



Wyre Forest Study Group

TALES FROM UNCLLYS, SPRING 2006

John and Linda Iles

The opportunity to live in the Wyre Forest does not come to many. When we first heard that the Guild of St. George's 13 acre smallholding at Uncllys might become available we were hesitant – but only because we wished we had the energy of 20 years ago! Then a very exciting plan for the farm and its land began to fall into place in our minds and we decided that we should follow our vision.

We are both very concerned about the ways in which mankind is rapidly bringing about a crisis by burning fossil fuels and we wanted to adopt a less energy intensive lifestyle for ourselves. We saw an opportunity to be able to carry on with our present jobs and to gradually invest in the farm to make it possible to live there more sustainably for many years to come.

In May 2004 we attended an interview with the Guild in Bewdley and were asked questions about Ruskin, farming and our plans to develop the farm into a sustainable enterprise. We were successful and moved in towards the end of October.

Uncllys

The farm is really a series of clearings and so is surrounded on all sides by mature oak forest. It appears that there has been some form of dwelling at Uncllys since the 1600's although the present farmhouse is the result of significant extension in the 1914 when the Quayle family moved down from Liverpool. During this period the cherry orchard was planted and a system to harvest rain water (for washing) from the roof constructed – the drinking water supply at that time being a spring 150m down a steep hill.

Although only 1.5 miles from Bewdley the farm is not connected to the electricity grid and so for many years a Lister diesel generator has given reliable service but at a price – both financial (around £40 per week) and environmental through burning fossil fuels. We wanted to install a renewable system. Wind has the advantage that it is strongest in the winter when our demand is at its highest but the house is surrounded by a high forest canopy which absorbs the wind's power. We therefore decided to install a 3KW photovoltaic array on the roof of one of the farm buildings which charges up a large 48v battery using the energy from the sun. Then an inverter takes the current from the battery and converts into useful 240v ac to power normal domestic appliances.

The system has been working since November but during the winter months when the sun is weak and low in the sky only a small amount is generated. Since March though as the light has become stronger and the days longer then we have hardly had to use the generator at all. We are looking at the feasibility of installing a micro hydroelectric

scheme using the little brook to drive a small turbine. This would contribute a small but steady flow of electricity to the batteries, which would be especially valuable to us in the winter.



Photovoltaic array

John Iles

At present generating solar electricity is expensive. Our installation cost over £20,000 but we were helped by a grant from the Government of about half that amount. The alternatives were either a very expensive cable to the mains or burning a lot of non-renewable diesel. We now know that we will not have to spend anything more for most of our electricity for the next 20 years or so.

We heat the house and hot water from burning wood in a multifuel cooker linked to an underfloor heating system. We have also recently installed a wood burning stove in the lounge. We are able to collect and store oak from the forest around us. The fuel is not 'free' as it takes a lot of sweat, a chainsaw and effort to collect, split and stack but it is satisfying to know that this is a sustainable source of heat that is not adding to the CO₂ burden or the atmosphere.

So having got the basics of heat and electricity sorted out what else are we up to?

Wildlife and Landscape Conservation

The farm is on very poor quality soils and is all put to pasture. Most of the land is in a Countryside Stewardship Agreement with DEFRA (the Government Department for the environment and farming). The Agreement sets out how the land is to be managed – mostly through grazing and hay cutting – and in return we get a small payment. The pasture is semi-improved grassland and is responding well to the grazing we have initiated using small Dexter rare breed cattle. The grassland is home to a wide variety of wild flowers including cowslips, pignut, betony, devil's bit scabious, harebell and quaking grass, which will be nurtured by our careful grazing regime. The pastures are grazed from April to November only and hay can



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be cut from 15 July, allowing wild flowers to set seed. Already the fields are looking less tussocky as the coarse grasses are reduced. We are monitoring the effect on the grass sward with help from Rosemary Winnall, who carries out an annual transect for us across the most diverse field. So far the huge population of voles seems to be standing up well to the changes and the attentions of the farm cats!

The 6 acre cherry orchard was planted in the 1920's and records show that in 1936 it produced a crop worth £720! Think about that and how much that would be worth now! Only 31 of the original 100 or so trees are still alive and many are dying. The orchard is part of the Wyre SSSI (Site of Special Scientific Interest) mainly because of the many different invertebrates that live on the dead cherry wood. To maintain the richness of this habitat it is crucial that there will be more dead wood in the future – so we are pruning the old trees to help them to live longer and in the winter of 2004/5 planted 27 new cherry trees with the help of friends. This winter we have planted a further 40 new orchard trees including apples, pears and plums. All these have to be protected from deer, rabbits and our cattle with substantial tree guards.

Like many smallholdings we are planning a number of small scale interrelated enterprises. Our Dexter beef herd stands at 6 at present and we are hoping that there will be 4 new calves in the summer. We also have a variable number of laying hens and have kept Gloucester Old Spot pigs.

To develop a sustainable business we will need to find ways of adding value to our basic products. The beef will be of high quality and commands a premium. We will aim to sell directly locally through the local farmers market to keep the food miles low and to maximise our income as well as enjoying the relationship between producer and purchaser. Another idea we are investigating is to involve the local community in the farm's orchard fruit production through a cropshare scheme. We are also open to co-operative ventures with other producers in the area – the possibilities are boundless!

In our stewardship of the holding we will be seeking to live out Ruskin's principles and ideas that form the basis of the Guild of St George. Already we have seen several people come to the farm to help plant cherry trees, put up new fences and establish the raised beds in the vegetable garden. They, like many others, have a very basic desire to reconnect with creation in very practical ways. Several are in the process of recovering from illness and so the experience of Uncllys is forming part of their healing.

Members of the Study Group are welcome to come by prior arrangement by calling us on 01299 403691 or email john@uncllys.co.uk. The unfolding story of Uncllys will be told on our website at www.uncllys.co.uk.



Aerial View – Uncllys Farm