



Chapter from
The Rising Water Project:
Real Stories of Flooding, Real Stories of Downshifting
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Compiled by Ian Mowl

Downshifting in Wales

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*Downshifting by Jane Faith including a picture of Jane.
Pictures supplied by Jane Faith.*

I moved 21 years ago from a terraced house in London to a small, crude farm labourer's cottage in a very rural part of West Wales with 1.5 acres of land, 4 miles from the nearest town, and then after 7 years to this eco-community, where I have lived for 13 years in a low-impact roundhouse, the last 7 being semi-retired from full community living.

Since leaving London I have not had a fridge or a washing machine. I have never missed a fridge: although I like to have stores of dried beans, porridge, sugar for jam-making etc and put a lot of thought into preserving apples, strings of onions, potatoes etc that we grow, I truly prefer to keep the spare packet of butter or bacon in our small clay pot on the earth floor. Fresh fish has to be eaten the same day. Yoghurt keeps fine for several. I really don't like it when I open a city fridge full of multiple choices of food, all seeming to me half dead in their state of suspended animation. So that bit of downshifting was easy for both me and my husband. We didn't have fridges when we were children either and don't like the noises they make. I hate the noise of washing machines too, but did miss one at first, when my children were still at home. They had to learn to wash their own clothes for themselves by hand, which was a bit hard on them, I now realise, along with all the other new changes. In fact, I think that would be my main warning to people contemplating downshifting – you should really think a lot and talk a lot about it with your children. It's probably not a good idea to move them when they've just started secondary school, as my younger daughter had, especially to a different country, which Wales actually is.

Before moving we went on a Permaculture course. I would strongly recommend this as it puts you in contact with a good network of people on a similar path and supports you mentally, practically and socially when you lose touch with why you're putting yourself outside the 'normal' way of life of a lot of people you meet who don't really understand.

As we get older, coppicing, sawing up and chopping all the wood we need with double handed saws – we do not use chainsaws to break into the tranquillity – not to mention moving logs about, on often muddy paths, becomes more tiring for us, but still preferable to doing indoor work to pay for fuel. Having wood fires seems an essential for life now, and not seeing flames a serious deprivation. The smaller your house the easier to heat (and less space to need cleaning). I am happy not to have gas central heating with boilers turning themselves on and off, vents humming etc.

We do have running hot water, from the back boiler on the woodstove, and could have under floor or central heating from one too if we wanted. But we don't have any gas, oil or electricity bills. Hooray! Just saw blades to buy and tools to keep them sharp.

We have come to enjoy the seasonal variations of electric power – on short winter days there's no wind or sun, we have to go easy on the 'lecky': only watch half a DVD film on the computer or there's none left for reading in bed.

LED lights are great especially now that they come in warm colours, we can get many more hours of light now. But some candlelit nights still occur, and are enjoyable – as well as giving us extra sleep.

Even though we live quite a low-impact way I still often feel quite upset by being part of our awful human over consumption of nature, using packaging, metals, especially aluminium: which I want everyone to know we must stop using to stop consuming the soil of indigenous people in Orissa. When I first moved to Wales I was more hardcore and would rarely go in the car to events. We sold it and got a milk float, which was fun, but very limiting, and we became dependent on others for lifts. Now we drive a bit more, as part of a society that works like that, but expecting, hoping, that the peak oil price rises will gradually and soon change this way of life that we are used to. I also had a phase of only cooking barley instead of rice, split peas not lentils, as they grow in the UK, but have slid back now.

For me downshifting was right down – to no bills, no mortgage, just council tax and a car to sustain with money. This meant time to grow veg and cut wood, and less time needed to earn money and doing things I enjoy that earn less money. More time to think, to wander in nature, more freedom. It's definitely the right exchange for me. But most importantly, it just feels right, feels natural. All the people that I know who live this way do not seem to hanker for more 'comforts'. Some of my neighbours have lived happily for years with even less than we have, no electricity for instance, so no artificial music or computer, only singing and acoustic instruments, no inside taps or bath, only outside hot tub. So we live a high-tech life by comparison. Sometimes I need to retreat from it to my den where there is no silent hum of batteries or water waiting to escape from taps, just total peace – except when they're cutting silage into the night on the farm across the valley, tractors thundering on with great headlights beaming or using chainsaws at dusk in their woods! Or our other low impact neighbours are having a big party band outside with microphones fed by their big efficient windmill!

There are many ways of downshifting. Most teenagers aren't that into it – they have other agendas for the moment. Maybe while they're still with you it's best to just have downshift holidays, for them to experience simplicity, but younger ones can adapt, I think, pretty well. The only other problem that we have with this way of life is having relations to stay. We would love family to come, but can't provide facilities that they would take as basic – indoor toilets, separate bathroom, mud-free paths and it is a real pity that they don't come more often for longer, as there is so much nature here to enjoy.

One of the funny things is when salesmen on the phone try to sell me things they think I might need like house insurance and I try to explain. Another one is how visitors from 'normality' always assume we must be very cold in winter in our 1-room wooden house when, in fact, we are warmer than big stone houses.

When we meet up with friends we chat about ecobuildings, roof materials, wood-gasification stoves and sources of second hand windows rather than what's on telly.

I love going to music and dance camps in the summer but it is so hard to leave our beautiful corner of nature and especially all my vegetable seedlings to be cared for by someone else. Leaving my garden is like leaving my family. It's great once I get there – much more nourishing than flying abroad for a holiday.

It was easier to go away when we were part of a community, as responsibility for veg-growing, goat milking etc was shared and no-one was indispensable. I recommend those going into any type of farming to go as a group so that you are not tied to the farm.