

EVICITION UPDATE

SIMON FAIRLIE explains what has been happening at Monkton Wyld Court, where *The Land* had its headquarters for 13 years prior to being forced to leave.

It has not been a good year for hippy communities. Brithdir Mawr has been struggling to come to an arrangement with its owner who wants to sell up (see page 66). The Zigzag building in Glastonbury, whose progress we have been covering in *The Land* for over 15 years, has lost its enforcement appeal after a five day public enquiry (see page 63). But for devoted readers of *The Land* magazine, the destruction of the community at Monkton Wyld Court in Dorset may be of most concern, since that is where our magazine's headquarters were based for the last 14 years, and we now have to find a new home.

In issue 33, we described how Gill Barron and myself, two key editors and administrators of *The Land*, were ordered to leave Monkton Wyld, where we had been living for 13 years, by incoming trustees parachuted onto the board by departing trustees in January 2023. The new trustees relied upon an investigation into a complaint against Gill, myself, and long term trustee Jyoti Fernandes from a recent volunteer, Stephen Williams, alleging bullying and intimidation. The investigation and report were carried out by KM, an HR consultant.

Since Summer 2023:

- Another five residents who objected to the trustees' approach have been ordered to leave, and four volunteer workers have resigned.
- The walled vegetable garden has been ordered to lapse production and is now a mass of weeds, randomly strewn plastic and a half-hearted attempt by the trustees to cultivate a few token veg.
- The microdairy, which has been functioning almost continuously since 1943 (and was probably the oldest of its kind in the UK) has been closed down and brambles, bracken and rushes are already invading.
- Stephen Williams, the original complainant, is now site manager with sole access to the office and computers that were formerly accessible to the whole community.
- The Workers' Co-operative that had operational charge of the land and buildings has been "dissolved" by the trustees in breach of the contract between the Co-op and the trustees.
- A small workforce of blow-ins (in a different context they would be called blacklegs or scabs) have been engaged to keep the place ticking over.
- The new trustees have changed the articles of association of the Charity, pasting in those of a London CIC of which one of the trustees, Laura Guest, is a director. The objects of the

charity – formerly sustainable education and preserving the listed buildings – have been expanded to include the following: "to promote ... any profession, and to promote any social, political or sporting activity", arguably allowing the charity's assets to be used for anything from arms trading to a brothel.

- The trustees have repeatedly called in the police and bailiffs to investigate activities carried out by the last remaining community members – for example the alleged theft of dirty apple-juice bottles. They prosecuted Jon Hill, who has been helping me with the farm, for trespass, though they eventually abandoned the action after spending over £11,000, presumably of the charity's funds, on legal costs. I was arrested in November, detained and charged with taking the community car without consent (TWOC), even though in September I had forked out £550 of my own money to get the car (valued at £500-£700) through its MOT. I'm due to be tried for the offence on 9 August.

- The Crown Prosecution Service evidence in my TWOC case states: "*Mr WILLIAMS was employed by the charity to act as a "Whistle Blower" as the charity had received ongoing issues such as Harassment and Thefts which it was believed that Mr FAIRLIE was responsible for. Mr WILLIAMS was brought in to try to get to the bottom of the issues.*"



Our response has been:

- Four of the seven members ordered to leave by the trustees have left. In July 2023 Gill moved back to her old haunts in Cumbria, taking with her *The Land* magazine's office and stock for safe keeping. She now administers its distribution from there.
- Three community residents – Jasmine Hills the head gardener, Jon Hill and myself – stayed on and challenged the eviction in an attempt to prevent the trustees eviscerating the community.
- In November we submitted a 43 page formal complaint to the Charity Commission, describing in detail the destructive actions taken by the trustees, and followed this up with further evidence of malfeasance. The Commission gave the trustees a rap on the knuckles for not consulting them first about the change of the charity's objects, but refused to investigate.
- We also lodged a complaint with the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, about the investigation carried out by KM. (Incidentally, the first HR consultant approached by the Trustees had turned the job down flat.) They responded



Monkton Wyld Court in happier times. Community members drink to the health of one of our number in our licensed pub, the Reluctant Volunteer (also known as The Thirst After Righteousness). The pub has now closed and its license has lapsed.

that she should NOT have investigated the complaint from Williams made under the “whistleblowing” procedure laid down in the Public Interest Disclosure Act, which had meant that Gill and I had had no opportunity to read or challenge any of the accusations. (Despite the serious consequences that would follow these allegations, KM never bothered to meet with the people involved so as to form an independent assessment of their characters, but took accusations as facts.) They did not investigate the evidence we provided that KM had misreported the statements of witnesses, whose names she had incompetently redacted. She too got a mild rap on the knuckles.

Pastures New

The Law and the Establishment are not on our side, so we have little choice but to leave. That’s easier said than done when you have a small farm with cows, pigs and veg production to move, plus a scythe retail business that helps to keep the farm and *The Land* magazine solvent.

Jon, Jasmine and I have pooled our resources and acquired some land in Devon, with eight acres of pasture, plus hazel coppice and an abandoned quarry. The land was affordable since it was unattractive to the horsey brigade on account of the vast quantity of ragwort in the fields. Since there are no buildings on the land we are in for another planning battle, not something I envisaged having to do in my dotage.

We are therefore currently engaged in the business of moving some 50 or so trailer loads of livestock, farm machinery, sheds, dairy equipment, building materials, scythes, books and personal effects over to the new site 45 miles away, while at the same time constructing makeshift living accommodation and infrastructure, getting the land shipshape for animals and vegetable growing, and pulling out all the ragwort.

Contesting eviction, I have found, is a full-time occupation, and moving an entire farm doubly so. I have had little time to devote to *The Land* magazine, and am sorry that we could not get an issue out last winter. (Readers may be aware that I am usually lead editor for the Winter issue, while the Summer one is led by Mike Hannis.) I am extremely grateful to my co-editors for keeping the ship afloat, and especially to Gill for continuing to handle our distribution throughout these upheavals. I hope that when we are fully installed on our new land, normal service can be resumed.

More information at www.monktonwyldcourtcase.co.uk, including a preview of *Wyld*, a film by Solveig Herzum documenting the early stages of the eviction process, which is due for release soon.



ON LETTING GO OF A GARDEN

GILL BARRON says a glad goodbye to Monkton Wyld.

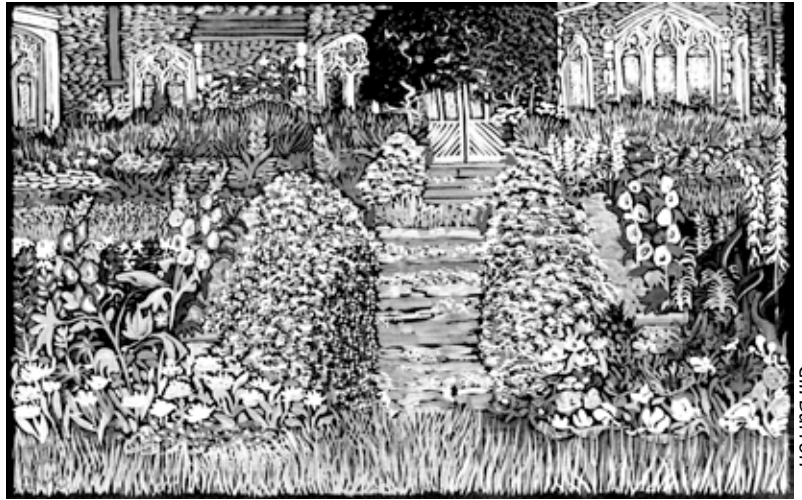
Elizabeth Bishop's great poem, *One Art*, begins
*The art of losing isn't hard to master
So many things seem filled with the intent
To be lost that their loss is no disaster ...*

How many gardens have come and gone in my life? Hopeful plots hacked out on canal-banks or in abandoned quarries, a desolate moorland slope with two-foot-deep beds of pure muck where the leeks grew taller than the children. All were hard work, and none of them were mine. Always for food, never for fun. Then, in my sixtieth year, I came to a place so neglected I knew I could do anything I wanted, and no-one would bother to stop me.

For decades, Monkton Wyld Court had been a transient home to countless hippies; most, it appeared, more fond of Weed than weeding. Brambles, thistles, hogweed and burdocks swarmed around the pseudo-Gothic buildings, and roosting in the shrubbery were the carcasses of several caravans. Between the barn-sized woodshed and the lane, a thicket of stout laurels sprouted through old school bedsteads, smashed cast-iron bathtubs, and mounds of putrefying nylon carpet. Needing to be seen to be doing something useful, I got stuck in. Where angels fear to tread, indeed.

Let someone else grow the veg. (They did). I would go for beauty over utility. I would, at long last, just grow flowers. Years of arduous digging and creaking knees followed. Where hogweed once flourished, triangles of earth appeared. Bermuda triangles, soon lost again under rampant, prickly greenery. One such I called the Porridge Patch, attempting to grow neolithic naked oats for the communal breakfast. This was at a time when "sustainable living" seemed an achievable aim, and the Cook knitted her own dishcloths from string. While the farm, once equally derelict, became more verdant and productive every year, fired by the enthusiasm of youthful Wwoofers, my patch – the terraces below the Big House – malingered under the onslaughts of moles and toddlers, whose delight in uprooting lupins and decapitating tulips would leave me seething but helpless. How many hundreds of £1.99s did I spend at the cheapo supermarket on doomed bedding plants? Someone's pet chicken would always scratch them up.

And then, all of a sudden, it happened. Thanks perhaps to sheer bloody-minded perseverance, a garden occurred. It was as if Nature had made up its mind to give my vision of loveliness a go. An invisible, underground battle won at last, by a critical mass of benevolent roots and seeds — hollyhocks, lupins, foxgloves; fuschias and ferns, lillies and lavender. Forgotten bulbs, not rotted after all, exploded in tigerish splendour. And, weaving them all together, the little pink-and-white Dorset daisies, otherwise known as Fleabane. Magic is just a word for all the things we don't yet understand: or that we don't need to understand, they just happen anyway.



I knew all along, of course, that one day things would change; I'd go a-travelling once more, or drop dead, or something. And so I nurtured the plants that would romp on happily without me. Swarms of periwinkle, white and blue, polka-dotted with the buttercups you'll never beat, so may as well love. Spires of buddleia, black and white and purple, hiding hideous gas-tanks and unsavoury compost toilets. I'd let anything grow, as long as it wasn't a bramble. There was a separate patch for them, full of nesting blackbirds. You need song to encourage the blossoms. Or so I believe.

And then, out of a clear blue sky, the vultures landed. We were sitting ducks for a hostile take-over, and defenceless in our naïveté. No amount of quacking, flapping, or wittily-expressed righteous indignation, certainly not *facts*, was going to puncture the wall of malice they built around us. Remember, folks, when up against the thieving Corporates: they have no scruples, no regard for truth, and *no* sense of humour. And so they win. And so we lose.

The poem ends:

*... it's evident
the art of losing's not too hard to master
though it may look like (Write it!) like disaster.*

A year's gone by since I left that place, forced out, leaving too many roots in the ground. But after the long, wet winter I went back, by moonlight, with a sharp spade. And now I've begun another garden in a saner place, and the paeonies don't care. They're happy anywhere. So am I. But just occasionally I get that haunting feeling Pablo Neruda captured, when he wrote:

*And I will leave, but the birds will stay, singing,
and my garden will stay, with its green tree,
with its water well.
Many afternoons the sky will be blue and placid,
And the bells in the belfry will chime
as they are chiming this very afternoon.
The people who have loved me will pass away,
and the earth will burst anew every year.
But my spirit will sometimes wander, nostalgic
in that old half-hidden corner of my flowery garden.*