



smallholding



commercial activities will depend on the local environment; these Jacob's sheep, for example, prefer higher ground.

what is it?

It's an area of land bigger than a garden and smaller than a farm, used for productive agriculture or forestry. The lines are blurred however, so you can think of a smallholding as a very small farm. Crofts (Scotland) are smallholdings, although there is a legally-defined tenure for a croft, but not for a smallholding. Smallholdings can be comprised of families, individuals or communities, where people pool resources to hold land together.

Smallholding is still the most common livelihood in the world, even though there is a global flow from country to city (and in the West, a trickle has started in the opposite direction). The UK has the largest farms in Europe, due to a history of policies intended to phase out smaller farms. The Enclosures were the most obvious example (and in Scotland, the Highland Clearances). Landowners and factory owners were often in conflict, but when it came to despatching poor farmers into cities to become factory fodder, they were in complete agreement. Also in the UK, primogeniture (passing land on to the eldest son) tended to monopolise land ownership. In France, this system was changed after the revolution, and helped to keep holdings smaller.

There was a smallholding revival in the early 20th century. The Liberal Party brought in the Allotments and Smallholdings Act of 1908 that initiated county smallholdings – county councils were able to buy land and rent to smallholders. Land taxes were introduced after WW1, and many large estates were sold off for housing, land resettlement and farms. The land resettlement scheme was designed for returning soldiers, and when the depression kicked in, for unemployed

rural workers. The scheme was finally killed off by Mrs Thatcher, and then John Major advised councils to sell off county smallholdings. Now the situation is more polarised. As farms go bust, parts are sold to already large farmers, and parts get sold to a variety of individual buyers, including horsey folk, leisure parks and smallholders.

what are the benefits?

productivity: smallholdings are normally more productive per acre than larger farms – they are farmed more intensively, and often mixed, having more than one thing on the same patch of land. Also, because smallholders' income tends to be lower, they try to get as much from the land as possible (and, just maybe, there is more love applied per acre by smallholders living on their land than large farms with absentee landlords).

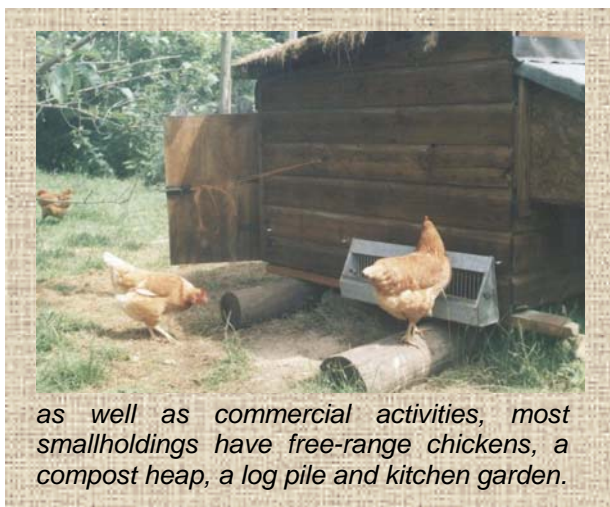
environmental: smallholders on their own land can be more flexible, and their rewards are not just financial, so they can experiment with low-impact technologies and practices. Also, smallholders can provide more of life's necessities for themselves and their communities, so reducing transport. And of course the environmental benefits are greater if the smallholding is organic.

social: smallholdings employ more people than larger farms, so provide benefits to rural economies via employment and providing goods for sale. Smallholdings can take business from supermarkets, and put it into rural areas that have been losing jobs for years. Stronger communities and economies can retain more services such as buses and post offices, and support traditional skills such as blacksmithing and hedgelaying.

personal: it's not easy to make a living from a smallholding, but no more difficult than from a



when it comes to building a home on a smallholding, you can go super-eco, like this off-grid roundhouse with turf roof on a smallholding in Pembrokeshire.



as well as commercial activities, most smallholdings have free-range chickens, a compost heap, a log pile and kitchen garden.

large farm. Smallholdings offer activities that are varied, physically and mentally demanding, healthy, outside and close to nature. It's more of a way of life; the rewards are social, environmental – even spiritual, with greater independence from commercial pressures.

what can I do?

First you need to get some experience, find out what works and what doesn't, and see if the life is for you. Go WWOOFing – talk to smallholders, and pick up skills. Next work out what you want to do – market gardening, animals, or a combination of the two; or maybe something more specialised – veg box scheme, bees, mushrooms or point of lay hens. Of course you need to know how to do those things, so you need some training, some targeted WWOOFing, or a job at a specialist farm. You'll need some money. Do you have a house to sell? Maybe you could get together with other people, and divide up the land accordingly. There will be benefits in having a cluster of smallholdings – shared vehicles and equipment, marketing, childcare, labour and bartering.

Then find some land. Word of mouth is good, and about 5-10% of estate agents specialise in land. More than half of land sales are via auctions – run by estate agents. If the land has a house already on it, it's less likely to be sold at auction. Agricultural land is currently (2009) around £5000 per acre, but certain factors will bump this up, e.g. being close to a town. Woodland is less, but is catching up.

Your workload will depend on the activities you choose. On 50 acres, you could run beef cattle part-time, but a small mixed holding with vegetables could involve a lot of work, and you might need to live on your land. If so, you'll need to prove to the planners that the enterprise is economically viable and that you have a need to be there. You can apply to your local planning authority to build a home, but the process could take a long time and is often unsuccessful. An option is to build your home and apply for permission retrospectively. This not an offence, but can also take a long time. Permission is more likely for an enterprise that is competent and financially viable. If it's neither of those things, then you won't succeed. You have to put in copious management plans with your application. Write down what you're going to do, costs, and targeted profits over 3 years. If you build a single dwelling house on your smallholding and live in it continuously for 4 years (and can prove it) then you will be immune from planning enforcement (which is the equivalent of having planning permission). Getting to live on your smallholding can be complicated however, and we suggest you do your homework. See Chapter 7's website and *DIY Planning Briefings* (resources).

Buying a smallholding with a house on is very expensive. This route could work if you have a house to sell – especially if it's in London.

resources

- LILI have a low-impact smallholding course and a range of books, including:
- *Surviving & Thriving on the Land*, Rebecca Laughton
- *the Smallholder's Manual*, Katie Thear
- *the Smallholder's DIY*, Michael Roberts
- *DIY Planning Briefings: a guide to the planning system for smallholders*, Chapter 7
- Chapter 7: campaign for access to land for all - tlio.org.uk/chapter7, 01460 249204
- bestofbreeds.com/clubcorner/countrybreeds/sm-allholding.htm - Smallholding Societies: list of UK smallholding associations
- Country Smallholding Magazine, useful articles – countrysmallholding.com, 0844 848 2892
- the Land Magazine, devoted to land issues, available from LILI

Contact us or visit our website to find out more about our factsheets, books, courses, online shop, links, forum, events and volunteering on organic farms. You can also become a 'Friend of LILI', and receive our e-newsletter, discounts on our courses, and help us to make a difference.

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