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welcome to the winter 2017 edition of WWOOF UK News

We’re approaching the winter with enthusiasm in our latest issue – there’s the prospect of long, quiet evenings for planning, plenty of outdoor tasks to do during, hopefully, crisp bright days and maybe even some seasonal celebrations to look forward to.

We’ve got your festive gift shopping covered; gift WWOOFer memberships could open a whole new world for your nearest and dearest while our bright, colourful, A4-sized calendar, with photos and quotes drawn from hosts and WWOOFers will provide year long inspiration, see page 3 for details.

A chance encounter brought Jeannie Ireland to our attention and we’re so grateful she has shared her thoughts and experience on keeping cows naturally, on page 4. Cee MacDonald is a first-time WWOOFer who found WWOOFing works for introverts and the socially anxious with some careful preparation, page 7 and our new-style members gathering was a great day out, page 8.

Mister Fluttergrub is planning to split his favourite rhubarb over winter, and tells us the best way to go about it, page 6, while returning host Dan Nettelfield inspires us all with his energy and aspirations for charcoal, veg and new beginnings, page 10. We were glad to hear from host Sally Hall who disagreed with our last news from the office item and are happy to bring her views to you, page 12. And the classified adverts – don’t forget them when you want to get in touch with like-minded people, they are free after all!

Please continue to send me your news, comments and experiences, we love to share them.

Elaine Koster, Editor

stay in touch

Please send contributions for our print editions to editor@wwoof.org.uk or by post (address page 12) by the following dates:

- 31st January for Spring 2018 issue
- 30th April for Summer 2018 issue
- 31st July 2017 for Autumn 2018 issue
- 31st October for Winter 2018 issue

The deadlines for material to be included in the next four electronic updates are:

- 12th January 2018
- 13th April 2018
- 13th July 2018
- 5th October 2018

We particularly welcome your photographs and letters as well as your WWOOFing tales.

Follow us on Facebook: www.facebook.com/wwoofuk
on Twitter: @wwoofuk
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Contact: socialmedia@wwoof.org.uk
And don’t forget members can always post adverts, question and comments on our members’ forum www.wwoof.org.uk/forums/forum

what is WWOOF UK?

- WWOOF UK holds a list of organic farms, gardens and smallholding, all offering food and accommodation in exchange for practical help on their land.
- These hosts range from a low-impact woodland settlement to a 600 hectare mixed holding with on-site farm shop, café and education centre.
- WWOOF hosts should follow the IFOAM organic principles but need not be registered with a certifying organisation.
- Hosts do not expect WWOOFers to know a lot about farming and growing when they arrive, but they do expect them to be willing to learn and able to fit in with their lifestyle.
- The list of hosts is available, either online or as a book, by joining WWOOF UK for a membership fee.
- Once you have the list you can contact hosts directly to arrange your stay.
- Your host will explain what kind of work you will be expected to do, what accommodation is on offer and will discuss the length of your stay.
- WWOOFers do not pay to stay with hosts and hosts do not pay WWOOFers for their help.
- The ethos and mission page of our website gives full details of what is expected of hosts and WWOOFers.
- WWOOF UK is a charity registered in England and Wales 1126220 and in Scotland SC045524.

The views expressed in this newsletter do not necessarily represent those held by WWOOF UK

cover: members gathering, Taryn Field
Our Host Contact, Taryn Field, writes:

- Now that we are entering into a quieter season and enquiries from WWOOFers may decrease, you can check that you are indeed receiving all your emails. As internet security is constantly getting tighter some recipients’ email providers intercept the emails sent by WWOOFers from our system as they see them as mass-produced spam. We have tried to make each message sent look as unique as possible so that this doesn’t happen but it doesn’t always work. If the messages are intercepted they could be sent to one of a couple of places; the spam box of the email provider which you log in to on the internet – so, using a browser; or the spam or junk box of the software you use, e.g. Outlook or Thunderbird, on a device where emails are downloaded. Both of these places ought to be checked to ensure that nothing is missed. If you find a received email in spam or junk and you know where to find the email headers, please send them to us using info@wwoof.org.uk to help us make our system more resilient.

- Although from WWOOF UK’s point of view there is no upper age limit for WWOOFers, I have recently discovered that some host insurance policies state an upper age limit. So if you are a host please check whether you have any age restrictions on your policy, and if you are an older WWOOFer please check with your host that their insurance covers all ages. Employer’s liability insurance usually covers people from age 16.

- A reminder to check that all WWOOFers have a current membership not only when they initially get in touch but also for the time they are scheduled to visit you.

- Host photo permissions – we have recently added a check box on your listing with a reminder on the home page, asking permission to use your lovely host photos for our social media. Don’t worry, we will never mention names, location or contact details. Please tick ‘Yes’!

If you want to give an ethical gift that supports a great charity then you've come to the right place!

A year’s WWOOFer membership for friends or family makes a great present

AND you can add a copy of the WWOOF UK 2018 calendar for just a little bit more

PLUS you can also buy copies of that calendar for only £7.50 each

Go to the home page of our website, www.wwoof.org.uk, to find your seasonal gift solutions
Our Chief Exec, Scarlett Penn, met Jeannie Ireland earlier this year and was so interested in her ideas about, and experience of, keeping cows ‘naturally’ that we asked her to tell us about them.

In 2008 I moved to a rented property with a small field and a few sheds attached; an opportunity to realise a long-held ambition to become a smallholder. Along with pigs and poultry, central to the dream was the presence of a milk cow.

Having sought the advice of farming friends, volunteered with livestock tasks at a local CSA and read all I could find on small-scale cattle farming, I felt ready to take the plunge. The founder of my new herd was to be Lizzy; a twelve year old Gloucester/Kerry cross. She was in calf, an experienced mother and used to being milked – the perfect candidate for the post!

The first few weeks were a far cry from any rustic idyll I may foolishly have harboured. The winter turned from wet to frigid, with snowfall and an icy northern chill that froze the water in the cattle trough, together with all the pipework that supplied it. In the brief periods of thaw, the livestock churned pathways into knee deep mud that dragged boots from frozen feet and made trips to and from the cowshed a struggle for cows and people alike.

Lizzy was still in milk and would need milking daily until late February when she would be dried off before calving. She was (and is) a strong-minded cow, who didn’t know me, but did know that I was inexperienced. She was used to a milking machine, not being hand milked and she regarded my clumsy efforts with contempt. There were many times that, had I not been terrified of her developing mastitis, I would have abandoned all attempts to extract milk from the recalcitrant beast and given up on the whole idea. She routinely kicked over the milking bucket, or trod in it and on at least two occasions managed to kick me across the cowshed.

In April, Lizzy had her calf, a heifer that I named Isabelle. Lizzy calved with no difficulties and proved herself to be every bit the devoted mother I had hoped for. Lizzy and I had come to an understanding by this point and she was happy to share her milk between me and the calf – there was plenty for both of us.

Watching mother and calf over the coming weeks and months, I was captivated by the strength of the bond between them. With successive calves over the next few years and a growing family of cattle, the complexity of their relationships became ever more fascinating. I learned to recognise the different sounds they made when communicating with each other, becoming able to tell if all was well or if one of them had gotten itself into some sort of trouble. It became clear that each individual had its place in the herd and there were seldom arguments between them. All knew who was who in the hierarchy and Lizzy was undisputed matriarch (this is referred to as the ‘hooking order’ in cattle, rather than the ‘pecking order’).

Watching my cattle in comparison with larger, commercial herds close by, their associations were in stark contrast. For ease of management, herds are usually split up into separate age groups, and also in a dairy herd, into the milking herd and other ‘dry’ animals. In the dairy industry, calves are separated from the mother within days or at most a few short weeks, so that all the milk goes for human consumption. The development of relationships that occur naturally within a herd are disrupted, resulting in stress that is often accompanied by sickness and failure to thrive. In my herd, not only did calves get to stay with their mothers, but they benefited from the company of their aunts and uncles. Youngsters would, more often than not, be found in a crèche, watched over by one of the adults, whilst the others grazed nearby. I noticed that the yearling heifers were fascinated by the calves and would often spend a great deal of time with them. I felt sure that this made them much better prepared when the time came to have calves of their own. These relationships made my life much easier too. If I wanted the cattle in, I just called Lizzy and she led them to wherever I wanted them. Whenever there was a management task that they might find stressful, such as the dreaded annual TB testing, I found that the youngsters would watch how their elders behaved and act accordingly.
I then found myself in the position that many smallholders come to, of having to make financial (and ethical) sense out of something that started out as a hobby and kept on growing. I set out with the intention of keeping a house cow to supply dairy produce for my family; but of course, it is never that simple. To produce milk, a cow needs to have had a calf. If it is a heifer calf, she can go on to produce milk herself, but what if it is a bull calf? What do you do if you have only limited grazing and the herd keeps getting bigger? I found that I was forced to confront these questions as my small herd and the responsibilities and expense that went with it kept growing.

I had been vegetarian for most of my life, mainly because I was uncomfortable with the way many animals were raised in large-scale commercial systems. When Lizzy’s next calf was a bull, I needed to decide whether I could justify keeping cattle at all. What I could not afford to do was to keep them as pets; somehow they needed to pay for themselves. After a great deal of soul searching I decided that I could be ok with my steers going for beef, so long as I had made sure that their lives were as comfortable and contented as possible and that when the time came to be killed they were not stressed or afraid. I travel with them to the abattoir and go in with them to make sure that they are calm. This is my contract with them that allows me to acknowledge and accept my responsibility for their deaths. When one of them goes for slaughter, the sale of the meat goes towards meeting the cost of keeping the herd, their family, for another year.

I began reading what I could find on ‘natural’ behaviour in wild/feral cattle and trying to mirror this in my herd management. Wherever possible, the family is kept together. When they do need to be separated, for instance when young heifers need keeping apart from a bull, I make sure both groups are made up of a good number of relatives that get on well. When I move stock, the older ones generally go first, as they are more sensible and the youngsters then arrive to find the rest of the family in place so they settle quickly.

I have come to believe that this perspective on cattle rearing has advantages that can translate into financial practicality. Somewhat to my surprise, when I first started selling my beef, the positive response was overwhelming. Staff at the abattoir were complementary, as was the butcher who hung and prepared the beef. Customers repeatedly told me that it was the best beef they had ever eaten. When this was repeated with successive beasts, I began to try and pinpoint what was the cause of this welcome result. The cattle are of a rare breed (Gloucesters and Gloucester crosses) and are grass fed and slow matured. In addition to this, I strongly believe that being ‘family’ reared they lead extremely stress-free and relaxed lives. Furthermore, so far, I have had virtually no health issues to worry about, which has kept vets’ bills to a minimum (no pneumonia or scouring in calves, no TB).

This is a subject that could be explored and debated at great length, but for me this system of small-scale cattle rearing has numerous benefits; I am able to sell my meat at a premium, not only because of its quality, but because buyers like the ‘back story’ – they like hearing that my cattle have as natural and pleasant a life as possible. Management is also much easier and a lot more pleasant for me.

As time has gone on, the subject has become wider and the debate more complex. The herd quickly outgrew the few acres I had available and I now have a grazing licence on some beautiful species-rich grassland on the Cotswold escarpment. For those who would argue that cattle are net producers of methane and as such are contributing to climate change, I would counter that my cattle are also conservation managers. The richly biodiverse landscape they inhabit was created by millennia of grazing by cattle and without it, precious habitats would degrade.

I hope, in time, when the herd is larger and more of my time can be devoted to it, that I will return to my early dairy ambitions and begin milking again, but on a commercial rather than just a personal level (Gloucesters are dual-purpose animals, providing both meat and milk). This would have to follow the ‘Calf at Foot’ model, where the cows are milked once a day and the calves are left with them. The economics of reduced milk yield, can, I believe be offset both by sales of quality meat and by the higher premiums paid for ethically produced milk.

This way of raising cattle is likely not suited to all situations, but certainly, for small producers in environmentally sensitive areas, it is a means of making management easier whilst producing a high-value product with fantastic ethical credentials.

For the record, Lizzy is now twenty years old, a little grey round the muzzle and still worth her weight in gold as herd matriarch and generally bossy old cow.

Any thoughts? Let us know using info@wwoof.org.uk
As I wandered round the plot trying to put together an ever expanding list of tasks to be carried out over the winter so I came to one of the rhubarb patches. After quite a few productive harvests this year’s crop had been relatively small with fewer and thinner stalks than expected. These are the tell-tale signs of rhubarb in need of rejuvenation and so I added ‘revitalise rhubarb’ to the list.

Rhubarb is often the Cinderella of vegetables (although I usually consider anything eaten with custard a fruit, rhubarb is technically a vegetable). It is frequently consigned to an odd corner where little else will grow. I must confess to being a rhubarb abuser, with both of my patches in fairly inhospitable areas. However, rhubarb is a remarkably tolerant plant. All it needs, apart from an annual dose of manure, is a recharge every five to seven years.

Rejuvenating rhubarb is a case of being ‘cruel to be kind’. Essentially, to revitalise it, you dig it up and chop it into pieces. Put a little less brutally, rhubarb is, as the gardening texts put it, ‘propagated by division’ (although it can also be grown from seed). This involves several steps. The first is to carefully dig out an old clump, itself no mean feat as the rhizomes (thickened roots) will penetrate deeper than you might expect. Once the clump is out it needs to be divided into portions each having a good piece of rhizome and a clearly visible surface growing point or bud.

Splitting is usually possible with a sharp spade. As when dividing any perennial plant, it is the younger growth on the outside of the clump that is likely to be the most vigorous and have the best potential to form strong new plants. If the centre of the clump lacks strong buds it is best to discard it.

A dug up clump can generally be split into three or four viable portions. These should be planted without delay to prevent deterioration; do not believe the old gardening lore that leaving a clump on the surface for weeks will somehow reinvigorate it. Planting can either be on a new site or on the same ground as rhubarb doesn’t seem to suffer from any replant diseases. However, I like to work a good quantity of manure or compost into the soil wherever the new plants are set out to get them off to a good start.

Because rhubarb is early into growth in spring regeneration is best carried out in winter, ideally before the solstice. This gives the plants time to settle and root before warmer weather stimulates new shoots. Don’t tax the new plants by pulling stalks in the first year after replanting. They need time to establish. It is only in the second year after rejuvenation, by which time they should show strong new growth, that I start harvesting and even then I may go easy on any clump that is still ‘in convalescence’.

If you don’t grow rhubarb and have none to divide it is possible to buy young pot-grown plants. These, however, take just as long to establish and crop as an offset taken from an old clump so there’s much to be said for starting with rejuvenated rhubarb. The only downside is that you may not know the name of the variety. Many people assume rhubarb is rhubarb, and are surprised that there are different types. In fact hundreds have been developed although few are now grown commercially. My favourite is Timperley Early. Its main virtue, as the name suggests, is that it is ‘early’, always the first to crop, often giving a worthwhile pulling of stalks by mid-March. Timperley Early comprises about half of my rhubarb plants and I’ll be making sure that any of its tired older clumps are given a fillip by careful division this winter.

Mr Fluttergrub is the pen name of someone who is close to the heart of WWOOF UK. Based in the north of England he’s a very experienced grower and has agreed to write a regular column for us. Let us know if his suggestions work for you or if you have other ideas for your region, please get in touch using: info@wwoof.org.uk.

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WWOOFing for introverts

From spreadsheets to spreading compost: a WWOOFing guide for the introverted and socially anxious. First time WWOOFer Cee MacDonald found that WWOOFing works for her.

This summer I took time out from my job as a spreadsheet nerd to go outside and get dirty. I felt positive about many things in that choice. But I also had concerns about how someone as highly introverted and socially anxious as me would cope with what I saw as the chilled out, community-orientated vibe of WWOOFing.

In the end, my fears were misplaced. I was able to navigate the placements in a way that made me (hopefully) useful to my hosts and gave me some fantastic opportunities to experience the real joy of smallholder living. In case anyone else was in a similar situation, I wanted to share some tips on how to get the best out of WWOOF placements even if you feel people aren’t really your forte.

Introverts are people who recharge their batteries by being alone, whereas extroverts get their energy from being around other people. If you know you need some alone time to be your best then take that into account when looking through the host descriptions.

Hosts often signal what sort of vibe there is on their placement. You might look for placements where the hosts say they like people to be self sufficient or independent. Placements less suited to you will sometimes have hosts say things like ‘we really like it when you are part of our community or family while you are here’ or ‘our favourite thing about meeting WWOOFers is the long discussions in the evening’. However, I almost didn’t apply to one placement because I felt having a hot tub was evidence of a flagrant tendency towards socialising. My inkling was correct, but it turns out you can be a social household and also be very happy for people to go off on their own.

You may want to look for placements that only have one WWOOFer at a time rather than a crowd of people who might get together and socialise at the end of the day. There is usually information about the accommodation on placements; if it’s important to you to have time alone then look for placements which where you get your own room rather than sharing. When you contact potential hosts, you can also signal your social preferences by talking about being self sufficient, and the solo hobbies and activities you enjoy.

If you are a socially anxious person, then going to a stranger’s house is always going to bring up some worries. At every placement I went to I worried that my hosts would find me weedy, ignorant and boring. For me the trick, and it’s not easy, is to recognise I have those thoughts and then pretend that I’m a relaxed confident person. And what helps on WWOOF placements is that the sort of people who decide to be WWOOF hosts are generally the sort of people who are warm and kind and pretty relaxed about meeting different types of people.

On a more practical level, you may want to think about how you carve time for yourself on your placement. This may be by volunteering for tasks you can do on your own. On my placements feeding the animals was always my favourite task. Sometimes there can be a tendency for everyone to get together in the evening, but don’t feel like you need to be a part of that if you don’t want to. If you feel uncomfortable saying you just want to be on your own, tell your hosts you want to finish a gripping book, or go out and take some photos with your camera, or go for a run. You may plan your social activities weeks in advance but don’t be surprised to discover that your hosts are constantly having people over for dinner or to stay with minimal notice. Two of my hosts said they regularly had friends of friends dropping by unannounced. They seemed to welcome this, which I found very baffling.

My final piece of advice about being on your placement is to share a little, if you feel comfortable, about how you experience the world. I have found that people enjoy delving into the intricacies of their personality including where they fit on the introvert/extrovert spectrum. And almost everyone can relate to some circumstances where they worry about how people will react to them. WWOOFing can be a great way to have experiences and meet people who wouldn’t usually get a chance to, and I encourage you to embrace it.

A huge thanks to the families who hosted me with such warmth this summer, and dealt so calmly with me accidentally freeing their chickens and threatening to steal their dogs.
‘Friendly, informative and inspiring’ were the words used by a WWOOFer to sum up her experience of our most recent Members Gathering held at The Sustainability Centre, near Petersfield in Hampshire on 23rd September 2017. The one day event was a fresh take on our traditional autumnal get-together and WWOOF UK team member Amanda Pearson tells us how it went.

This new member had not yet plucked up the courage to contact her first host. She thought this event would be a good way to put her toe in the water – and she was right; having arrived knowing no one, she left with at least two firm offers from hosts and some warm WWOOF memories.

The gathering started at ten o’clock and while we waited for our late arrivals, delayed by major local traffic problems, we jumped straight in to a question-and-answer session, offering members a chance to raise burning issues of the moment. Replies came as much from members as staff, as knowledge was pooled and experiences shared.

Topics included both older and younger WWOOFers, hosting volunteers with children, and the thorny problem of insurance. Frustrations were expressed from both sides of our membership about hosts who don’t reply and volunteers who fail to show up. Everyone agreed this should not be happening. We completed the formal AGM in record time and tucked into coffee and delicious homemade cake before all of the workshops and tours began.

First up was a session led by Carol Lewis, a former social worker turned interfaith minister and now Spiritual Director (or ethical juggler) for Gaunts House, a host with a mansion and 2000-acre estate in Dorset. This community of 25 like-minded equals has welcomed WWOOFers for many years and endeavours to create a nurturing environment that supports personal growth.

Carol invited us to step back and examine the essence of the WWOOF exchange and what it means to belong to our organisation. Several entertaining stories of residents past and present served to remind us that hosts can learn from WWOOFers just as much as WWOOFers can learn from hosts. She proposed our foremost question on meeting a member should be ‘what can I learn from you?’

Inevitably talk turned to the role of our regional host contacts and how they might energise the local WWOOF scene. If you are a host, do you know who your regional host contact is? Do you know who your neighbouring hosts might be? Would it help for all new hosts to have a buddy?

Sadly, lack of time meant we could only scratch the surface of this philosophical discussion but clearly the mood in the room was that it would be great to be better connected with one another on a more regular basis. The question remains – how? Some continued to ponder this over lunch, whilst others took the opportunity to fit in a spot of sunbathing, it was a gorgeous day, or discover the joys of the swaps table, which this year was particularly well laden with surplus goodies members had brought to pass on in the spirit of exchange.

The spirit did however get a little carried away. A box of cat food was put on the table by accident and there was a case of mistaken identity when the Centre Manager’s shopping was assumed to be a contribution! Fortunately, everyone had a good laugh when this error was unearthed at the end of the day. Whoever has the food, we hope your cat enjoys it!

After the profound discussions of the morning, our next workshop session was much more down to
earth with everyone absorbing the advice medicinal herbalist Sarah Furey had to give. A former head teacher who has embarked on a second career by pursuing her passion for plants, Sarah advised us on the many and varied anti-bacterial, anti-fungal and antiviral agents to be found in our back gardens, allotments or on local walks with much talk of tinctures, teas and syrups. Sarah was on a mission to let us know about the free medicinal cabinet nature provides and to reconnect us with the knowledge of the wise women rather than the bank balance of the big pharmaceutical companies.

Our trio of contributions was concluded with another practical session from WWOOF UK Director Katie Hastings who shared her story of setting up The Green Isle Growers co-operative veg box scheme in Machynlleth, West Wales. Katie works with seven other local growers to serve 50 people with seasonal and organic fruit and vegetables for six months of the year, with occasional supplements from an organic wholesaler. The group’s turnover is small – in the region of £13,000 per year – but, by working together, they avoid undercutting each other and ensure they get a fair price for their veg.

Katie joked that in the corporate world the co-op might be accused of price fixing, but this strategy has given her the rare luxury of a realistic and sustainable price for what she grows as well as enabling her to do something she loves and connect with her local community.

Throughout the day Sustainability Centre Education Officer, Louise Ambrose took those not participating in the workshops on tours of the former HMS Mercury site. The Centre is a place for independent learning and study, dedicated to exploring how we can all make greener, healthier and more ethical choices – the perfect backdrop for a WWOOF UK meeting.

Set in 55 acres of woodland and downland it is not, however, your typical ‘alternative venue’, as it comprises several office buildings in Sixties/Seventies style that the organisation has bravely decided to retrofit rather than pull down and start again.

And so to our last tea break, which afforded participants a final opportunity to purchase the all new 2018 WWOOF UK calendar at the bargain price of £6.00. Some people bought multiple copies (possibly because they featured in it). Those who missed this limited offer can now buy the calendar from our website, see page 3 for details.

All too soon it was time to head home. We want to say a big thank you to Holly for her excellent organisation, and Dan who provided a taxi service to and from the local railway station with his veg-oil-fuelled car.

As ever it was great to meet some old friends and make some new ones, bound together by our passion for growing and making a difference.

Hosts Seeds of Eden will be launching a community supported agricultural scheme in January 2018 on seven acres of the Stanford Hall estate in Lutterworth, Leicestershire. Produce from the scheme will be distributed to local school canteens and the community through a membership system. Alongside the produce they’ll also be offering a wide range of educational activities. They’re working from scratch, on a field that has been grazing land for as long as anyone can tell, so will need all the help they can get to pull this off.

Stanford Hall is a particularly beautiful estate on the river Avon, and would make a great springtime residence for any keen WWOOFer.
Returning host Dan Nettelfield shares his story, his aspirations and extends an invitation to WWOOFers to help make his dreams come true. Energetic? This man spends his days wielding an axe and then goes running!

I only discovered my official job title just recently – I am a wood-collier. I never saw myself as making a fancy fuel for specialist outdoor cooking; it just wasn’t top of my priority list. It wasn’t even in the top ten results spat out by the school careers advice computer programme – for the record, the number one suggestion was salmon farming.

A land-based way of life started calling me when I found myself spending all day chained to a computer, looking forward to retirement and desperate to be outdoors. This feeling was combined with a desire to be making a living directly from the earth in a thoughtful, sustainable way. There seemed to be so many issues that could be helped by reconnecting with soil.

WWOOFing was my way in; I squeezed in little bursts of travelling around the UK and visiting farms, between rubbish temping jobs in Bristol. Learning all the time, it became obvious that growing vegetables was the only thing that made sense to me in this over-complicated world. Sadly things are never quite so straightforward. Which is where, fast-forwarding a few years, the charcoal making comes in.

It started as a device to help with my planning permission problem. I, and my (now ex) partner, got kicked off Strawberry Field, the beautiful fifteen acres of North Devon that we were so lucky to ‘own’. We’d spent a couple of years turning our field and woodland into an off-grid smallholding. Learning all the time, it became obvious that growing vegetables was the only thing that made sense to me in this over-complicated world. Sadly things are never quite so straightforward. Which is where, fast-forwarding a few years, the charcoal making comes in.

As demonstrated by Ben Law and others, charcoal making definitely has the potential to catapult you through those two tricky planning hoops of the functional and financial tests. There are other seriously good things about being a wood-collier, not least bringing my overgrown coppice woodland back into useful rotation. At first, felling lots of large trees seemed rather destructive though I always had confidence in the Forestry Commission approved management plan. Within months I was seeing vibrant and vigorous regrowth and many birds now living in the thick undergrowth. There are hundreds of newly revived coppice stools and thousands of new saplings, all competing for that newfound daylight.

Seeing all that vitality, it’s now easier to believe that young woodland absorbs more carbon than one whose canopy is already complete. And although many of the felled trees will be burnt as barbecue charcoal, some of the stored carbon in their trunks will make it into the structure of my house and tractor shed. And brilliantly, my veg-garden benefits from barrow loads of biochar, courtesy of the fine charcoal that gets graded out at the bagging stage.

I love the woodland work – particularly felling and processing in the winter. I use a chainsaw for felling and cross-cutting and a tractor for getting the logs out of the wood. Both machines seem pretty much essential, though part of me would love to do it all without fossil fuels.
Like the good folk at Tinkers Bubble, I'll never forget my fortnight WWOOFing there – my life seems awfully conventional by comparison. So far, I have refused the temptation of a tractor-driven log-splitter. Give me my axe any day. Unlike a tractor it doesn't rumble away requiring ear defenders and result in isolation from the wonderful countryside all around. And it doesn't have hundreds of moving parts all needing oil and grease and just waiting to go wrong. Wielding an axe takes some skill, enough to engage the brain but not so much as to detract from the meditative swinging and thwacking. It's cracking exercise too – fitness and accuracy both improve with pleasing rapidity.

Anyway, the charcoal did the trick (or rather has done so far) and I'm back living on the land. Thanks to a successful enforcement appeal last year, I finally won temporary permission to live in this beautiful place. The charcoal was deemed to give me the ‘functional need’ and – big win – my expected income of £8K was seen as ‘viable’. Temporary permission is a tool to test the financial viability of a business so theoretically, as long as I can hit that £8K, there's a good chance the planning authority should let me build a permanent home. I barely dare imagine: a beautiful, hand-crafted and low-impact house that, unlike my static caravan, will retain heat, have more than an inch of headroom and won’t shudder in the gales.

I have John Seymour-esque dreams of a Jersey house cow, pigs, and veg – many small productive fields and a forest garden all working together seamlessly in a way Mollinson and Holmgren would be proud of. In reality, here on my own, the charcoal takes most of my time; especially when you insist, like me, on reserving a decent chunk of the day for cooking healthy, veg-tastic meals. And running. I often wonder why I didn’t join the local singing group or perhaps take up knitting but running has me hooked – the club in town is pleasingly competitive and an important part of my social life.

Despite the distinct lack of hours in the day, I feel the need to incorporate some commercial veg growing alongside what I produce for my own table. I've just installed a large polytunnel that will allow me to grow some valuable crops and keep salad bags going through the winter.

I’m looking forward to welcoming you WWOOFers again. I’ve learnt a lot about low-impact living over the years and would love to pass on some of that information. I’m also as keen as ever to learn more from everyone who visits.

It could be that you fancy taking on the veg-side of things allowing me more time for charcoal making. If we make a good team and you wanted to stay longer, we might talk about profit sharing. Or come and help me with a bit of everything. Log splitting is not obligatory, all the more for me! This winter I’m putting up an oak-framed tractor shed; in the right hands it has the potential to be a thing of beauty but with my current skills will be a rather rudimentary affair. So if you have building or framing skills; come and join me!

Whatever your thoughts, skills or available time, I’d really love to hear from you.

We recently received this from ex-host Dave Fox of Cambridge and wanted to share it with you.

‘In July 2015 I was diagnosed with an advanced cancer which required radical treatment on a ‘potentially curative pathway’, as my surgeon’s letter put it. Three WWOOFers, Dea and Millie from Canada, and Felicity from New Zealand, were here. They helped me greatly during this difficult time, staying on longer than originally planned as my chemotherapy commenced. I live alone and couldn’t do much myself. They kept me going, as well as the allotment. To cut a long story short, I’ve survived a major operation and recent scans show no return of cancer at the moment. Meanwhile all three WWOOFers left Cambridge but have since returned and made permanent homes nearby.’

Dave is now hosting refugees but added: ‘Maybe I’ll rejoin as a WWOOF host sometime. But in any case my various guests always somehow feel like WWOOFers; they help on the allotment, they love the food, and they become friends.’
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Housesitter/s required from 2nd-10th March 2018 to look after two cats and one pony in beautiful Highland Glen. Wonderful walks, bike rides etc. Will need own transport and knowledge of horse care. Tel Juliette on: 01349 884440 or email: juliette@dalreoch.co.uk

WWOOFing North and South by Margaret Halliday
https://maghal.wordpress.com This book is a must read for anyone wanting to discover what life as a WWOOFer is like. Margaret gives an honest account of hosts in Scotland and New Zealand, describing both the highs and lows with sensitivity and humour.

We are looking for a couple for the winter or longer to join our small community and help out on our Dartmoor smallholding with land, vegetables and animals in exchange for cosy stone bothy with a wood-burner. tel. 07765069849 email: ceelaweela@yahoo.com

Winter accommodation offered in return for occasional farm sitting, perfect for couple; room or railway carriage, Nov-Mid March. Also room to rent (£50/week) on our organic farm in mid-Wales. www.thewildernesstrust.org A small cabin is also available to carpenter/builder in return for some work. 01686 413857 or 01686 412744 franblockley@yahoo.co.uk

Are you a new or landless grower who has energy and skill to help start up a collaborative market garden enterprise on land you could potentially live on? Is the South Shropshire Hills AONB an area you’d consider? If so, get in touch to talk possibilities. pensca@gmail.com

Free holidays for tired WWOOFers. Large shed with woodburner, cooker and necessary cutlery etc, separate shower, loo, and upstairs bedroom, free for short breaks in our six acre wildlife home in rural North Cornwall. No dogs. Email: alison@zanzig.plus.com

Host Sally Hall, who is based in Wales, wrote to us in September in response to our news from the office item about insurance, in the autumn issue of WWOOF UK News. We always welcome our members’ feedback and asked Sally if we could reproduce her thoughts here.

WWOOF is a fantastic organisation and stands for much of what I believe in – a sustainable way forward for farming. I really enjoyed the latest edition of the newsletter. The inspiring and really interesting pieces on mob grazing and Crossing really represent what I believed WWOOFing is helping to achieve – protecting the environment and our precious flora and fauna. However, I was extremely disappointed to hear about your meeting with an NFU rep and your promotion of its insurance products. This is a very wealthy English agribusiness lobby group which is NOT a union for the majority of farmers. For some reason which is difficult to determine, the NFU has always had immense political power – despite it being a minority group (little more than 15% of farmers are actually members) and it is not even democratically elected. It has been instrumental in intensifying farming, with the subsequent welfare and sustainability issues. It does little to promote sustainability and is publicly very economical with the truth when making public statements, for example, the current badger cull in the news this week (Sally wrote to us in early September) it is the NFU that is pushing this forward and with the continued culling in the pilot areas and its likely spread to other areas in the UK we may well see some areas of the UK lose their badger populations. Back in 2013 George Monbiot stated, ‘The National Farmers’ Union secures so much public cash yet gives nothing back.’ ‘The NFU’s grip on agricultural policy helps enrich millionaire landowners while destroying biodiversity, polluting water and wiping out pollinators.’, https://goo.gl/6hZbd0, I would agree. See also the ethical consumer’s article: https://goo.gl/Xn8G43

If you have any views on this or anything else in the newsletter please contact us using info@wwoof.org.uk.