



# Fields of dreams

A rent-a-cow scheme, an Alpine tractor and an ancient seed-scattering contraption... **Peter Marren** visits the Gloucestershire village where innovation helps time stand still. Photographs by **Donald MacLellan**

**S**T BRIAVELS Common in the Wye Valley of Gloucestershire is not, as you might expect, open land. It is, rather, a loose, higgledy-piggledy settlement of modest homes varying from tiny stone-built cottages and brick bungalows to more substantial houses. There is no centre, and the houses are linked by a network of narrow lanes running between hedges. During the foot-and-mouth epidemic of 2001, a farmer applied for permission to move his cows across one of these lanes. The paperwork, which was sent by fax, measured eight feet in length - longer, in fact, than the distance travelled by the cows. This was very thorough paperwork and these are very narrow lanes. They are one reason why no one around here owns a combine harvester.

The other reason is that hardly anyone owns enough land. Nearly every property in St Briavels Common includes a

couple of tiny fields of no more than an acre or three. From the air, the whole place looks like a jigsaw puzzle, an intricate mesh of parceled land in which every postage-stamp field has a different shape. On the ground, what strikes you right away is that many fields are bounded "bowered in" is the vivid local expression by big trees: oaks, beeches and the scarce small-leaved lime. Some trees have been incorporated into walls and, since trees are of course living, growing things, this means they eventually knock down the walls. If you come at the right time of year, you also find fields unfashionably full of flowers, the flowers of this former common, such as ox-eye daisies and spotted orchids, with glorious drifts of bluebells spreading in from the shade.

The residents of St Briavels Common are understandably proud of the place and want to maintain its beauty and



## PASTURES OLD

**Above: without the familiar intrusions of modern farming, St Briavels Common resembles a scene from centuries past.**

**Above left: evidence of the village's ground-breaking, cud-chewing, rent-a-cow scheme**

character. But natural beauty does not come ready-made. If the fields are not farmed, bracken and brambles rush in, and the colour drains out. But if they are “over-farmed” with fertilisers, underdrainage and fewer walls, the result is the same: boring fields, no flowers. What is needed is, in the words of one local commoner and a former woodland scientist, George Peterken, “moderate usage”. Unfortunately, modern farming methods do not, in general, favour moderation. To make money through farming, you either farm hard to squeeze every penny of profit from the soil, or you decide not to bother. Moderate usage is not an easy balance to strike. That’s why Peterken and his fellow commoners have set up a scheme to manage the habitat - and it involves a bizarre tractor, an antique contraption called “the fiddle” and a rent-a-cow scheme.

But what created this strange landscape in the first place? Paradoxically, it was not moderate usage so much as blatant illegality. The tiny fields and flowery meadows were not created not by some grand squire with a Capability Brown at his side but by those most reviled of rural dwellers, illegal squatters. The landless poor who moved in on St Briavels Common were the 19th-century equivalent of today’s travellers. According to local historian Austyn Williams, most of them lived locally. They were in desperate need of a patch of land to call their own, and finding a vast wooded common on their tattered doorsteps, they walked in and took it. Simple cottages and barns sprang up among the cleared and felled plots. Stone was plentiful, and what they did not need for buildings they piled into encircling walls. Within perhaps 20

years the common turned from wild rocky woodland to what might have looked like a giant allotment. To begin with, the local authorities tried to enforce the law by pulling down many an encroacher’s fence and barn. But, like today’s travellers, the squatters had a powerful sense of solidarity. As their numbers grew, they threatened anyone in authority who tried to dislodge them. Eventually the authorities gave up. The illegal occupiers were given “negative leave” to settle; that is, while they were refused legal freehold rights, the attempts to force them off were abandoned.

Williams has unearthed a report from 1805, in which a sympathetic official noted that the people on the common had spent the prime of their days taking in and improving “the waste lands”. “To bear too hard on their industry would be cruel and impolitic,” he concluded, “cruel to take from them the labour of so many years, and impolitic to drive them to extremes and on to the Parish.” The squatters were, after all, acting in sympathy with the times. Everywhere in England in these land-hungry years, commons were being fenced and divided up, generally at the expense of the poor who had used them for grazing. The difference at St Briavels was that it was the poor, and not the landlord, who had seized the land. And, once they were established, possession became nine-tenths of the law.

In time, the squatters’ shanties were replaced by brick bungalows and more substantial dwellings dignified with names like *Sylvan House* and *Apple Acre*. In some cases their



## COMMON GROUND

Clockwise from top left: fields in bloom; the village's shared tractor; John Childs' farm; Keith Orchard's orchard

humble origins are betrayed by their lack of foundations. George Peterken found he could dig under the original wall of his house with a garden spade. But since there was no planned settlement, no village square or green, St Briavels remained true to its nonconformist origin - not a village set in fields but fields set with houses. There are no roads, no streetlights or pavements, but only the original lanes, as winding and narrow as woodland streams.

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The unique local custom - 'cheese throwing' - symbolises a link between community and land

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Such places tend to retain a powerful sense of community. The author Flora Klickmann found all the rural life she needed for her stories within a stone's throw of her rented cottage on the common. Her *Flower Patch* books, written before and after the Second World War, once made St Briavels Common as well-known as Ambridge. One of the ceremonies Klickmann described was the unique local custom of cheese-throwing. For at least 300 years, the Creswick family, dubbed the kings of the common, have presided. Each year, on Whit Sunday, they chop up bread and cheese and throw the pieces to the crowd waiting by the village pond just outside the walls of St Briavels Castle.

Those who manage to catch a lump have the right to take what wood they can carry from the common. Those cunning enough to bring umbrellas or nets also get a free lunch out of it.

The ceremony is not just a rather silly country game. By tradition the "dole" of cheese was a way of reconciling common rights with a limited and valued commodity: useable wood. Even today, a few people exercise their cheese-won rights by collecting pea sticks from the wood. Of course it was, and still is, also an occasion for merriment. Once the food was flung like confetti from the gallery of the church. Unfortunately the congregation started using it to pelt an unpopular curate, and the ceremony had to be moved first to the yard and later to the adjoining road. The continuance of the custom symbolises the long relationship between the community and the land. It asserts, in its quaint Hardyesque way, the principles of commoning: a communal use of land, a help-thy-neighbour approach and an agreed balance of exploitation and conservation.

The reason the commoners of St Briavels continue to hurl and catch the cheeses may explain why they are equally keen to co-operate over saving the precious flower-rich fields and meadows. Today, many of the commoners are incomers and, at least compared with their squatter predecessors, well-off. From jobs in industry, teaching and government institutions, they have made enough money to become, in retirement, what Peterken calls "amateur landowners". Few would suffer financially if their land simply went to waste. But most, if not all, prefer well-maintained flowery fields and pleasant surroundings to a jungle of bramble and coarse grass.

The project was started in 2001 to find a way of preserving

the pretty but, in national terms, unexceptional fields. Using his professional knowledge as an ecologist, Peterken and several of his fellow commoners set up the Parish Grasslands Project. The idea is, in his words, “to raise interest in, and knowledge about, the grasslands on the former common, and to offer help and advice on how to manage it”. Peterken is an expert on the management of natural habitats. His neighbour, John Childs, is a farmer specialising in pedigree breeds of cattle, sheep and pigs. Another neighbour, Peter Chard, owns some particularly beautiful fields grazed by two donkeys borrowed from a local horse sanctuary. The happily named Keith Orchard has planted his fields with apple trees, and sells delicious home-brewed cider and honey. As neighbours and friends with a broadly similar outlook on life, they promised to make a good team. One of the things they did was to buy a tractor. No normal tractor could negotiate the common’s winding lanes, let alone cope with its gradients and narrow gateways. The team used a successful Lottery bid to buy a Vithar 700 AR, a centrally articulated machine normally used to weed between rows of vines in the Italian Alps. With its full set of accessories, the Vithar can cut and bale hay, clear brambles and bracken, and cruise happily through tall grass in the tiniest field. It is available to anyone within the scheme. Farmer Childs normally operates it, but the tractor is communally owned.

Meanwhile they have also dusted down and oiled up the fiddle. Owned by the veteran commoner Stan Scrivens, this is a machine of antediluvian age used in times gone by to renew the meadows by scattering seed on to the fields. The fiddle operated like a bow on a fiddle-string to rotate a perforated drum containing the seed. Hardly used in agriculture since 1940, it was an effective way of mechanically strewing barn sweepings on to fields. Walking behind it, working on the fiddle, you might say, a small field could be sown in an hour. Another idea is John Childs’ rent-a-cow scheme. While nearly all the commoners have a grass field, not many have their own livestock. The idea is to rent out a cow or two to anyone who owns a field and needs an animal to graze it. Childs would oversee the animals. And these are not just any old cows but ancient breeds ideal for rough natural grassland. The happy field owner would not only be saved the trouble of mowing the

## ROCK STAR

George Peterken the man leading a rural revolution in this area of great natural beauty



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Real life is more like ‘The Archers’ - people muddling along and sharing experiences

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supervision. It amounts to something of a social experiment as well as a conservation project. Entry into the project is purely voluntary. Aspiration must come from within. What the project offers is pooled experience, an exchange of ideas and tips and practical help. Clearly it is also reinforcing the existing sense of pride and common identity.

So far some 70 people have entered the scheme, and meetings in the local hall or community shop are guaranteed a large and enthusiastic turn-out. The project’s aims and ideas have spread to the other, Welsh, side of the valley where suitable holdings are more scattered but share the same problems of moderate maintenance with limited means.

There are differences, however. One of the faintly seditious aims of the Monmouthshire, Meadows Group is to replace cultivated daffodils on roadsides and other public places with wild ones. Quiet soundings have shown that most valley dwellers are sick of blowsy yellow blooms that flop like spent balloons at the first sign of rain. Local sympathies are strongly in favour of the paler, perkier and infinitely more evocative wild daffodil. A quiet revolution seems to be gathering in the bulb world.

Government likes to give the impression that rural landscapes, beautiful or otherwise, are created by planning and economic perks. Real life is surely more like *The Archers* - people muddling along, swapping ideas and sharing experiences, acting very much, in fact, as they always have. Although the lives of today’s commoners are very different from their squatter forbears, they see the same flowers, farm the same fields, and possess the same sturdy spirit of independence and community. Perhaps that is how the land should be managed — not by the edicts of government and planning authorities but by local people, conscious of who they are and what they stand for.

grass but be able to gaze from their kitchen window at magnificent Gloucester or ‘White Park cattle.

The project is supported by Defra’s Farm Stewardship Schemes, of which 15 are currently up-and-running within the Parish. They pay some of the costs of fencing and take the financial edge off the costs of keeping the fields going. However, the aim is to work together as a community, without designations, project officers and outside

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