

TINKERS BUBBLE

by Michael Zair

Tinkers' Bubble takes its name from the springs and stream at the heart of our 40 acres of orchard, unmanaged pasture and three types of woodland. This happens to be located in the parish of Paddy Ashdown, former leader of the Liberal Democrat Party, and consequently attracted much media attention - with mixed blessings.

Our beginnings were hatched on individual - often temporary - allotments and at the active road protest at Twyford Down at Winchester during 1993. The core group of founders had to find the money, agree some basic principle about a permanent space and invite shareholders to become "partners in our garden". None wanted to be a career protester or lobbyist but rather the chance to work and live with less dependency on fossil fuels. Since the beginning of 1994, the primary purpose of the occupation has been to manage the land organically on a communal basis. To reintroduce the gentler methods once the mainstay of the nation. This home and garden idea is not seen as an investment in the conventional sense, more a "live for the day, work for the century" approach.

Managing this diverse smallholding was very challenging during those first years. We bought Samson, a shire horse who was unused to being worked for timber extraction, especially by people not themselves experienced in the job. In addition to the private dwellings, there was a need for communal facilities - kitchen, bathroom, guest accommodation, a meeting place, a tool shed. Hedges had to be laid and replanted, pruning to be done and, of course, skills to be shared.

Meanwhile we were under threat of eviction. Our planning application for temporary living structures, for twelve people who wished to live with minimal impact upon their surroundings, was refused by the local council. We appealed successfully, but the Inspector's ruling was then overturned by John Gummer, then Secretary of State for the Environment. The whole legal process, especially the appeals, took a great deal of time, energy and money. Overwhelming hostility, including highly coloured media descriptions, served to bind us more closely together. The appeals process delayed the eviction for a very long time, during which we were able to convince many of our serious intent. We received donations for our cause, in particular from one individual who believed it was a right for everyone to choose how they should live.

In January 1999, we finally convinced South Somerset District Council to grant us planning consent for twelve adults to live in temporary buildings for five years. We now have a Section 106 agreement which approves our residential siting, including an agreement on the maximum number of vehicles, and our management plan.

The following day, a BBC reporter asked "What's the ethos?" Our reply was that what we have won is the right live a simple life, to become less dependent on the centrally controlled basics such as food, fuel, water and shelter.

However, living simply can be very complicated. We find out how little we have been taught. Let's face it, how many schools examine the responsibilities involved in team sharing - looking

after tools, cleaning and maintenance, returning them when used? We've all a rucksack full of wasteful or inefficient habits brought from living with water on tap and energy at the switch.

We have monthly management meetings, just after each moon. We meet on Monday mornings to adjust the detail to the week's activities, domestic, van-sharing and two days' communal work. We also eat together in the evening. Eight to ten of us regularly live or work here now, and other supporting shareholders bring along friends to help with the endless project in progress.

Now, living is quite luxurious, with our older roundhouse connected to a covered kitchen with two ranges, a bath house and a woodburner, our hydraulic ram pumping water up to our individual dwellings and down via gardens and greenhouses to our recently constructed temporary barn. This haybale structure houses our portable steam engine which drives the timber saw bench. Our simple, innovative design has reduced the noise level, to the astonishment of the authorities who, two years ago, had put on a noise injunction. However, the injunction is still in place and we remain unable to include timber products from our woodlands in our case to prove our 'economic sustainability'.

After five years, we now operate a mini economy based on our orchards and gardens. In 1999 we supplied organic boxes, a scheme whereby folk could order a selection of seasonal organic produce, and we provided cider makers and wholesalers with Soil Association certified organic apples. It was great also to be at our first local Farmers' Market. Here our surplus vegetables had a local outlet, and our best windfall apples were the bargain that true market-goers seek.

It has been a long, hard journey. We have overcome many difficulties and obstacles and some still exist. But we have dug our ground and nurtured it. It is in those exciting times of surprise and delight in what we have produced that we find our earned reward.

For further information about planning an alternative community like Tinkers' Bubble, see "Low Impact Development" by Simon Fairlie. Published by Jon Carpenter, price £10 + p&p. Available from Chapter 7, 20 St Michael's Road, Yeovil BA21.

Further information on the community [<http://www.geocities.com/capitolhill/congress/7727/tinkers.htm>]