

Dedham Vale Society

Article : The Cottager



In 1970 when we first moved to our cottage we were the newcomers. There had been no deliberate intention on our part to move into the Vale, rather to buy a property which required work and a plot large enough to grow vegetables.

The renowned John Seymour was waxing lyrical at the time about self-sufficiency and the advantages of "growing your own"; Tom and Barbara were about to participate in "The Good Life" and we were enthusiastically embracing all aspects of life in the country. Many of our neighbours had flourishing gardens which provided them with almost year round sustenance growing vegetables and raising a variety of animals which included geese, chickens, rabbits, ducks, ferrets and the occasional goat.

We were anxious to tame the tussocky grass, nettlebeds and blackthorn thickets which covered the two thirds of an acre at the back of the house. Organic principles governed our ideas and I wrote to the Soil Association for their opinion about the best approach. Their advice was to dig the whole area and not to use weed-killers. I knew they were right but I hadn't the time to do it by hand remembering how long it had taken my father to dig the tarmac-covered playground attached to the old school he and my mother bought in 1945. He dug the plot four spits deep and as a result it became extraordinarily productive. So I bought a very old and very large cultivator together with a plough and a set of discs. I found that I could use it best by standing on the discs whilst attempting to control the machine through the two very long handles which projected rearwards from the engine. Thus I careered around the garden, most of which is sloped towards the stream at the bottom, as if I were participating in a chariot race, breaking-up the clods into ever-smaller lumps. Eventually a large enough area had been cleared to enable me to begin planting, but not before I had wheeled well over one hundred barrow-loads of muck up the slope. We did manage to harvest a certain amount of produce in our first year but the pigeons and rabbits put up some stiff competition!

Advice I had read in a pre-war small-holder's book recommended an area the size of an allotment would be required in order to provide year-round vegetables and fruit. The second and third seasons were better after digging-in a rabbit-proof fence. We planted a large strawberry bed, three rows of raspberries, apples, plums and pears but soon found that birds liked to share the bounty! We even joined a local self-sufficiency group which met monthly in each other's homes to discuss wood-burning cookers and to barter plants and vegetables saving items which would have been rejected by any other self-respecting gardener, but marvelled-at by the enthusiastic "pioneers"!



Arthur

Cycling to work each day I passed a vegetable plot which matched anything I had ever emulated and through the season I would watch its owner, Mr Fisher, harvesting enormous crops of perfect produce. Another of our neighbours who lived in a cottage just up the hill from us and which had been occupied by his forebears for many years, also knew how to grow things. Arthur, it turned out, was completely self-sufficient, but this was no pretension, this was the real thing. He grew his own food-crops, snared, trapped or shot his own meat, caught fish from his trawler on the river at Manningtree or Pin-Mill, made his own beer and wine and took a walk each day to collect fallen timber for the fire. He was also a first-rate cook.

The Emperor's new clothes were rapidly becoming all too transparent! Meanwhile in the Press it was reported that John Seymour's wife had had enough; it had been revealed that it was she who dug the garden, whilst he merely wrote about it.

Our flirtation with the adherents to self-sufficiency quickly ended once we had realised that our neighbours and their ancestors had been practising the craft extremely successfully for generations. Inspired by Arthur, we became ever more resourceful and Arthur regularly brought us rabbits, herring, dabs and occasionally pigeons, the meat ready for cooking and the fish perfectly filleted. Twenty-five years ago, when eels were plentiful, he fished them commercially, storing them in a perforated wooden box in the stream beside our garden. This practice upset our eldest daughter who at primary school age was perhaps over-sensitive to the ways of the country-dweller. But Arthur struck a bargain with her; he had some eels in a bucket ready for placing in the box and he told her that if she could pick one out with her hands, she could release it in the stream. But, of course, they proved far too slippery and Arthur knew that his catch was safe.

His cottage was typical of the Essex/Suffolk border with timber-frame, thatched roof, rendered finish and diminutive windows. Little had altered since the upper floor had been inserted together with the massive chimney in the late 1500s, but surprisingly, Arthur didn't like it, and could not wait to sell it. Eventually he bought a bungalow, deciding at the same time, that he had finished with fishing, shooting and gardening; a swinging seat on a patch of grass surrounded by concrete was the way ahead!



The Cottage

But to misquote an old saying, “The man can be removed from the country, but the country can’t be removed from the man.” Before long Arthur bought a small fishing-boat and began trawling again. Next came a new shot-gun and finally he rented not just one allotment, but four, cultivating all of them with the help of his wife. He still visits us with gifts of fresh fish and manages to fill a bank of freezers in his garage with produce; no flown-in Kenyan beans for him.

Arthur is one of a fast-disappearing breed of men but a few remain along the valley some still living in their cottages, having been in their families for generations. But for how much longer? I fear that time is up and we are the last to see a way of life which has existed for hundreds of years. The true cottager will soon be extinct.



The ‘Trusty’ cultivator I broke up the clods with

We still continue to grow as much as we can, my wife continues making bread and beer, preserving vegetables and fruit for the winter months and collecting eggs from the flock we started in 1970 after picking-up on Colchester by-pass two hens and a cockerel which had literally fallen off a lorry!

Paul Gallifant