



BOOK EXTRACT

Chapter from
Deep Green Living
Sixth title in the low-cost GreenSpirit Book Series
Edited by Marian Van Eyk McCain

Sheep and Art: An Experiment in Connected Living

Helen Cockburn

I am writing this on a hot May afternoon. Insects of various descriptions are crawling on my arms and legs and scuttling across the pages of my notebook. The hawthorn hedges which surround me are a mass of fragrant white blossom; oak and ash trees are in full leaf; dandelions stand proud of fading cowslips and a waving crowd of puffballs jostles between buttercups, cow parsley and groundsel. A blue tit preens himself on the branch of an ash tree as a pair of swallows swoop and soar in the cornflower blue sky. This is Greenhaven, our home in northeast Suffolk where for the past two years we have been building an organic smallholding with ecology and creativity at its heart.

Our journey here began with a growing awareness that we needed to make changes in our lives. It's becoming a very familiar story. My husband was becoming increasingly dissatisfied with corporate life – especially after a round of redundancies during which he represented the interests of those employees considered surplus to requirements. In trying to negotiate these redundancies with dignity and fairness he found his personal values stretched to breaking point. We were also becoming more and more disillusioned with a monoculture which measures everything on an increasingly dubious scale of economic values and incredulous at the constant striving for economic growth regardless of the fact that the 'success' it signifies only magnifies the very inequalities and dissatisfactions it purports to dispel. A system which, as the playwright Edward Bond put it, "creates inequality with contrived wants".

Wendell Berry has written of this separation of people, places and products from their histories as being one of the primary needs of industrialism; a process of detachment which means that UK supermarkets now sell 80% of all the food we eat at home, supermarket delivery lorries account for 40% of lorry traffic on our roads, and we spend three times more on ready meals than any other country in Europe.

Another feature of this dislocation has been the reduction of sentient beings to mere commodities in a system of industrialised agriculture (surely an oxymoron?) which means that it is almost impossible for us otherwise unrepentant carnivores to square our consciences with current farming practice. So, refusing any longer to be identified solely as 'consumers' and lamenting this increasing disconnection between ourselves and the Earth we decided to stop being armchair critics and try to create an alternative – following Gandhi's philosophy of being the change you want to see.

We spent a year trying to decide what exactly this would mean: slowly building a vision of where we wanted to be; researching what was possible; devouring an entire library of books; visiting the Centre for Alternative Technology at Machynlleth, Wales, compiling endless lists... We wanted some land, certainly. But how much? And what could we afford? Staying where we were was out of the question – north Hertfordshire is a beautiful but expensive part of the country. We had gravitated east towards the Suffolk coast for several years, seduced by its haunted coastline of crumbling sand and glittering sea, sweeping skies and endless horizons, so making the decision to move here was easy. Eventually we were able to make a straight swap between our village house with its small back garden and Greenhaven, a three hundred year-old former blacksmith's and wheelwright's.

The house needed renovating but had the irresistible advantage of ten acres which had been organically cultivated for almost thirty years. By the time we moved in my husband had completed a part-time agricultural course and resigned from his job, retraining as a coach and therapist. Our aim at Greenhaven is to create a connected living and working environment in which the senses and imagination are stimulated.

The idea of the genius loci or spirit of place is very close to our hearts; an awareness of the powerful energies contained in every landscape, most commonly symbolised by the archetype of the Green Man. For us, the expression of this creative spirit is an essential part of forming a meaningful relationship with any locality. We feel a deep sense of stewardship for these ten acres, aware that whatever we do here will become an indelible part of its history, for better or worse. In a practical sense we have found that concentrated observation of our everyday environment has been our best teacher. This simple act of paying attention and taking notice of the minutiae of where we live, comparing it day by day and season by season, has helped us become a great deal more aware of our surroundings and our impact on them.

For example, our apple orchard contains nineteen varieties, including Lord Lambourne, Easter Orange, Norfolk Royal (still laden with crimson apples in the snow of late February), Newton Wonder, Egremont Russet, Merton Knave and our personal favourite, Ashmead Kernel. Each fruit is uniquely different in size, shape, colour, taste, smell and texture. We were keen not to take for granted our first abundant harvest (which produced excellent juice and cider) so we duly Wassailed the orchard with friends one cold, wet evening last January as a sign of our gratitude, hoping for an equally good crop this year. We splashed the tree roots with cider before consuming a glass or two of the heady concoction ourselves then crammed leftover Christmas cake into the heart of the bough. Traditionally this should have been followed by firing a shotgun over the branches but we agreed to substitute party poppers in order to prevent the premature demise of our Southdown sheep who were grazing innocently in an adjoining field.

In our first year we have grown potatoes, tomatoes, courgettes, cucumbers, peppers and aubergines and planted almost thirty trees – hawthorn, elder, birch, hazel, damson, dogwood, birch and mulberry. We have cleared and burnt debris from the massive old ditch (or moat, which once marked the boundary between farm and common land). Three new fields have been fenced and hedged with blackthorn, whitethorn and hawthorn, along with ash and oak saplings to plug gaps and protect us from the bitterly cold north-easterlies. One day we hope to have a polytunnel here and perhaps a small wind turbine. A large open field skirts our northern boundary, an everyday reminder of the kind of farming we don't want to echo here – oversprayed, overcultivated and oversized

By privileging science as our sole means of knowing, rather than as one method among many, we have neglected the imagination to such an extent that art is often regarded as just another commodity and reported almost exclusively in this context (the record price paid for a painting by Picasso and the destruction of Charles Saatchi's collection in a warehouse fire are just two recent examples). Art as a soulful activity, as a vital connector between mind and matter, is virtually ignored. Emily Dickinson said that Nature is "a haunted house, but art a house that wants to be haunted" yet as we continue to dismantle the house of Nature it is hardly surprising that the house of art has lost some of its magical atmosphere. But the phenomenal success of 'Sun', Olafur Eliasson's beautiful installation at Tate Modern, shows that there is a widespread hunger for art concerned with such meaning (despite the fact that the Tate's commentary makes it clear that any spiritual associations are to be regarded as incompatible with the work's 'exposed structure', as if by understanding the 'how' of something we necessarily negate the mystery of 'what').

At Greenhaven we plan to build into our landscape elements of contemplative stillness and surprise, including walking a maze of herbs along spiralling footpaths so that the air is filled with the scent of rosemary, thyme and oregano; sculptures and totems; assemblages of natural objects; trees dressed with fluttering ribbons carrying messages into the air, and, more conventionally, a small gallery attached to our framing workshop and studio.

A great inspiration for us has been Kettle's Yard in Cambridge, once the home of Jim Ede, a curator at the Tate Gallery, and his wife Helen. They filled their house with modern art while retaining all the qualities of a domestic space. Ede spoke of people being prevented from seeing art because of what he called the 'functional eye'; a way of seeing which insists on seeing 'correctly'. This is fine for judging the distance between, say, a teacup and a sugar bowl, for making adjustments in distance and direction but, as Ede so rightly said, 'in the arts none of this matters'. Art instead enables us to constantly re-imagine possibilities; it engages us with questions of meaning in energised form. But as 'doing' (producing, building, profiting) has become synonymous with living, 'being' (imagining, enjoying, connecting) has come to be identified with that most terrible of modern sins, inefficiency, and the reflection which is an integral part of the imaginative process interpreted as idleness. There seem fewer and fewer accessible secret places, both interior and exterior.

The kind of aimless wandering conducive to the imagination always takes place on the margins, in those liminal spaces where one thing shifts into something else, however briefly: dawn, dusk, the slow passage of one season into another, a walk along a field margin or through an orchard path flanked by hawthorn and apple blossom. At Greenhaven sheep and art co-exist as symbols of the earthy soul and the skyward spirit, with ourselves hovering at the intersection, weaving a way between the spirit as it soars and the soul as it descends, tethering each to the other, reconciling and balancing both, while remaining aware of their complementary yet distinctive natures. As John Updike said, it is the duty of art "to give the mundane its beautiful due".

The Green family lived here in the house which still bears their name for more than three hundred years. The last of them, Corporal Oakley Scott Green, scratched his name into the soft red brick beside the front window and was killed in France in October 1918. His father and grandfather bore the same name and a carved oak tree sprouting giant acorns adorns the fireplace in our sitting room. Alongside our twelve Southdowns we now have thirty chickens, a refurbished workshop which houses our framing business and gallery, a renovated wheelwright's shop soon to provide self-contained holiday accommodation, a coaching and therapy practice, and last but not least a house which has become a home. In a financial sense this project will be a risk for the foreseeable future – but in every other way we are immeasurably richer than before. We believe passionately in what we are doing here and our aim is to establish a not-for-profit trust so that we can share our experiences with others and provide a resource for exploring the ideas sketched out here. Creating Greenhaven is a process, an ongoing experiment in connected living and as such we have no sense of either 'success' or 'failure'. It is simply our way of weaving depth and meaning into life and will continue in some form or another for as long as we can make that happen. Slowly, quietly, the genius loci of Greenhaven is re-emerging.