

Resilient
Green Spaces
Mannau
Gwyrdd Gwydn



Exploring Community Access to Farms & Land

Ecological Land Cooperative Case Study
Resilient Green Spaces



School of Geography
and Planning
Ysgol Daearyddiaeth
a Chynllunio

The donation of Maesgwyn Isaf Farm to the Ecological Land Cooperative

The Landworkers' Alliance and Shared Assets have teamed up to find ways to realise the challenges and opportunities of access to land for new entrants and local communities interested in agroecological farming as part of the [Resilient Green Spaces](#) project. This series of case studies are meant to showcase existing good practice amongst a variety of groups in Wales, as well explain how they have tried to tackle some of the barriers they've faced along the way, to inspire others who might be on a similar journey. This case study has been prepared by the Ecological Land Cooperative.

The Ecological Land Cooperative

The [Ecological Land Cooperative](#) (ELC) is a community benefit society, cooperative in structure, established to address the lack of affordable sites for ecological land-based livelihoods in England and Wales. The ELC is supported by the Ecological Land Trust (ELT) which is a registered charity. Together they work to address a range of complex and deep-rooted social and environmental challenges in a simple and pragmatic way by removing barriers to land access for sustainable uses. Set up in 2009, the ELC's core business model is to buy agricultural land, securing planning permission and installing infrastructure for clusters of affordable residential, ecologically managed, smallholdings. The farms are then sold on a long lease to new entrant farmers with permission to build their own sustainable home with off-grid utilities and road access.

The ELC's vision is to see a living, working countryside where land is valued as a way to enhance the good of community, countryside and the natural world. Revitalising rural economies, new entrants are supported into agriculture by making access to land a reality for all. The ELC holds land for agroecology in perpetuity, for the benefit of the community.

The ELC's aim is to enable low-impact, land-based livelihoods. Through the stewardship of land, communities create healthful, wholesome and ecologically sound food and land-based products that benefit people and the biosphere, now and into the future. On the ELC's sites land stewards run small scale farms that are growing a wide range of produce for their local communities including vegetable and fruit box schemes, edible herbs and flowers, wholesale organic vegetables and salads, heritage fruit trees, and a farm to fork food business, with opportunities for local people to get involved in growing food.

Maesgwyn Isaf Farm

Maesgwyn Isaf is a 47-acre farm in Carmarthenshire in South Wales. The farm consists of four sloping pasture fields, multiple areas of woodland, an orchard, streams, a wind turbine, a stone circle, a five bedroomed farmhouse and agricultural buildings including two large barns and a polytunnel.

The Carters bought the farm in 2002, over time they planted extensive windbreaks around every field, planted the lower parts of the site with native woodland trees and installed an access track through the existing and new woodland. They installed a 6kW wind turbine in the top centre field and previously planted the same field with miscanthus, a biofuel, which has now been returned to pasture. They recreated a stone circle next to the Landsker Trail footpath and planted a Peace Wood where many friends and family members' ashes are scattered. The pasture fields were rented out for grazing.

In 2010 the Carters approached the ELC as they wished to ensure the land would be respected and managed ecologically in perpetuity. They were considering creating an intentional community at Maesgwyn Isaf with opportunities for educational services in ecological land use.

They were willing to exchange their title on the land for a long-leasehold on a small eco-house as long as the remainder of the site was to be managed ecologically and responsibly by the ELC. The Carters had worked the land and wanted to continue to have a role on the farm, albeit a physically less demanding one. The ELC team visited and put a proposal to them to create smallholdings on their land but this was not taken up and we did not hear from them again for some years.

Stuart Carter contacted us again in 2018 to tell us that the ELC had been named as the beneficiary of Maesgwyn Isaf Farm in his will but he had some conditions that he wanted to add. His wife, Jenn, had died and they had both agreed that they wanted the land to go to the ELC before she passed away. At this point, in the summer of 2018, we visited Stuart again to walk the land, and we agreed to his conditions which were to maintain parts of the farm for public access around the Landsker Trail and to allow his family members to continue to live in their caravan on the farm for as long as they wanted to. We left hoping that it would be a long time before we heard anything about Maesgwyn Isaf. Sadly, less than two years later, in May 2020, Stuart passed away peacefully and we were notified of the bequest by his solicitors.

Probate

Stuart Carter's estate executors were his solicitor and a family member. It was anticipated that going through the process of probate could take upwards of a year. It was possible that the will could be contested and then this process could take longer and the farm might not come to the ELC. As the farm and farmhouse needed maintenance in order not to fall into disrepair, the solicitor suggested that the ELC could be granted a licence to occupy the farm as soon as possible so as to be able to do this work.



*View from Maesgwyn Isaf at sunrise
(Image credit: Ecological Land Cooperative)*

We knew that there was no guarantee that we would eventually inherit the farm but we felt a sense of duty to maintain it for now. Unfortunately, the family member executor felt that this was unnecessary and ruled this out. The farm and farmhouse were left empty for the duration of the probate process. Taking Ownership of the Farm

It took over two years to effect the handover of the farm which completed in July 2022. During this time much of the farm became overgrown and the house became uninhabitable through damp and weather damage. Some fields were used for pasture by a local farmer and he topped the other fields in exchange. The wind turbine ceased functioning and needed major repairs to begin generating electricity again.

The family members living on the farm had not been in a position to take care of the farm or the farmhouse and it had fallen into disrepair. There was a sizeable regeneration job to be done before we would be in a position to offer new entrant farmers the opportunity to get started on the farm. Despite this there were still many benefits of inheriting a farm over buying agricultural land to develop into residential small farms.

Although there was a lot work to be done to bring the farmhouse and buildings into use, this was work that could be started immediately.

We were able to make part of the house habitable and bring caretakers onto the farm who have been able to clear the paths and start work on repairing the house. We have kept the costs of this down by offering rent free accommodation in exchange for a number of hours work on the farm. This has proved to be a mutually beneficial arrangement as Maesgwyn Isaf Farm is a lovely place to live and work. The ELC has also benefitted from having people on site who are getting to know the farm well and integrating into the local community.

Additional Land

We have been able to buy an adjoining 20-acre field which once was part of the farm at a very good price. This land is only accessible through Maesgwyn Isaf and so was not appealing to buyers when it went to auction. This opportunity would not have been available to us without owning the existing farm as ELC sites need to have particular attributes including road access. Having additional pasture land creates potential for a small livestock business on the farm.

Crowdfunding

Receiving a donation of a beautiful farm allowed us to reach out to our community and raise funds to bring the farm back to life. We exceeded our targets and raised enough money to begin the repairs needed to get people onto the farm. We do not have any outstanding debt on the farm, which is not the case when we buy land to create smallholdings as we borrow money to make the purchase and this must be repaid when the development is ready to be sold.



*The farmhouse at Maesgwyn Isaf
(Image credit: Ecological Land Cooperative)*

Plans for the Future

Having no loans to be repaid allows the ELC to consider different options for small farm tenancies. As well as selling long term (150) year leases, we could offer secure rentals which are more affordable and also allow people to take on shorter term farm leases. The money generated through rents can be directly invested in the farm to continue the regeneration process. Because we do not need to seek planning permission we can consider alternatives to commercial farm businesses such as subsistence farming, local craft businesses and land-based activities that only require small plots of land.

The land and buildings hold many opportunities for community engagement and we will explore with people locally to see how best to realise this. The farmhouse could provide rental accommodation for local people, which is in short supply, and the outbuildings could be affordable workspace for local trades such as woodworkers and builders.

The generosity of spirit and care for the land that led the Carters to donate their farm to the ELC and bring it into community ownership will provide a home and a livelihood for many new entrants to farming as well as a resource for the local community long into the future.

Find out more:

<https://ecologicaland.coop/sites/maesgwyn-isaf/>

About Resilient Green Spaces:

Resilient Green Spaces is a £1.27m partnership project being led by Social Farms & Gardens to pilot alternative re-localised food systems using communities and their green spaces as the driving force for change across Wales until June 2023.

This project has received funding through the Welsh Government Rural Communities – Rural Development Programme 2014-2020, which is funded by the European Agricultural Fund for Rural Development and the Welsh Government.

