



Stroud Common Wealth

Community Farm Land Trust Project

Case Study

Guild of St George

Bewdley, Worcestershire

Summary

The Guild of St George was founded in 1878 with a gift of £7,000 by John Ruskin (1819-1900); it aims 'to promote the advancement of education and training in the field of rural economy, industrial design and craftsmanship and appreciation of the arts.' Several properties were given to the Guild or acquired. Today it still owns the original 20 acres of forest in Bewdley given to John Ruskin, a further 100 acres of woodland and three small holdings which include the 13 acre acres at Uncllys Farm in the Wyre Forest at Bewdley, Worcestershire.

The Guild owns a number of cottages at Westmill in Hertfordshire and a field at Sheepscombe in Gloucestershire. They are let and managed on fair principles, giving preference to local people. Both the forest in Bewdley and the field at Sheepscombe are National Nature Reserves. The Guild of St George is a company limited by guarantee and a registered charity with open membership. Ruskin's ideas on land trusteeship and the practical experiments made by the Guild have had an enduring influence on the development of land trusteeship.

John Ruskin's Vision

The Guild of St George was founded as a non-profit body to stop the decline of family farms, the loss of rural crafts and trades, and the depopulation of villages. When founding the Guild between 1871 -1878, he appealed for land donations to build village homes, repair village halls, mills, barns and farms. The Guild enabled land that was donated to be held in trust. Tenants were let properties at affordable rents on long lease. The fixed rental system was designed to reduce as the land was improved. One principle was that the amount of land leased to a tenant was restricted to the amount of land the family could cultivate themselves. Construction should use local labour and materials to encourage local economic and ecological self-reliance

His work with Octavia Hill, John Stuart Mill, William Morris et al in the Open Spaces Society from 1865 was important for preserving various commons, such as Wimbledon Common, Wansdworth Common and Epping Forest. Their ideas and values influenced the setting of the National Trust in 1895 by Octavia Hill and Canon Rawnsley.

Benefits and Impact

The practical successes of The Guild of St George are limited to a few small projects- at Totley, Sheffield, building eight cottages on donated land at Barmouth in Wales, three smallholdings, including the 13 acre Unclyls Farm, near Bewdley, Worcestershire. Today, this is let affordably to a family that practices Ruskin's principles of care for the land, forestry, sustainable living using renewable energy, rural arts and crafts and food growing. The main benefit of Unclyls Farm is as a demonstration project, that offers working models of land trusteeship, forestry, sustainable energy, food growing and land stewardship. It is also a place for volunteers to work, courses and for healing and peaceful inspiration for visitors. Unclyls plans to be part of the Greater Wyre Forest Project for appreciating and enhancing landscape character and distinctiveness.

The fact that Ruskin did not just talk about land trusteeship, but enabled its practice through the Guild, is crucial. His ideas were taken up by George Cadbury at Bourneville Village Trust, by Joseph Rowntree at New Earswick, York, by Ebenezer Howard when he founded Letchworth Garden City using Co-operative Land Societies, by Leo Tolstoy, Gandhi, Vinova Bhava's Land and Village Gift movements and then the US Community Land Trust movement.

Unclyls Farm, Bewdley.

John and Linda Iles are developing Unclyls Farm as a sustainable smallholding since taking up the tenancy in October 2004. The farm is a series of clearings in the 6000-acre Wyre Forest, so is surrounded by mature oak forest. Photovoltaics and a multifuel heating system have largely replaced the Lister diesel electricity generator. Most of the land is in a Countryside Stewardship Agreement with DEFRA. The pasture is semi-improved grassland, with the variety of wild flowers nurtured by the grazing system with Dexter cattle. There are plans to revive the orchard, to build up a herd of 20 rare breed organic Dexters, rear some chickens and Gloucester Old Spot pigs. Products such as beef will be sold direct through the local farmers' market.

The farmers are stewarding the holding, inspired by John Ruskin's ideas and principles. For example volunteers have been helping to plant cherry trees, renew fences, build raised beds in the garden and reconnect with the land in practical ways. 'Over the coming years,' say the farmers, 'we hope to be able to host many visitors who will draw peace and inspiration from Unclyls and perhaps decide for themselves ways in which they could tread more lightly on the earth.'

Learning

- A non-profit, charitable body is essential to preserve land assets down the generations - and the Guild of St George demonstrates this can be long lasting
- Such bodies attract land and property gifts over time.
- Small demonstration projects can have a big influence on changing values as well as on practice.
- Leasing land at affordable rents, excluding the estate value of 'the house' on the land is important.
- Land gifts can be preserved by a community land trusteeship body for long lasting community access and farmer benefit.
- Smallholdings, even 13 acres, can be economically viable, supporting a variety of land based educational, artistic, crafts, social activities and businesses.

Further Information

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