



A simple woodland life

In its 18 years, Tinker's Bubble in Somerset has often been examined in the media as an example of whether low impact living can really work or not. Despite all the attention, its residents continue to live simply and manage the woods, as resident Pedro Brace describes.

Tinker's Bubble is a low-impact community – we don't use fossil fuels (other than a few minor exceptions, such as occasional use of paraffin lamps); our homes are built using the timber from our land and recycled materials; we grow much of our own food and we try to live as sustainably as possible. I moved here two-and-a-half years ago and couldn't imagine going back to conventional modern living.

The piece of land is 40 acres near Yeovil, south Somerset. When it was purchased in 1994, it comprised 15 acres of Douglas fir plantation, mostly on fairly steep terrain; four acres of Douglas fir planted amongst mixed deciduous woodland; five acres of larch, much of it leaning and suffering from butt rot; 14 acres of orchards and two acres of mixed deciduous woodland, swamped with laurel.

One of our key principles remains to earn our living from the land.

The land was not up for sale at the time and the landowner was approached directly. One of the founders, Chris Black, put up much of the money and the rest came as interest-free loans from outside supporters and from people planning to live here. There was no legal contract for the loans – it was all based on trust.

The original members moved onto the land and built benders (temporary homes constructed with hazel) without planning permission. Before long, another of the founders, the author and campaigner Simon Fairlie, was fighting a five-year battle with the planning system, finally winning five years' temporary permission, which has since been renewed and extended for another ten years.

It is hard to define what the original vision for this intentional

community was, as it seems that most of the founders had their own. Simon Fairlie's vision was of a pre-industrialised farm, using horses and manual labour to work the land. He clearly had a strong influence on the community and one of our key principles remains to earn our living from the land.

Eighteen years on, everyone still has their own vision for the community, but they generally tend to be focused on environmental sustainability and working the land. Our cost of living is extremely low; as we grow much of our own food, produce our own alcohol and tend to live fairly simple lives (we seldom buy new possessions) – it costs just over £100 per month to live here.

We generate much of our shared income from selling our organic apple juice, made with apples grown in our orchards. The other main communal business is forestry and some people have other small businesses, such as growing high-value vegetables or furniture-making.



Forestry by hand

Our forest management is currently focused on thinning the Douglas fir, which was planted in the 1960s, and gradually replacing the larch with broadleaf trees.

Typically the diameter of the fir trees we are removing ranges from six to 18 inches. All of the work is done by hand. Trees over 12 inches are felled for saw logs using two-handed saws and felling axes. Snedding axes, billhooks and bow saws are used to remove brashings (small side branches), and two-handed saws to cross-cut into saw logs, usually between eight and 16 ft long.

The tree tops and smaller trees are generally used for construction within the community and occasionally we sell some surplus. These poles have been used to build the frames of most of our homes and many of the agricultural structures, such as chicken houses and field shelters. The brashings are used to light our fires and any other offcuts unsuitable for saw logs are used as firewood, either for domestic use or in the sawmill. We always leave some wood on the ground to rot and some dead standing trees for woodpeckers.

Facing page and above, left to right: The communal fire pit; the roundhouse; moving logs by draught horse; felling with a two-man saw. Photos: Tasha Stevens, David Spero, Chris Brace, Pedro Brace.

The fire pit is the heart of the community, where we often have breakfast or lunch together.

The saw logs are extracted from the woodland down to the sawmill using a draught horse and a logging arch. The sawmill is powered by a wood-fired steam engine, which drives a belt-driven saw bench with a four-foot circular saw. The offcuts from milling the timber are seasoned and then provide most of the fuel required to power the engine.

The timber is either sold or used on-site. Most of the larch is used as fence posts for stock fencing and the Douglas fir for a wide range of projects around the land and in our homes. Currently the focus is on building a timber-framed barn to replace the current temporary barn which houses the sawmill.

Since the community began, we have been gradually clearing the larch and replacing it with ash, sweet chestnut and cherry. The majority of the laurel has been removed and we have been restoring the neglected hazel stools. At some point in the near future, we plan to clear-fell some areas of Douglas fir and replant with more of the same. In the longer term, we plan to have 50% conifers, the rest broadleaf.

Communal living

Our lives are highly communal, more so than many other communities.

The fire pit is the heart of the community, where we often have breakfast or lunch together. We eat together every night, taking turns to cook. This is a very important aspect of our community, as it brings us all together every night, conserves wood, conserves our time, and means coming home from a hard day's work to a meal someone has slaved over all day.

Most of our fruit and vegetables are grown here and we have a cow for milk. We don't tend to eat much meat, but we get occasional road kill and we hunt grey squirrels and wood pigeons. The rest of our food, mostly grains and treats such as coffee, sugar and spices, are bought in from an ethical wholesaler.

Life here tends to be fairly physically demanding, but very varied and satisfying. In a typical week, I might spend a day working on the frame of the barn, a day in my garden tending vegetables, a day cooking for everyone, a day making cider, a day felling trees and another working in the sawmill. Whatever the season, we're certainly never short of work.

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