



Forty years of living and learning

Laurieston Hall in the south-west of Scotland is a rural co-operative now in its 40th year. Patrick Upton, a resident since the very early days, reflects on how this intentional eco community has evolved over the decades.

Since its origins in 1972 as a commune, Laurieston Hall has matured into a combination of established smallholding and holiday centre. What hasn't changed is the commitment to cooperation. Indeed, for a group of people with disparate beliefs and visions, it is cooperation that is the cement, the common factor in much of what we do and aspire to.

When I joined the commune nine months after it started, I was 23 and felt considerably younger than the rest of the adult members who were in their late 20s and early 30s. They had children, careers they'd left and homes they'd sold in order to make the move. To local folk and to the media we were hippy drop-outs, but

we considered ourselves the opposite – we were choosing to engage with the issues of the time, both by exploring new social and family forms and by taking responsibility for our daily lives through the practice of self-sufficiency. We were – and still are – an intentional community.

The first decade was turbulent – some of the founders left, new members came. We had to develop structures that would help us live with each other, define our principles and allow us to develop both as individuals and as a group. Laurieston Hall is an Edwardian mansion house with outlying buildings, a walled garden,



Above: An aerial view of Laurieston Hall. Right: April roof maintenance. Opposite page: The Laurieston cows pass the haymaking field. Photos: Chris Mitchell and Dave Edwards.

and, at the time, 12 acres of land. We quickly had to learn all the skills necessary to grow food and to maintain the buildings... and we had to find ways of making a living. We soon appreciated that the best way to learn about these aspects was to ask local people, the farmers and the trades people. How do you raise pigs? Why have those potatoes gone brown? How do you fix a leaking lead roof? So many people gave their help and advice, especially the long-established farming families nearby.

The art of co-operation

The art of co-operation partly came as a by-product of working and learning together. We had theories of how it should be done, but the actual practice and development of our own version evolved with the years. At first we all lived together, sharing income and expenditure, childcare and meals. When we became too large for this – about 12 adults seemed the top limit for this type of living – we split into ‘living groups’. These were, and still are, clusters of adults who might share a closer friendship or personal outlook. By the late 1980s the attractions of a less emotionally entwined set-up led to the commune transforming itself into a co-operative, adopting model rules from the Industrial Common Ownership Movement as a legal template and confirming some precepts that continue to this day.

Equality is perhaps the most important of these. Once someone is accepted as a member, they pay the same rent and have the same rights, in theory, as someone who has lived here forever. However, in practice, their influence on decisions will be considerably less. It takes at least two years – known here as ‘the honeymoon period’ – for new members to learn at least some of the ropes. It can sometimes mean finding out that this lifestyle just doesn’t suit them, however careful our joining process was.

Consensus underpins our decision-making process. It is a highly inclusive principle and is practised

by both the small committees which oversee the various work areas – garden, land, wood, finance, etc – and the weekly meeting of the whole co-op. Members are expected to have and express views, often helped by simple systems such as the ‘go-round’ – we sit in a circle in our meetings and each person has the opportunity to say something about an issue. Achieving consensus can be slow and frustrating. It doesn’t mean everyone thinking the same, but it does mean all of us eventually accepting an outcome as the best decision the group could reach at the time. It can mean that we are more conservative than some members would like. The same approach and attention is given to issues as big as whether to develop the Stables into new housing, to as small as how best to rid the garden of moles.

Work-share is key to the financial viability of Laurieston Hall, each member giving about two and a half days a week unpaid to the co-op to do any of the tasks needed to keep us going. Nobody keeps a tally – we are small enough to know if folk are slipping significantly and we try to be tolerant of varying capabilities and commitments. However, we all know that if we didn’t have this system then we couldn’t afford to live here. This equality of input is reflected in equal access to output – we all take from the garden and food stores according to need, but with an eye too on what is a fair allocation. All of our heating and much of our cooking is done with woodfuel – a mixture of managed resources from our own land (now over 130 acres) and bought-in logs which are processed and stored in sheds. We take from these according to need, but follow restrictions on use, especially of precious hardwoods.

Challenges of maturity

The issues we face as a 40-year-old community are partly caused by our success – there aren’t many communes or residential co-ops of that vintage and even fewer where more than half of the 23 adult members have lived there for two decades or more (and five of us for virtually the whole

time). The People Centre business has changed with the group, moving from focusing on political activism to personal creativity such as music and dance. However, many people return every year and have become our friends. The outcome is a two-season lifestyle – six months with lots of people visiting and six with largely just ourselves. This has been a rhythm crucial to our longevity... 12 months of either would be too much.



This very stability is also a problem. How can newer members feel that they ‘own’ the place in the same way as we elder ones? Whilst we do play together, it is work – often physical and outdoors – where we focus our cooperation. How will we continue to do this work with the many of us already in our 50s and 60s? Why would younger people join if part of the deal might seem to be acting as carers for a highly opinionated group of aging parent figures?

It has been said that we are just another form of community, a place closer to a co-housing project than a commune and little different from the nearby village. I think, though, that our peculiarity is living and working together, thereby sharing chunks of our emotional and economic lives. These are sustained in diverse ways, from the power delivered by our hydro system to the social cement of our weekly pot-luck suppers. Many more people could be living like this, learning cooperation as they live it, and thereby continuing the push for the social change we sought all those years ago.

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