

Tired of the hustle and bustle? Reap the rewards of the good life on a smallholding

TO PASTURES NEW

by **Graham Norwood**

YOU don't have to join climate change protest group Extinction Rebellion to do your bit for the environment.

There are growing numbers changing their lifestyles and their homes to get closer to nature and give their families a taste of the countryside.

In the jargon of estate agents they're called Greenshifters — people who up sticks from the city, sell their property and move to a rural location, bagging

themselves a beautiful home and a few acres of land on which to rear some animals and grow family fruit and vegetables. Some people have smallholdings as a hobby or others try to make a living from it — such as Steve Bates and Matt Brown who have land near Aldridge in the West Midlands.

They run a website explaining exactly what a smallholder's life is like (smallholding.blog). In addition to a

range of animals, and crops from chillies to pumpkins, they have solar panels to provide power.

'Our biggest tip to anyone is to take it steady and expect problems. Our land is in the middle of nowhere with no neighbours, no gas, electric or running water, so everything we do has to have this taken into account,' Steve says.

'When the sun's out it's fun and enjoyable, but you have to remember to take water on every single trip. In winter it's pretty when it snows, but gets extremely cold,' he adds.

Downsides include occasional rural crime and dog attacks, but Steve says that they are always out-weighted by the good times.

'Goats giving birth, bees producing honey, the chickens, ducks, geese and turkeys all laying eggs we can eat and bake nice cakes

with. The hard work is worth it in the end.'

So if you want to follow suit, how do you do it?

Firstly, check a smallholding is right for you. Speak to people who have already made the move to the country — many smallholders have blogs with contact details, and most are happy to help new converts. Better still, stay with one: several have rental cottages on the smallholding and allow visitors to help out.

At the Lint Mill in Lanarkshire (thelintmill.co.uk) paying guests are encouraged to do as much or little as they like on an organic smallholding, where there are horses, hens, ducks, pigs, geese, a peacock and a donkey.

Meanwhile, in Northern Ireland there is Lackan Cottage Farm (lackan.cottage.co.uk), an off-grid cottage and converted horsebox where you can stay and witness the owners' sustainable grow-your-own lifestyle.

Secondly, find the right property. If you're convinced about the move, then it's not enough to say you want 'a house with land' as you may want out-buildings, easy road access, hills, pasture or woodland, depending on your ambitions for the smallholding.

'Fifteen years ago buyers wanted five acres without knowing what to do with it: now buyers who want small

amounts of land have a definite need — ponies, growing things, or privacy.

'People like the idea of slow food and family activity so go in for growing,

brewing, curing, smoking and pickling for a farmers market,' says James Greenwood of [Stacks Property Search](http://stackspropertysearch.com) (stacks.co.uk) a buying agency.

THIRDLY, learn the skills. Humble By Nature — a

Monmouthshire farm set up by TV nature expert Kate Humble and her husband Ludo Graham back in 2011 — is one of many country companies across the UK offering classes for inexperienced smallholders.

They include various forms of animal husbandry from bee keeping to lambing and even sheep shearing, plus rural skills tuition —

hedge making, laying a dry stone wall or cider-making, (humblebynature.com).

'We allow people to come here to live out their fantasies or to learn what it's like to keep their own animals,' says Kate. 'So if they have a bit of land and that's what they want to do, they can go home and do it. If anybody leaves here with clean hands and nothing under their nails, we've failed them.'

Fourthly, remember the red tape. Heading to the country doesn't mean you can escape bureaucracy.

There's help online to steer you through County Parish Holding numbers required for agricultural land, and for registering



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livestock with the Animal Health Veterinary Laboratories Agency. These will help: defra.gov.uk, rpa.gov.uk and cla.org.uk.

Finally, sell your produce: There are now more than 550 farmers' markets in Britain, according to the Farm Retail Association — and they're still expanding as the UK becomes more interested in its food provenance, (farma.org.uk).



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Fresh start: A smallholding in Argyll, West Scotland