their piece of land awaited them, but also numerous unexpected bureaucratic obstacles. Their creation of an ecological farm at 'Guilden Gate' became a veritable odyssey.

"The truth is that in England these days, to live and grow things on your own land has become practically illegal. There is nothing else which requires as much hassle – you need time, money and a shitload of determination to get official approval".

According to Simon, the problem "lies in the gulf between political rhetoric- all in favour of ecology and organic farming- and the bureaucracy. If the government, whether Labour or Conservative, had any real intention of encouraging the development of organic farming, they would not make things so complicated, and would make some concessions".

And he, an optimist by nature ("an optimism very akin to rashness, otherwise it would be difficult to bear the uncertainty inherent in agriculture") has come through the experience, bitter and disillusioned. "perhaps we were naïve", explains Jacqueline "we thought we would be welcomed with open arms. Basically, we wanted to create an organic farm out of the ruins of old chicken houses. We wanted to plant trees, tend vegetable patches where there was nothing". However, in the end, they won through and today 'Guilden Gate' is a model of ecological architecture and farming (Simon organises guided tours for groups or clubs who are interested in learning how to build a similar farm).

The fact remains that, quite apart from the bureaucracy, taking 'Guilden Gate' forward is exhausting. "From the economic viewpoint, things are still difficult" continues Simon. Isn't it paradoxical: organic produce is expensive, but those who produce it don't get rich. "To produce using ethical and ecological methods is costly. Food is expensive but we have got used to the idea that we can feed ourselves on the cheap. Even imported produce, which once upon a time was considered a luxury, to be used only on special occasions, have become everyday items. It is a mistaken way of thinking and living. Above all it is unsustainable, not only from the environmental point of view, but also economically".

There is nothing harsh nor particularly austere in their beliefs, nor in the Saggers' behaviour. To tell the truth, sat at the table in their elegant, cosy kitchen, music in the background, broadband permanently connected, the children just back from school and creeping inquisitively around, it does not even seem that this style of life (tiring, of course and uncertain, that too – but agriculture always was) brings with it enormous sacrifices.

“Is there anything you lack, anything you hanker after?” “No, there really isn’t anything we miss”, answers Jacqueline smiling, with certainty and sincerity.

“The fundamental question” adds Simon “is to manage to differentiate between needs and desires. It isn’t always easy. Our plan was to make ourselves self-sufficient in terms of our basic needs, in other words food, electricity and water”. Certainly there are so many things which are not totally necessary but which it isn’t necessary to give up. “For example, we don’t make our Wellington boots, we buy them” says Simon. But it is one thing to buy a pair of boots and quite another to feed yourself everyday with vegetables which, to arrive on your plate, have crossed a distance greater than the average family will travel in a year. Beans from Kenya, apples from Chile, tomatoes from South Africa.

“Even the vegetables grown here in East Anglia are sent to Scotland to be packaged and then sent back to the local supermarket around the corner”.

These useless miles, these unnecessary journeys, this unjustifiable waste, the unsustainable costs have become an integral part of our way of life. “Guilden Gate” wants to offer a different model. “When we were planning the farm” recalls Simon “we knew we wanted children. We have tried to build a place where they would be able to grow up in comfort, peacefully and which would be an inspiration for them. ‘Guilden Gate’ is also our moral testament”.

A generation ago, Simon’s father had wanted him to devote himself to anything but farming because it is too tiring, too risky. Today, Simon and Jacqueline say that they would be delighted if their children chose to remain at ‘Guilden Gate’.

However, the future generation remains an unknown. All bets are on. The hope is that they will not confine themselves to changing their light bulbs.