

*The final chapter*

I took over the Thornham Estate from my father in 1980 when he died aged 97. I had inherited it from my Uncle Charles when he died, but my father ran it while I worked abroad and in London. The development of the Estate followed on seamlessly from my years of charity work and was my response to the problems of the area. Julia and I had both been brought up in the now old-fashioned but fundamental Christian belief that the fortunate should share with their less fortunate neighbours. As owner through no virtue of my own, of a lovely Estate, we felt especially blessed. We had worked in the deprived urban areas, and seen the rigours of life there and saw in Thornham a unique opportunity to help people in real need. We thought we could and should build on our experience and the location and capacity of the Estate to develop a resource, responding in as many different ways as possible to the needs of the local and wider community.

In the 1980s unemployment was a major national concern, and locally jobs, mainly in agriculture, were in decline. At the start of the century, when Thornham began to fail as an economic concern, there were about 10 important country houses within 10 miles, all of which have since disappeared, and all of which provided jobs and a way of life. We sought to provide jobs and resources, to invigorate the local communities and involve them in their countryside and gradually to diversify some of the Estate's traditional activities. In this we were encouraged by the Structure Plan for Suffolk, which called attention to the complete absence of amenities around Eye. We seemed in an ideal position to respond. There was, despite isolated

examples elsewhere, a good deal that was experimental.

When my grandfather inherited at the end of the nineteenth century, the Estate had been some 40,000 acres. By the 1970s it had been reduced to 2000 acres with substantial land sales after the First and Second World Wars. During the Second World War, the Estate was used for the war effort. There was a radio post in the woods and Thornham Hall served as divisional headquarters. Italian prisoners of war were housed in huts in the old garden and woods. There are now around 1,200 acres of arable land, 400 acres of woodland, ponds and parkland and a river, the Dove flows through it. The Estate contains two small villages; Thornham Parva and Thornham Magna and is bordered by five others; Gislingham, Mellis, Yaxley, Wickham Skieth and Stoke Ash.

Julia and I had married in 1976 and came to live at Red House where I had lived as a boy. The house, which started as two clay lump cottages in the sixteenth century, had traditionally always been lived in by the Agent, and is set in the middle of the Estate yard, with the model nineteenth-century farm buildings around it. When I was a boy, the yard was the base for the Estate workers, where they ate their lunch and reported to the Estate office – the carpenters, the farrier, the sawmill men, the horsemen, the cowmen and the keepers. The engine that drove the mill chugged away in the south-east corner.

In 1976 the yards had largely fallen into disuse and disrepair. The Red Poll herd had all but disappeared, but there were still 13 men working on the farm, in the woods and on maintenance. There were two keepers and the farmyard was a busy place. The Estate and its unspoilt beauty made it a unique oasis of woodlands and fields that were unlike the open prairies of a lot of East Anglia. We were very conscious that local people had nowhere to walk and that their children had nowhere to explore and experience the natural world around them. Farming subsidies took away hedgerows, field margins, cart-ways and rough corners. We felt very strongly that we should share what we were so very fortunate to have, and that by sharing, people would begin to understand and value the natural world and help to preserve it. This was at the beginning of growing awareness by the public of the importance of conservation for the environment. We recognised how vulnerable Thornham was to the forces of change and economic necessity.

All the elms died in our first two years. Great trees that bordered nearly

all the field hedgerows and lined the cart-ways. It was a devastating change to the scale of things, reducing the skyline in some cases to the height of elder bushes and hawthorn trees. We were advised to demolish the old farm buildings; modern farming needed larger barns and silos. The village had an ageing and declining population as the younger generation left to find work and better housing in the town. None of the cottages had indoor sanitation and with rents at nine shillings and sixpence per week (50 pence) there was no way we could fund their modernisation.

We took advice about converting the yards into craft workshops; which seemed to be the need in those days, and for cottages for pensioners and some newcomers. We sold the village houses to their tenants, hoping against hope that we could retain the people in the village community and that they would not be tempted to sell on to weekenders. We built, in partnership with Suffolk Rural Housing, a group of sheltered cottages in the Street, and inserted five larger family houses for newcomers, who would, we hoped provide a mix of ages and incomes. We were also very concerned to keep two sites as business workshops so that there was some community life going on and the Street didn't become a museum piece. Twenty years on the balance still holds, but for how long we can't tell.

Meanwhile along with the frantic replanting, which still continues, of hedges, clumps and copses and rows of hardwood, in order to replace the elms and improve the condition of the nooks and corners that were not part of the forestry operation, we began to convert the yards. The local authority, after initial suspicion of our motives, were immensely helpful, even though this was years before the conversion of farm buildings to business premises was even thought of, let alone funded by grant aid. But as we entered the first recession in the 1980s the very small businesses that had established themselves here found it very difficult to survive without the help of "rent holidays".

We had opened the Walks and with a sudden burst of enthusiasm for the environment we had a lot of visitors coming and no-one to tell them where they were going, or to cut out the paths which became impassable in the summer. So we approached the Countryside Commission, who had urged us on to create the public access (with no capital grants to build the lavatories, car parks and other necessities obviously needed by visitors) and they did, in partnership with the Local Authority, fund the salary of a Warden.

This was an enormous relief to us, as order was established, maps printed, waymarking signs put up and we were protected from the frontline and given some privacy. There was no way to collect any entrance money to pay for all this, so we had to rely on people's generosity and voluntary contributions, which never amounted to much, even though there was an unwelcome element among our visitors who assumed we were coining money.

We also came to realise that many of our visitors had little idea of what they were enjoying and wanted to know more about trees, birds, animals and flowers and sometimes about the farm and the history of the Estate. Children, who now were driven everywhere and were no longer able to ramble and explore as we had all done as children, were growing up with no knowledge of the feel of mud or the smell of ponds. So with the inspiration of a biology teacher who came to us with the idea, we opened the Field Centre, which is now the Field Centre Trust. We had always assumed that the education authority would help us with a salary. All the other counties had set up their own Field Centres and Suffolk was using our resources to educate 3,000 to 4,000 of their children in what are now National Curriculum subjects. But a salary was not forthcoming and ever since 1983, we have struggled with the shortfall between what the schools can afford and what it actually costs. We have a marvellous team of part-time teachers, a full time Head and an Administrator. The courses range from the tinies'; Key Stage 1 and 2, to sixth form self-led groups, team building, residential courses in the cabins we put up in 1986, farming and conservation and anything else we are asked for. We have recently developed courses on recycling, teambuilding and alternative energy.

We opened a small tea room, again to try to create jobs and somewhere for our walkers to recover from the mud they encounter almost all the year round on this heavy land. Over the years a lot of the local young people, including our grandchildren, have worked there in the summer months. Apart from the cream teas and coffee for our adult visitors, it provides mountains of fish fingers and burgers for the school children.

We have a camp site with very good washing facilities and another log cabin (as an addition to tents) which is used a lot in the summer, and, for many years by groups who came from a very deprived area in Islington.

We took part in the successive government schemes such as the Youth

Opportunities Programme, Youth Training Scheme and Community Programme until they were abandoned by government on the grounds that they were more expensive in the country and were better run by private effort in towns. The buildings that had been used in Thornham Street we eventually let to a group of disabled people who gradually established a woodwork workshop and IT training centre. This is now funded by social services and self help, and over the years we have helped with fund raising efforts to improve the buildings and facilities. Now in the year 2001, there are plans to expand more into horticulture. The tenants of our craft workshops too have changed; now in 2001, we have offices and IT businesses alongside the three craft workshops that remain. There are 16 units and enquiries come all the time. Rural business and working from home are expanding and the conversion of redundant farm buildings is a matter of course.

The Field Centre is run with enthusiasm and energy but funding is a continual problem. In the summer of 2000 we opened our Walled Garden which had taken five years to restore with grants from charities, ourselves, volunteer labour and a National Heritage Lottery Grant to rebuild the glasshouses. This marvellous place will enable us to offer courses in horticulture, mainly to people with disabilities, and provides us, and the community, with a place for concerts, exhibitions and celebrations.

We have we feel, almost finished the self imposed programme of restoration at Thornham. We now have good buildings, plenty of activity and opportunities for enjoyment and learning, and people working here with enthusiasm and energy. But I came to the conclusion some time ago that for a small private enterprise like ours, operating on its own, to expect to achieve its objectives or even to survive in an effective form has probably become an impossible pipe dream. I therefore thought that we must try to join or ally ourselves to some larger enterprise which has the same sort of objectives and is part of a wider world and a more established network, with access to a bigger infrastructure and to information, communications and official attitudes not automatically open to us. Being on our own outside the mainstream, without natural access to information or support, not only impairs our usefulness, but also, in educational activities and such matters as the care of children, is nowadays pretty dangerous.

I also thought that in respect of the provision of access and teaching

about conservation in this tiny area of north Suffolk, we should be more widely useful and more effective if we could make a partnership with the district council and become, instead of an isolated island in a fairly large area, part of the admirable network they seem to be building through the links between the Waveney, the Broads, the Breckland, the Gipping, the walks around Eye and such things as the lakes at Needham Market. We could add a bit to that. We have now and for the next 20 years a management agreement with Mid Suffolk District Council, which has taken a great load off our backs – not yet as much as we had hoped – again because money is so difficult to find in a countryside which is earning no money itself.

Over the years we have found and used our own capital to fund all this and charities have been an enormous help. But we begin to feel too old and exhausted to continue the constant struggle for funds to keep all these activities going and the infrastructures kept up.

We have established a strong and able management company and a board of trustees to manage and gradually take over from us. This involves our whole community in playing an active part, and we hope will provide insurance for its future.

Our only aim has been trying to help people in this part of the world to have a slightly fuller and more interesting life through the Estate than might otherwise be possible, and we have no other agenda, except to hope to keep this Estate as a going and lively concern and a thing of refreshment and beauty. We regard access to the countryside and education as the most important of our activities, for our aim is to offer the peace and tranquillity of the country to children, and also to those whose lives often contain a lot of extra worry and illness.

With the restoration of the Walled Garden, we feel that the main bulk of our enterprise has fought its way through with great difficulty, and must therefore – if it is to make a lasting contribution which it is well designed to provide – be kept going until some more permanent financial security can be achieved. We feel that we have so far been more successful than we expected and there must be a chance of maintaining momentum until Thornham has become fully part of the fabric of this beautiful county.