

It's been four decades since Felicity Kendal wowed the world in her dungarees in the BBC's sitcom - but for some the search for The Good Life continues, as SEBASTIAN OAKS reveals

EVER since Tom and Barbara entertained us in *The Good Life* on the BBC in the 1970s, leaving the rat-race and living off the land has been a dream at the back of many a mind. And today the vagaries of an uncertain world might make self-sufficiency seem more attractive still. A desert island might even begin to beckon...

But is it really possible? Is it realistic to think you could live successfully by your own efforts alone without needing the outside world?

Producing all your own food might on a smallholding seem not impossible but surely no-one could do without all the countless other ways modern society inputs into their lives? Could someone really survive on their own? What would they do, for example, if the fridge broke down and they couldn't fix it themselves, or should they not have a fridge anyway?

There are perhaps many questions of ethics and practicalities that those interested in this path could end up wrestling with. And you may find

some of those answers on a smallholding at Gorran Churchtown near Mevagissey.

Cotna Eco Retreat is the home of Sara Readman-Smyth and her husband Dave and last December it won a prize for land management at the Cornwall Sustainability Awards. For the past ten years Sara and Dave have worked tirelessly to develop the site to meet as many of their practical needs as possible. It's a textbook example of harnessing the tools of nature through hard graft to create a system that can continue indefinitely without degrading the land. Full but careful use is made of everything; nothing is wasted.

Before coming to Cotna, Sara was teaching in London. She remembers when the property came on the market. 'Dave knew the people who first set up the smallholding and used to help out - and he loved it,' says Sara. 'I sold my flat and Dave sold his cottage and we were able to upsize and buy Cotna together. I didn't know what I was letting myself in for but have learned masses over the years. So has Dave.'

IN SEARCH OF THE GOOD LIFE





Simple living - with a touch of luxury awaits at Cotna Eco Retreat



Cornwall's own Tom and Barbara: Sara Readmane-Smyth and husband Dave

Dave originally trained as a plant biochemist. Sara describes him as 'a plantsman, gardener and ardent composter,' while she says she brings a more reflective side to Cotna through her interest in yoga and meditation. And as a self-confessed foodie, she also enjoys 'cooking up a storm' in the kitchen.

Look around Cotna and you will be amazed at

'Producing all your own food might on a smallholding seem not impossible but surely no-one could do without all the countless other ways modern society inputs into their lives?'

what has been achieved in just 12 acres. Taking pride of place are two polytunnels that seem to go on for ever. In high summer they're bursting with produce, including tomatoes, aubergines, peppers, squash, basil, edible flowers and melons. Outside adjoining vegetable and soft fruit plots are home to salad leaves, spinach, beans, peas, sweetcorn, onions, artichokes, celeriac, strawberries, raspberries, blackcurrants, rhubarb and more. On the other side of the well-used composting area is a small orchard with apples, pears, quince, mulberry and medlar.

Up by the farmhouse green energy production is ▶

equally diverse with photo-voltaic panels, a solar hot water system and a wind turbine. Next to the house is a barn and attached studio made from straw bales, faced with lime render. At first glance the roof appears to be slate but then it doesn't seem quite as it should. That's because the 'slates' are tiles made from recycled car tyres.

Farther down from the growing areas live the hens, providing around a dozen eggs a day, watched over by Sean the cockerel, who also ensures a supply of replacement chicks. Nearby are three yurts and a shepherd's hut, providing back-to-nature holiday accommodation. There's a patch of watercress growing in a stream that runs from the spring that lies at the heart of Cotna and supplies the drinking water. There are lines of willow shoots too, providing the raw material for basket weaving, and even a patch of bamboo to provide canes for the vegetable garden.

Right at the foot of the land is an area of coppiced hazel woodland with larger ash trees that together meet all firewood needs on the site, including the wood-burners in the straw-bale barn and the yurts. Last autumn trials started with charcoal making.

As you might expect, fruit and vegetable growing is organic and most jobs are done by hand. A revolutionary 'no-dig' method is used, based on adding layers of cardboard, compost, horse manure – provided by Bos and Elderflower – and straw to the ground and letting it all break down naturally without disturbing the structure of the soil. Green leafy crops such as comfrey and nettles, seaweed collected from the cove at Portmellon and hen poo are also added into the mix, while the end product from the yurts' compost toilets ensures the continuing health of the fruit trees.

You get the impression that no trick has been missed, nor any opportunity lost. There are beehives here belonging to a friend, aiding pollination and providing free honey. The apples are juiced – on-site obviously – ending up as cider, and Sara makes sourdough bread, granola, hummus, pesto, chutney, fruit vinegar, salad dressing, jam and marmalade.

There's plenty going on but Sara and Dave are not alone in rolling up their sleeves. They are helped through Worldwide Opportunities on Organic Farms (www.woof.net), which provides welcome volunteer workers, known as WWOOFers.

'Through them we have made great progress,' says Sara. 'And at the same time we've met some amazing people whose presence has really enhanced our lives. We've had volunteers from all over – Italy, Spain, France, Chile, South Africa and Latvia, as well as Cornwall and other parts of Britain.'

Even so, Sara is candid about what their days involve. 'It's not an easy life – it's very hard work. You have to live, breathe and eat the place. It takes a lot to keep everything up and running. Dave always says it's like trying to keep a whole load of plates spinning at once!'

And there is the Cornish weather to contend with too. 'We enjoy the different seasons but the worst thing is the cold and wet – the rainy times when it's just muddy and grey.'

So, the leading question is, do Sara and Dave produce all the food they eat themselves? It obviously helps that they are vegetarians but they do buy in



Cider is one of the many products created from the produce grown at Cotna



Cotna's eco-credentials include photo-voltaic panels, a solar hot water system, composting toilets and a wind turbine



Picking tomatoes that will go into one of Sara's many favourite vegetarian dishes



The chickens lay a dozen eggs a day, while Sean the cockerel helps supply more chicks

staples, such as cereal grains, as well as spices, condiments and other items.

'To grow all our own food would be quite hard, very full-time,' she admits. 'I think it would be possible – we could survive. But we would need to be even more dedicated and spend even more of our time on this one aspect of life here. In the end it comes down to a balance between time and money.'

There are other signs too that Cotna is not a sealed bubble, ignoring everything beyond its borders. Salad leaves are sold to farm shops and local pubs and restaurants, a range of courses and retreats are organised and, as well as offering holiday-makers a chance to learn from Cotna, Sara and Dave host visits from the local primary school and work with students from Falmouth University.

Nor too is Cotna an idealistic hair-shirt designed to ensure life is harsh. Both Sara and Dave have cars and there is a quad bike to make it easier to move things around. They do have a TV, although Sara claims they only watch it 'once a week in winter', and they also like to escape once a year to somewhere hot and dry, often Greece.

Maybe it helps that both Dave and Sara have part-time paid jobs elsewhere to help keep things in the black. Dave organises volunteers to maintain



Cotna grows dozens of fruits and vegetables to help it towards self-sufficiency

footpaths and cycle routes and Sara teaches students with dyslexia. Does this mean though that the smallholding could never be fully self-financing? Sara says that, on the contrary, Cotna certainly could pay its way, but until now, development has taken priority and that has needed a certain amount of hard cash. This year, however, with everything more or less as they want it, Sara and Dave's reliance on additional finance is expected to lessen.

It is reassuring for anyone contemplating treading in the couple's footsteps and Sara is quick to recommend the way of life. 'I feel very fortunate to be here,' she tells me. 'The best thing about our life at Cotna is the great potential around us and the excitement that brings. The creativity and the freedom to do what we want are very fulfilling.'

Clearly a distinctive pathway has been forged at Cotna, combining a sustainable, low-impact lifestyle and self-reliance with an undiminished embrace of the outside world and even a few mod-cons. It's a contemporary, relevant, open approach to green living.

One thing is for sure: Tom and Barbara would have loved it. ♦

For more information, visit cotna.co.uk