

# LIVING IN INTENTIONAL COMMUNITY

I moved into Brithdir Mawr community with my partner Ben and daughter Josie in early 2004. Before coming to Brithdir, we lived in a small village in the south of Spain with a very communal feel. We didn't like the idea of being an isolated nuclear family, so when we decided to move back to the UK we also decided to look at the possibilities of living in an intentional community. So what is it like to live in a recently established community?

## SOME HISTORY

Brithdir Mawr is not new by any means; the original community was first started on the site in 1995. Since then, the site has been split into three separate entities.

Tir Ysbrydol (Spiritual Land in Welsh), is a small community with a specifically spiritual focus, based around huts in the bottom part of the original site. Jane Faith and Tony Wrench in their roundhouse are set up as the Roundhouse Trust. Finally, Brithdir Mawr Community, where I live, is based in the top part of the original site. This split happened in 2002, so the community in its current form is effectively three years old. Half of the current members already lived here in the original community, the others (including me) have joined since 2002.

Brithdir Mawr community is made up of 10 adults and five children. We rent the big farmhouse and buildings around the old farmyard together with 80 acres of land. Our landlord is one of the founder members of the community – he doesn't live here now, but he charges us way below a market rent, so we are partly insulated from current property prices.

## HOW IT WORKS

In 2004/2005 the community formed a fully mutual housing co-op, which rents the site, and a company limited by guarantee, which sub-lets the land from the co-op. These legal structures don't make much impact on our lives, but they have helped to formalise the set-up and

make it easier to deal with the 'outside world'. All community members are members of the co-op and the company, and all decisions are taken by consensus.

We all pay rent, at the moment around £180 per month for an adult and £32 per month for a child under 18. This covers most of our food, maintenance, and bills as well as the rent. Although it may seem like very little for those accustomed to city rents and bills, it can be hard to find in a rural low wage area with limited work opportunities.

Everyone does around three days a week community work, leaving the remaining four days for childcare, earning a cash income to pay the rent, and of course free time.

## Top:

Panorama of part of the site with the farm buildings just visible on the right.

## Right:

The windmill, which provides much of the power required for the community to live off the grid.

## Left:

Author Kate McEvoy tending brassicas.





Photo: Adam Newby

## Kate McEvoy describes life in the Brithdir Mawr community in Wales.



People work in a variety of jobs, on-site and off. We don't generate much income as a community as yet. We are just starting to run a range of courses based around the activities of the community plus the skills of some individual members; one member is a dance teacher, another teaches basketry and other crafts, and another green woodworking; so this should develop over time.

We are working together at the moment to develop a statement of our vision for the future of the community; aiming towards sustainability both in land use and in our lives more generally is very important to all of us, and will be a central part of that vision.

*Centre:*  
Members of the Brithdir Mawr Community outside the main building.

*Left:*  
Children have the opportunity to grow up in an unusually safe and nurturing environment.

*Right:*  
Kate McEvoy's partner Ben working in the polytunnel.



### THE LAND

Our 80 acres are mainly grazing land. We also have around 10 acres of mature woodland and four acres of coppice planted since 1995.

All of the heating and most of the cooking is by wood, part from our own land, part from other woodlands nearby which some community members help to manage. At the moment any shortfall is made up by buying offcuts from a nearby sawmill; as our coppice comes into rotation we hope that we will no longer need to do this.

The community is completely off-grid for electricity, water and sewerage. We generate our own power from a combination of small micro-hydro generator, a windmill, and a few solar panels. Our water is spring-fed, and grey water goes to a septic tank, with two composting toilets in the yard.

We are lucky to have an on-site plumber and Rayburn expert, so we have plenty of wood-fired hot water to supplement our two solar water heating panels.

There are two large community gardens, which provide lots of soft fruit and apples, together with nearly all of our vegetables. As well as all the traditional vegetables, our two polytunnels and the reasonably mild west Wales climate means that we have

plenty of tomatoes to bottle, green salad stuff all year round, and even sweet peppers, aubergines and grapes in season. At the moment we run out of both potatoes and carrots by early spring, and sometimes don't have enough onions, but we hope to increase the space for these crops so that we don't need to buy in.

The grazing land supports three working horses, seven goats and two cows. The animals generate enough manure for one of the gardens and the fruit trees; the other vegetable garden is currently managed on a vegan-organic system. This was set up by a vegan member who has now left, but it seemed worthwhile to keep the garden running under the same principles. There are also around 18





chickens who provide eggs, and a flock of 6 Khaki Campbell ducks who do an excellent job of keeping slugs under control, as well as laying extra eggs.

We eat together around four evenings a week, sometimes more. Meals are mainly vegetarian, based as far as possible on our own produce, but we very occasionally eat meat produced on site (cockerels/male kids). We don't raise any animals specifically for food.

We don't have freezers or fridges, because of the amount of electricity they consume, so we do a lot of old-fashioned preserving – bottling, drying and chutney making – and lots of cheese production in the summer and autumn.



### MANY HANDS?

So does community living mean that we get away from the overload of living on the land as a nuclear family? I would say only a qualified yes. Of course it is easier to manage 80 acres with ten adults, rather than two. But there is still a very long list of things that we want – or sometimes need urgently – to do which seem never to make it to the top of the list.

Partly I think it is an age issue – many of us have young children, which inevitably means that we are more occupied with family life than single people or those whose children have grown up. Equally, there would be scope for several more people working on the land here. We are severely limited by planning laws which means that – at least at the moment – we can't increase the size of the community beyond the housing that we have in the farmhouse and out-buildings. Effectively that means that we could at most have one or perhaps two more single people joining, as there are no more family sized spaces left.

But overall I'm not sure that living as a community in itself does help that much in making more time available. Having more people to work a given area of land



helps. Not having to earn the money to pay a huge mortgage also helps, but this is true also for families who bought land long enough ago when it was cheaper or who have paid off money that they owed.

There is also a time cost to living as a larger group. Where a family can make decisions over the kitchen table, a community needs to have meetings. Imagine, for example, trying to decide what colour to paint the sitting room with ten people all needing to have their say. Deeper philosophical decisions around land use or approach to life take this sort of complexity to another level.

Where does community life help? I feel that the

*Top left:*  
Young orchard near the main building.

*Top centre:*  
Sweetcorn in front of one of the converted farm buildings.

*Right:*  
Making a bentwood chair.

*Left:*  
Putting up post and wire fencing.





benefits of community life are to be found elsewhere, in particular in the support and companionship which we are able to give each other. Living on the land can be very isolating, particularly if you are trying to avoid using a car to travel around. When you have nine other adults on site there is no need to worry about a lack of someone to talk to, even if sometimes you do spend your coffee break discussing how the goats got out, when someone is going to mend the fence, and how much it is going to cost! At a practical level eating together so that we don't all have to cook every night, sharing car trips if we need to go further afield, working together on big

jobs, and always having a babysitter close to hand can all make farm life easier.

Bringing together ten adults also means that you have a much wider range of skills available. So, for example, if we were all living separately, only some community members would perhaps live with off-grid renewable energy; only a few have the knowledge and skills to work with horses; others can make computers work or write the website. Living together we are all able to benefit from each other's abilities and enthusiasms.

Living in community can also help in other less concrete ways. In *PM44* the members of the Lampeter Permaculture Group talked about the support that they get from each other ('Power To The People'), and the benefits of feeling that they are not alone in their efforts to live a lower impact lifestyle. Living with a group of others committed to similar ideas is another way to provide that kind of support and backup.

Intentional communities will probably never be the way that most people live, but along with other models like permaculture and other affinity groups, workers/housing co-ops, ecovillages, co-housing and the social centre movement perhaps they can provide ideas and

possibilities for everyone who is trying to develop new ways of relating to one another and a lower impact way of living a fulfilling and happy life 🌱

**FURTHER INFORMATION**  
For more information about Brithdir Mawr and the new programme of courses see [www.brithdirmawr.co.uk](http://www.brithdirmawr.co.uk) or email [visit@brithdirmawr.co.uk](mailto:visit@brithdirmawr.co.uk)

Kate and her partner Ben run the Real Seed Catalogue; see [www.realseeds.co.uk](http://www.realseeds.co.uk) or call 01239 821 107 / email [kate@realseeds.co.uk](mailto:kate@realseeds.co.uk) for a paper copy.

Diggers and Dreamers [www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk](http://www.diggersanddreamers.org.uk) lists most of the intentional communities in the UK, with lots of articles and other info.

**Top centre:**  
Weeding with a hoe helped by one of the ducks.

**Top right:**  
Samson brings a load of hay in from the fields.

**Centre:**  
Cutting firewood with an electric chainsaw.

**Left:**  
One of the three horses on site.

**Right:**  
Centrifuging honeycomb to extract the honey.

