

How *THE LAND* CAME TO FACE EVICTION

SIMON FAIRLIE tells the story.

*The doors were all bolted, the windows were pinned,
But at a small peep in the window Long Lankin crept in.**

For the last 13 years *The Land's* HQ has been accommodated, along with two of its editors, Simon Fairlie and Gill Barron, at Monkton Wyld Court (MWC) near Lyme Regis, Dorset. MWC is one of those run down stately homes that metamorphosed into hippie communes around the 1980s. Starting out life as a rectory in the 1840s, it became an anarchist inspired free school in 1941, which functioned well for three decades, but became a bit too anarchist for its own good in the 1970s. It was shut down in 1982, and became a community run by a charity with educational objectives.

Initially the school was overseen by a handful of 'governors', elected by and accountable to an association of up to fifty members. The model is familiar to many charities. But somewhere along the line this membership association faded away, and when we arrived in 2010, the governors, now called trustees, were already a law unto themselves. Technically they are the owners of the property. Without an overseeing membership body, trustees are an unaccountable dictatorship, who can prolong or reinforce their grip over a charity by co-opting any new trustee that they fancy; and it can be very hard to get rid of them.

If these trustees are benign, and have the interests of the charity and whoever actually runs it at heart, then all well and good. In 2008, because the community was losing money and experiencing a high turnover of members, the trustees persuaded everyone (except an obstinate gardener) to leave and employed somebody to restructure the community, which she did quite successfully.

When Gill and I arrived in 2010 to revive the microdairy, which had functioned almost uninterrupted since 1941, we could see why the trustees had pressed the restart button. The house was apparently crumbling, supported in one place by wooden buttresses to prevent the collapse of a bay window

whose repair allegedly would cost £75,000, while rain and frost would blow shards of masonry off the roof's coping stones. The land was in a dire state with the fencing abandoned, the grassland rank, the walled garden a straggling mosaic of weeds and esoteric inedibles, the reed bed regurgitating sewage, and the soil impregnated with the archaeology of hippie indolence: plastic mulch and the remains of abandoned sweat lodges. The farm buildings were leaking and stuffed with the detritus of 'family weeks': yoghurt pot Daleks, papier-mâché dragons, and rotting heaps of unidentifiable tat.

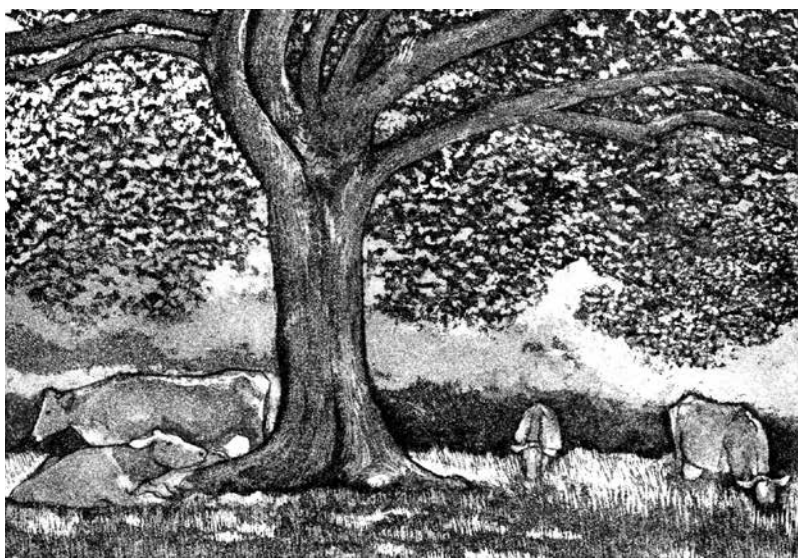
Thirteen years later, thanks to the combined effort of a dedicated team, the guest house is thriving, the buttress has been removed, coping stones have been replaced, the leaks are repaired, the reed bed is replaced by an efficient WET system (see *The Land* 28, p. 50), a timber-framed barn has been built, and the microdairy and garden produce all our dairy products and a high proportion of our vegetables. MWC is one of the few communities in the country that providest members with not only a place to live, but also a livelihood.

Trustees from Another World

Over this time the trustees played a largely enabling role, keeping an eye on the finances, and intervening only when difficulties arose. There was one trying episode in 2015 when a new trustee was co-opted onto the board claiming he could help us because he knew how to handle the business world. It turned out he was *of* that world, and after trying to persuade other trustees that MWC was financially unsustainable and legally unsound, he commissioned consultants Carter Jonas to produce a feasibility study for the sale of the property. Fortunately he lacked staying power, and when he encountered resistance from the community, he cracked and resigned.

Once this threat was dispelled, MWC entered into a productive period in which the finances improved, the new WET system was constructed and the Covid lockdowns were successfully weathered, leaving the community with sufficient funds to pay for the rewiring of the entire thirty-roomed mansion.

It was in early 2023 that the rogue trustee syndrome reared its ugly head again. Two of the trustees indicated that they wanted to resign and so word was put out to locate new ones. In January 2023, five were co-opted onto the board, including three former pupils of the school, and a certain Ms X. She is a magistrate (though she didn't mention this in her CV), who lives in London's Muswell Hill. She did mention that she had worked in the public and corporate sectors, where she was used to handling sums in the order of £450 million, in partnership with financial consultants Deloitte and KPMG. Not an obvious choice for an alternative community, but her promise to bring in funding impressed some, even though we had successfully operated without funding for ten years.



*An etching of cows under the oak tree, dating from when MWC was a school.
The same scene can be seen today.*

All went quiet until March, when a long term volunteer, whom I call the Lankin, came to the end of his six month probationary trial and applied to become a permanent member. At MWC, as in many residential communities, there has to be unanimous approval from existing members for an applicant to be accepted as a full member. This is necessary in order to avoid permanently cementing existing tensions into the community.

Several members had found the Lankin to be a difficult character – pushy, argumentative, not one to take a back seat and observe how the place functioned before coming forward with ideas how to change it. But he had maintenance skills that were sorely needed, so it was agreed to extend his trial period for a further three months.

The very next day, the trustees emailed to say that ‘issues had been raised’, though they wouldn’t say what these issues were. An email correspondence followed over the next ten days in which the trustees drip fed information: that the matter involved ‘contracts and behaviour’; that it was a workplace complaint; that there were complaints of bullying and intimidation; that the complaints were levelled against Gill, myself and Jyoti Fernandes, who had been a trustee for over 15 years – and (it later transpired) about the way the community was managed as a whole. Eventually the Lankin acknowledged what many suspected, that he was the source of the complaints. He had applied to become a member of the community, whilst failing to divulge that he was actually deeply dissatisfied with it, and so liable to disrupt it.

At this point, had they acted correctly, the trustees should have asked the Lankin whether he had taken his complaints through the community’s internal grievance procedure, as specified in his contract. Instead they commissioned an HR consultant (let’s call her HR) to carry out an investigation into the complaints, who conducted telephone interviews with seven other former and current community members.

However the three of us under investigation were not allowed to see the Lankin’s complaints, nor transcripts of the telephone interviews, so we had no way of responding to the allegations made against us. The trustees justified this ‘confidentiality’ on the grounds that the complaints were a ‘whistleblowing’ disclosure even though government guidance states clearly:

Personal grievances (for example bullying, harassment, discrimination) are not covered by whistleblowing law, unless your particular case is in the public interest. Report these under your employer’s grievance policy.

When we later showed the Lankin’s letter of complaint to a solicitor with higher qualifications and longer experience than HR, she was adamant that there was no public interest and the matter was in no way a whistleblowing disclosure.

Gill and I only got to see the Lankin’s letter of complaint when it was sent to us in the very same email that contained HR’s report, which upheld all his complaints. The report also cited evidence against us from the other interviewees, whose names had been redacted from the copy.

Unfortunately for HR, she wasn’t very good at redacting. When we later transposed the blacked-out names into an InDesign lay-out file, they magically reappeared! I was therefore able to interview all the people that HR had interviewed. What they told me they had said to HR was widely divergent from what

she had claimed they said, casting considerable doubt upon the reliability of the report.

However, a week after receiving HR’s report, when Gill and I were hauled up before a disciplinary tribunal, the redactees’ names had not yet been unveiled. We delivered a thorough rebuttal of the Lankin’s complaints, showing that his allegations were unsubstantiated, and in some cases sheer fantasy. For example he claimed that Gill would ‘bully, intimidate, coerce and manipulate her way through meetings’, when she hadn’t even been to any meetings for over two years, since long before the Lankin arrived. Another community member provided a five page critique of deficiencies in HR’s report.

All this was ignored by the two trustees adjudicating, who delivered a guilty verdict. Gill and I were given six months notice to leave the community (along with the cows and *The Land* magazine), a sentence that was confirmed a month later at an ‘appeal’ held on Zoom and adjudicated by Ms X herself, which we both refused to attend. Meanwhile Jyoti was grilled on Zoom by the other trustees on the grounds that she had a conflict of interest, and in her words was ‘coerced’ into resigning.

A Familiar Story

As a result, Monkton Wyld Court has been plunged into a state of meltdown. When Jasmine, the head vegetable grower, lodged complaints of bullying against the Lankin, her complaints were ignored, she was dismissed ‘with immediate effect’, and the walled garden was ordered to ‘lapse’ in mid-June. Eight residents at MWC out of twelve signed a vote of no confidence in the trustees. In response they sacked John the office worker, again with immediate effect. Two long term volunteers who had been aiming to join the community resigned, as did another two trustees. With all except one of the remaining community members ‘on strike’, the trustees have brought in ‘blackleg’ supply staff, with the result that MWC is now split into two camps.

What the trustees have in mind for the future of the charity, we don’t know and they won’t say. We wonder whether they have their eyes on the farmyard, which could be converted into holiday accommodation, or even to three or four dwellings if the Government’s plans to extend Class Q conversions to Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty come to pass. But that is just guesswork.

What we do know is that this kind of action by unaccountable trustees follows a familiar pattern. In the past we have heard of similar stories: at the Westway project in London, Unstone Grange near Sheffield, Embercombe and Dartington in Devon, and people keep coming up with others. There are two sides in any dispute, and *The Land* does not have sufficient evidence to pass judgment on any of these cases. What is certain is that charities where the trustees are not accountable to a wider body are vulnerable to being taken over by a coterie with an agenda. If you are thinking of handing land over to a charitable trust: beware!

**The above is, of course, is a biased account.
If you want to read material from both sides go to
www.monktonwyldcourtcase.co.uk;
or email the trustees at monktonwyldtrustees@gmail.com**

* From *Long Lankin*, a traditional ballad; Martin Carthy’s version.