



Patrick Whitefield visits an established community in Scotland and finds that the key to their success seems to be a co-operative and balanced approach to being relaxed as well as efficient.

As soon as we set foot in Laurieston Hall at Castle Douglas in Scotland we could feel that this is one intentional community that functions well. The land and buildings have an air of relaxed efficiency. The residents you meet casually on a path or corridor greet you with a 'Hello' and a genuine smile. The main house has an atmosphere of joy and light, partly due to good architecture and inspired interior design, but also surely the accumulated effect of years of positive experiences by residents and visitors alike. It feels like a happy place.

We had come to attend a week-long ecopsychology gathering, one of the series of events which Laurieston puts on during the summer.

THE LAND

There are 53 hectares (130 acres) of land, of which half are woodland. Some of this is ancient woodland, with a rich diversity of native trees, herbs and animals, some of it is a SSSI (Site of Special Scientific

Interest). Much of the rest was conifer plantation when the community took it over. Part of this has been replanted to broadleaved woodland, part encouraged to regenerate to herb-rich pasture, and part kept as conifers. A few conifers are valuable both as a useful resource and as habitat for the red squirrels which still live in the area. We were shown round the land by community member Patrick Upton, and the quality of thought which had gone into the various land-use decisions was clear from the comments he made as we walked round.

The Hall is heated entirely by wood. Some is from the community's own coppice woodland and some comes from gleaning after felling in the adjacent Forestry Commission plantations, a resource which would otherwise be unused. Electricity is provided by a micro-hydro generator, backed up by the mains. It is in fact a reinstatement of a Victorian system, but one of the first of its kind to be installed in recent decades as an alternative to the mains.

At the time the electricity board refused to buy the surplus electricity generated when output is greater than use, so this is converted to heat and provides most of the hot water. Drinking water comes from springs, with mains backup for visitors who prefer it, and washing water from the same stream which provides electricity.

There is some grassland, which supports two dairy cows and their followers. The male calves are grown

Top: Many hands make light work of the garlic harvest.

Below: Patrick Whitefield.





on for meat – about half the residents are omnivores – and three or four pigs are reared each year. 95% of the pig food comes from whey from the dairy and food scraps from the Hall. A flock of big, plump laying hens ranges through the pasture and beneath the trees. Both cattle and pigs are as confident and friendly as the friendliest of dogs. Even as a complete stranger, they immediately had me patting and scratching them respectively. I soon felt I was getting to know some of them as individuals.

The walled garden is magnificent. It was here as much as anywhere that I felt the atmosphere of relaxed efficiency. It's not one of those show gardens without a weed or a plant out of place but it's very organised, tidy and productive, and the people certainly seemed to enjoy their gardening. The light sandy soil no doubt was partly responsible for the impressive earliness of the crops, as advanced as at my home 300 miles to the south. But it is a hungry soil, and they have to bring in a lot of manure from neighbouring farms, especially as their own animals spend such a lot of the time outdoors and thus don't accumulate much usable manure.

HISTORY

The community started in 1972 when a group of young people, fired by the radicalism of the 60s, wanted to put their ideas of communalism, feminism and revolution into practice. They bought Laurieston Hall, initially by means of three of their number selling their London houses. But this was soon

Top left: Pasture and woodland.

Bottom left: Community members splitting firewood.

Centre: The vegetable garden.

Top right: Clearing bracken on a herb-rich pasture restored from spruce plantation.

Bottom right: Coppicing gives this wood its great diversity of structure.





converted to a mortgage so that everyone could be on an equal footing.

To begin with they lived communally, eating together in one large kitchen. But in the mid-80s they changed to a co-operative structure, with people living in smaller units – singly, in families or in small communal households – but working together and still deciding everything in meetings.

Decisions have always been and still are by consensus: every person present at the meeting must agree before a

proposal is adopted. In the early days everything was decided by meetings of the full community, but these days as many decisions as possible are devolved to sub-groups. This has made things much easier and more efficient, and its success reflects a level of trust between people who have known each other and worked together for a long time. The sub-groups include housing, finance, garden, dairy and land, with three to six people in each. Members are encouraged to rotate around the groups over time.

The main cash income has always been from visitors. In the early days the community organised events themselves, but now they provide the space, domestic facilities and catering for events organised by others. They have become expert at it and have acquired a loyal following of people who come back to Laurieston again and again.

The residents tell me that they are more prosperous now than they were at the beginning. Patrick puts this down to stability in an age of steadily rising prosperity. Stability certainly seems to be a key. Although there is some turnover of members, some have been there from the beginning or very near it.

The low turnover gives a solid foundation to the community but it also seems to give a certain inertia. The members have got things the way they like and don't choose to change them. If the custom of making all decisions by consensus has one fault it's to reinforce this inertia, because you only need one person to seriously disagree with a proposed change to completely block it.



Slow turnover also means that the average age of the membership is marching steadily towards retirement. New, younger members are welcomed, but they sometimes find that their style and aspirations are not the same as those of the majority and so decide to move on. I know this problem is one shared by other communities, and is perhaps one of the inevitable prices of success.

HOW IT WORKS

All the residents are members of the Laurieston Hall Housing Co-op. This entitles them to accommodation and a share in the produce: vegetables, milk, dairy products, meat for those who eat it, eggs, honey, firewood, water and electricity. In return they commit themselves to work half of each week on the land or buildings and to pay a rent. The amount of work people do is never policed and in fact varies a bit according to individual circumstances.

Some people work part-time off site – a full-time job is clearly impossible – and these contacts with the wider local community are highly valued. But much of the paid work the residents do is for the People Centre, the worker's co-op which makes the Hall available to visitor groups and does the catering.

It seems to me that a second key to the success of the community is the large proportion of time which the members devote to the community. It is surely this which is responsible for the air of relaxed efficiency which is so characteristic of the place. One thing which seemed to me to be lacking was that frantic feeling of 'so much to do and so little time to do it in' which is so characteristic of working on the land in a nuclear family situation.

On the other hand this is only possible because the need for money is low, so the residents don't need to work full time in order to make enough. This is partly due to the economies of co-operative living, but also because the mortgage is long since paid off, so all the rent money can go on maintenance and improvements. It must have been very different in the early days, when earning capacity was low and the mortgage still unpaid. You couldn't create another Laurieston as it is now overnight. It's the result of many years' hard work by people who believed in what they were doing. Today's property prices would make it even more difficult.

Below: The extensive main house and vegetable garden.

AN ECOLOGICAL COMMUNITY?

Laurieston Hall makes no claims to ecological purity, and sustainability is not a stated aim of the community. But, if three marks of successful permaculture are minimum inputs, home-grown and local resources, and maximum positive outputs, then their performance would put many an avowed permaculturist to shame.

There's no doubt that this is due in great part to the co-operative structure, which allows many hands to make light work. In a nuclear family you just haven't got time to do so much. Equally in a communal situation – all eating together and making all decisions together in one big group – a lot of energy is used up in group dynamics.

Looking at Laurieston from a permaculture point of view, I ask the question, "Does it meet the needs of the land and the needs of the people?" The answer is of course relative. But in the context of what is possible in the early twenty-first century, and comparing it with most of what I see around me, I can only answer 'Yes' 🌱

For a programme of events at Laurieston Hall please write to: The People Centre, Laurieston Hall, Castle Douglas, Dumfries & Galloway DG7 2NB.

