

Countryside



◀ Clare Hargreaves left the mainland to work at Graham and Ruth Eggins's 40-acre mixed farm  
➤ Call ducks greet passers-by with a noisy serenade



couple of days I am hobbling like an octogenarian. But as I grow fitter and my desk worker's body slowly strengthens, the pain lessens. Thanks for seeing me through the start of the pandemic, Joe Wicks: but I don't need your workouts now.

It's not just toil and sweat, though. The vibrant refrains of dappled song thrushes cascade from the field hedges around me, while below corn marigolds hum with bees. Looking to the distance I can see the turquoise sea, and the normally hectic silver shores of neighbouring Tresco, now deserted.

Animals keep me company and make me smile, from the ducks that serenade me like royalty every time I pass, to the hens dancing in the dust to cool off.

I have lost my sense of time. Days merge into each other, distinguished only by occasional storms, the goings and comings of different crops (spinach bolts, broad beans fatten), and small farm dramas like the dispatching of an over-lusty cockerel (which we ate for supper) and the birth of four Red Devon calves, complete with auburn curls.

The coronavirus has been devastating for areas dependent on tourism, such as Scilly. Graham and Ruth normally let out three cottages, which provide income that pays the rent on their Duchy of Cornwall-owned farm. The upside for me is that I'm living in one of the lets until the tourists return. When they do, I'll move into a one-room hut the couple are building beside the potting shed. (They're just waiting for the floor varnish to arrive from the mainland.) I've already christened it Sparrow Palace.

Supper is whatever is in the fields – currently kale, chard, new potatoes and eggs, which I turn into fritatas or omelettes. Ruth buys me flour from the island's shop to make soda bread. On lucky days, their 12-year-old daughter, Lizzie, pops round with brownies she's just made "as part of my food tech syllabus". By 9pm, we've all collapsed into bed, eased into sleep by the oystercatchers and the crashing of the waves on to the rocks of the evocatively named Hell Bay.

It will be strange, returning to my former life. First stop will be the manicurist to sort out my black finger-nails. When I buy veg, I'll feel huge respect for the toil and care that's gone into growing it. But for now, I'm happily marooned on my desert island. I'm learning what being "grounded" really means.

# I'm in the polytunnels by 6am...

Grounded by Covid-19, Clare Hargreaves swapped her comfortable food-writing life for a demanding job as a farmhand on the Isles of Scilly

Normally make a living travelling the country sniffing out amazing food producers and restaurants, but thanks to the coronavirus I've been grounded since March – and may be for some time yet. So since I couldn't write about food, I thought I'd have a bash at growing and picking it on one of the thousands of British farms said to be seeking labour.

I started the process in the first week of lockdown, but soon realised that the sort of farm I wanted to work on wasn't where I'd be sent by big schemes such as Hops. Agrochemicals, shared accommodation and piecework were not for me. I wanted a nature-friendly family farm, where I could follow crops from planting to picking.

It took a while, but finally I landed a job at Hillside, a 40-acre mixed farm on Bryher, in the Isles of Scilly. Graham and Ruth Eggins, the farmers, don't normally employ labour, but as they were having to teach their three children at home, they badly needed extra hands.

Ruth met my launch from the main island, St Mary's, to where I had taken a key-workers-only flight from Land's End. We wheelbarrowed my luggage along the shore to the farm, which looks out over the mile-long Atlantic

coast of Bryher. As the first outsider on the island since lockdown, I was immediately quarantined – so no contact with the 90-odd inhabitants for 14 days. Anti-Covid precautions are taken seriously when getting off the islands is pretty much impossible.

And then off I went, and here I am. Work starts at around 6am (earlier if I can drag myself out of bed) when the light is softly golden. I start in the polytunnels while they're still a tolerable temperature, mainly training tomatoes. Coaxing their reluctant stems up their cordons reminds me of childhood cat's cradle. Remember that?

Corner shoots need amputating, too. Graham's "Be ruthless, just a single stem" rings through my head. From experience, I know he's right: leave the laterals and you'll soon be crawling through a jungle.

I feel a sense of achievement as I admire my orderly (until I turn my back) rows. By 8am, though, the polytunnel has transformed into a sauna, and the tomato pollen has turned my hands black and yellow, resembling something out of a Spielberg monster movie. Wash them, and they erupt in a yellow froth that stains basins and towels. Clothes become tainted too, so I soon learn to wear only my oldest. These are

the secrets about the "love apple" that chefs don't tell you.

Then, as Ruth wrangles fractions, I battle with the bindweed that's trying to tango with the French beans. Like all Hillside's crops, the beans grow in soil which has been enriched with the manure of the farm's chickens, cows and horses. No agrochemicals here.

Next, I crawl through a netted tunnel plucking strawberries that are sweeter and more fragrant than any I've tasted. They're a traditional variety (Graham won't divulge which) that's grown for flavour rather than shelf life; the latter isn't a requirement when your strawberries are devoured just minutes after picking. Normally produce is sold from an honesty stall outside the farmhouse to self-catering tourists, but since there aren't any, Graham is delivering it to residents instead, in what's proving an interesting trial in self-sufficiency.

If, like me, you spent the early part of lockdown pottering in the garden trying to grow food, a commercial farm, even a small one, is another world. The crops grow in rows so dauntingly long you can scarcely see their ends, and crouching on the hot soil as the sun beats down on your back, leaves joints exhausted and stiff. Muscles I didn't know I had complain: after the first



▲ Hillside's white farmhouse by Great Par beach on Bryher; freshly cropped chard and kale

## How to find work on a farm

- For paid work, the most useful website is [pickforbritain.org.uk](http://pickforbritain.org.uk); more specific listings can be found at [hopslaboursolutions.com](http://hopslaboursolutions.com) and [britishsummerfruits.co.uk](http://britishsummerfruits.co.uk)
- Farmers Weekly ([fwi.co.uk](http://fwi.co.uk)) has a page listing jobs and recruitment agencies.
- If you're happy to volunteer in return for accommodation and keep, try [workaway.info](http://workaway.info) or World Wide Opportunities on Organic Farms ([www.woof.org.uk](http://www.woof.org.uk))
- Other useful organisations:
  - Farms to Feed Us ([farmstofeedus.org](http://farmstofeedus.org)) has created a database of small regenerative farms needing volunteers
  - The Land Army ([thelandarmy.org.uk](http://thelandarmy.org.uk)) "connects farms and people". Its website is about to relaunch.

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