



GREEN CREDENTIALS:
Chris Southall and
Rosie Dodds

Surbiton-on-Sea!

This year's Heritage Open Days are almost upon us – the chance to enjoy England's architecture and past for free. Among the delights are some quirky venues, such as an Essex DIY eco-home that's creating tomorrow's heritage today

If these are the fruits of the good life, we should all be throwing off the shackles of capitalism and getting our hands dirty...

Growing by the front door, under the transparent roof of a verandah that's otherwise open to the elements, is a crop of grapes that wouldn't look out of place in a vineyard. And they do taste rather nice, too – according to Rosie Dodds, who's just picked and sampled one.

"If you've got a little bit of shelter, they will grow outside," says her partner, Chris Southall, under the blue sky of an energising Essex morning. "We're almost in a Spanish climate here, aren't we? Drought is our big problem. It's what we

struggle with – especially this year. We've spent a lot of time watering things."

The couple – along with Labrador Zero and Rosie's teenage daughter – live in a 1930s bungalow in Clacton-on-Sea they bought in 2007. (It was once home to an extended family of 13, and had five loos!) Motivated by a desire to make as little demand on the planet as possible, they're striving for low-impact self-sufficiency – and are a long way down the road.

In fact, they've been dubbed an "urban permaculture family", heading towards self-reliance in energy and food.

The permaculture notion is central to their philosophy. It's about being in tune

with nature and seeking to create sustainable, agriculturally-productive, non-polluting and healthy settlements. It's a response to threats such as global warming and our dwindling resources, from energy to soil and raw materials. (Dwindling because we're using them rapaciously.)

Often, this means adapting how we're living – and Rosie and Chris are proud to have made a 76% cut in their home's carbon footprint, as assessed by the Sustainable Energy Academy. Their template for living with as light a touch includes recycling "grey" water through

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a reed bed and collecting rain; using solar energy and waste wood to heat water, the home and for cooking; generating solar electricity to reduce their use of mains power; trying to consume less and recycle more; growing and eating their own vegetables, fruit, eggs and honey, and trading their surplus with other people.

They are, indeed, living *The Good Life*, as portrayed by the 1970s BBC sitcom starring Richard Briers and Felicity Kendal and set in leafy Surbiton. Only more efficiently. And without the pigs or goat.

Before a tour of number 193 Burrs Road, we need to hear how they came to take this path.

Chris, 68, did an apprenticeship at the Government's Royal Aircraft Establishment at Farnborough, worked conventionally for a year as a research and development engineer, but then met someone and moved to the Isle of Man with the goal of being self-sufficient.

He'd realised the way most of the human race lived was not sustainable. Even in the swinging '60s, when he was in his 20s, it was unusual to see consumerism as the root of most of our culture's evils, though. Chris says several things had an influence, including the example of John Seymour, an early self-sufficiency "guru", and even *The Good Life* TV series.

Part of his approach to consume minimally was to deliberately limit his income to one quarter, a third or even about a half of the average wage. How? "You just don't earn the money. You work part time, or

work for less money; do a lot of volunteering."

It's a strategy that's endured, and Chris insists he's managed to enjoy a good life at this level. "You can do a lot without money if you are prepared to be creative."

He explains: "I don't believe that endless consumption of 'consumer goods' leads to happiness, only to a deadening of the pain that comes from a non-creative life. At the best times in my life I couldn't tell 'work' from 'play'; I was doing what made sense at the time, all day long, and enjoying it so much that I didn't want to stop until I fell asleep."

He's allowed himself technical and consumer goodies if he can rescue them from being thrown away and repair them, as he reckons they have already done their damage by that stage.

Anyway, there he was for nine years, trying with his then partner to be self-sufficient, "doing all the usual things like having a cow and making cheese and butter, and growing lots of vegetables, and at the same time earning some money through being a potter and a drummer".

When his marriage broke down, he lived in a self-sufficient community on the Isle of Man for 18 months before returning to England in the late 1970s.

Home for 22 years became a community near Cambridge – a good way of sharing resources, growing food together and reducing outgoings and cutting the resources one consumes.

Chris and Rosie later met through an online dating site called Natural Friends – "for environmentally-sensitive, country-loving, health-conscious single non-smokers aspiring to tread lightly on the earth".

"Only people who are really right-on!" Rosie grins.

She'd have been wary about

meeting someone she'd contacted online, but her sister knew Chris, so that gave her courage. Obviously, they shared core values about life.

A trained nutritionalist from a farming background in Norfolk, she'd always been concerned about injustice in the world – was even left irate by "stupid rules" at boarding school that forbade the wearing of trousers or the possession of a radio. The importation of food from abroad, to feed animals here, also struck her as the height of stupidity.

After some work in Sudan and Egypt Rosie had gone to London as a researcher/dietician. She and her then husband also got involved in campaigning on issues such as apartheid, acid rain and the depletion of the ozone layer.

She had a son 25 years ago and a daughter 16 years ago. Her marriage later came to an end and she'd thought of joining a self-sufficient community, though in practice couldn't envisage making such a change as a single parent.

After she and Chris got together, they did look for a community where they might live, but for various reasons didn't find one that suited them, or discovered they were often full.

So: all roads led to Clacton!

They could have got more land for their money in Wales, Cornwall or

northern England, but East Anglia was closer to Chris's mum. It also allowed Rosie to get to London whenever she needed to as part of her part-time job with NCT, the parenting charity.

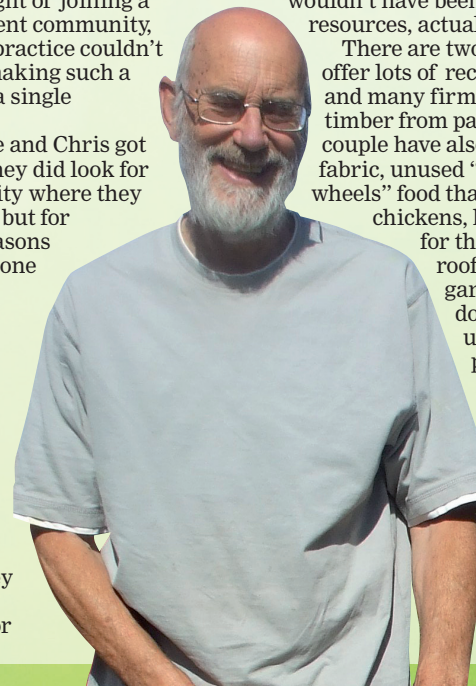
She's senior policy adviser – working 20 or so hours a week, mainly from home. There might need to be three rail journeys to the capital a month, perhaps.

Rosie enjoys the balance: able to use her nutritional knowledge and research skills for a good cause but also left with time and energy to pursue the self-sufficiency goal. She admits she does enjoy being out in the fresh air, swinging an axe and chopping logs!

Chris admits the location has brought unexpected bonuses. "Our house is half-built from stuff I scrounged from the industrial estate!" It's just down the road. "If we'd been in the countryside, there wouldn't have been half so many resources, actually, to use."

There are two skip firms that offer lots of recycling potential, and many firms with waste timber from packaging. The couple have also welcomed fabric, unused "meals on wheels" food that goes to the chickens, horse manure for the garden, roofing tiles for garden bed edges, double-glazed units for solar panels, radiators, and more.

"We have insulated our floors and flat roofs with insulation off-cuts from the industrial estate." Rosie



Hard graft and a little help from their friends

It's the half-acre of land that came with the bungalow that has taken most of Chris and Rosie's energies over the past six years. It was overgrown grass when they moved in – and, it appears, a builder's yard in the mists of time, with rubble not far beneath the surface.

Today, it's highly productive, and something of a wildlife haven. Deep beds have been laid, with unwanted soil, manure and turf gratefully retrieved from skips and other sources and given new life.

There are about 60 fruit trees, including apricot, pear (doing better than the apples this year) and fig (whose riches have just been discovered by the birds). Peaches, too, and almonds. Raspberries, cherries... it goes on.

They do buy grain to make bread, but reckon on producing 70% of the food they need. Sunflowers are

Chris's special crop in 2013. He's been experimenting, trying to grow really big seeds to eat.

A polytunnel is full of produce bursting with goodness – tomatoes and massive cucumbers, for instance – as the unwanted attention of cabbage white butterflies confirms. Its salad will see the family through winter.

The preservation of food is down to a fine art. There's much drying and bottling, and a lot of produce to store. It's hard work dealing with 20-30kg of tomatoes, admits Chris. There are laid-back chickens. Wood chippings cover the ground of their run – either produced on-site or obtained for nothing elsewhere. They're down for about a year, take the animals' droppings, and become a perfect material with which to mulch the garden. There's even a fennel plant. The

seeds can be eaten by the chickens. Rosie ponders the notion of making toothpaste from fennel. But Chris says he doesn't even use toothpaste, and it does sound a self-sufficiency step too far, especially as the couple admit that while they want to be as self-reliant as possible, they don't wish to appear fanatical!

The reed bed is certainly more sensible than eccentric. All the "grey" water from the bungalow (from the bath, washing machine and vegetable-washing sink) flows down pipes to the reed bed, where it is naturally cleaned before passing to the vegetable patch. The household has to draw only 80 cubic metres a year from the mains supply: half the average family usage. There's also a well, dug out with the help of volunteer labour. A solar-powered pump provides

water for irrigation.

The tour of the property continues, this time looking at the changes to the outside of the house – the results of Chris and Rosie's green DIY improvements. A lot of the materials they've used – everything from wood to insulation, and cage-wire to stop birds eating their crops – was simply going to waste elsewhere and has been recycled. The couple have friends who look out for useful stuff, while a bonus of moving here was the presence of a big industrial estate just down the road. It's fertile ground for a scavenger happy to take "rubbish" from businesses that would otherwise probably have to pay to send it to landfill.

On the side of the bungalow is a south-facing, "solar gain", lean-to greenhouse that's rather neat in design – as is the fact that it's made



admits leaning originally towards the countryside, but has come to appreciate the advantages of being able to easily walk to places and the social benefits from having neighbours.

Chris is never embarrassed to ask if he can take something that's being thrown away. "For me, it's a moral issue. If I'm stopping something being wasted, that's a good thing to do."

"We must have stopped tonnes and tonnes of stuff going into landfill," says Rosie.

They do meet people from time to time who think their chosen way of life is, well, nuts, but count themselves lucky to have so many lovely neighbours.

She says that, in terms of the broad sweep of history, it's only relatively recently that mankind has lost its way. People used to the fools' paradise of days of plenty might think the permaculture approach is a bit austere and an over-reaction, "but the positive aspects of having a more connected and integrated community aren't really acknowledged or understood.

"People think it's going backwards and going for a colder, more miserable life, whereas we see it as a more balanced life."

Chris insists the West's mantra about "growth" isn't the solution. The financial system would have collapsed if it hadn't been for quantitative easing. "It can't go on. It's not sustainable. That word again..."

The couple welcome a steady flow of volunteers who come to help with the

work, and learn. (And pass on their own knowledge and ideas.) There's a flat upstairs, which allows board and lodgings to be exchanged for labour.

The home has also become a Permaculture Association learning centre, which means groups can seek funding from the organisation to visit and see what goes on.

Chris's engineering background *must* make life easier in the self-sufficient world. I certainly suspect so when looking at a beam (made from a tree they chopped down) installed during the moving of a bathroom to extend the kitchen. Many of us, surely, would lack the skills and knowledge to tackle practical tasks.

"You don't have to do everything. You can start really small – growing things in pots on your patio or wherever – and there are always people you can ask for help.

"That's a key thing: being prepared to learn. Learning is the thing that keeps me interested and lively. I've always been wanting to learn new stuff, and the internet makes that easy. Never say 'I can't do that' – 'I just can't do that now' – and learn about it. Nobody's born with these skills – I wasn't – but you can learn."

Any luxuries they simply can't do without? The cars are quite high up,"

murmurs Chris. Mind you, we're hardly talking petrolhead tendencies. Last year, he did only 2,000 miles. "I think of it as a motorised wheelbarrow. It tows a trailer backwards and forwards to the wood and around the industrial estate.

"We are thinking of getting a small electric car that would charge off the solar (system) and keeping one traditional car for towing."

Rosie would love to embrace pedal-power. "But then you can't bring a huge trailer of wood back, or transport the beehives, let alone how many polycarbonate sheets when Chris has been to the skip again!" she smiles.

She does admit to her own weakness. "The food miles in chocolate...! I've reduced my consumption of coffee a lot. We have got tea plants that we're looking forward to using; but we could use a lot more herbal tea, and think about the imported food: oranges and bananas and chocolate."

Tell you what, though: any minor non-greenness is more than cancelled out by the use of wee.

It seems daft to waste drinkable water to flush away our urine, and the couple don't. Diluted, it's a perfect fertiliser.

Speaking of which, I could do with visiting the littlest room before driving back to Ipswich and belching out 135g/km of CO₂. (Sorry.)

There's a green jug in the bathroom. I could salve my conscience, slightly, by making a contribution. So I do. It's carbon off-setting. Of sorts.

■ Chris and Rosie's home at 193 Burrs Road, Clacton-on-Sea, CO15 4LN, is open as part of Heritage Open Days – from 10am to 5pm on both September 14 and 15. Their website: www.ecodi.org www.heritageopendays.org.uk



SUNSHINE DAYS: Rosie Dodds and Chris Southall in the garden of their bungalow in Clacton-on-Sea, where they live by self-sufficiency principles

from reused materials: concrete blocks from next-door, when a domestic garage was demolished to make way for a new home; recycled polycarbonate roofing sheets; and a greenhouse that was being given away.

The growing season can be extended into chilly spring and autumn by using a 12-volt extractor fan to "pump" warm air from behind the glass through a pile of rocks in the floor, heating them up. The warmth is then released during the evening, much like a storage heater. On hot days the rocks gain 10C and the night-time temperature of the greenhouse can be lifted by up to 5C. Temperatures can be boosted on colder days by using a wood-burning stove. Of course, opening one of the bungalow windows that's within the lean-to will let warm air flow into the living quarters, too.

The greenhouse certainly doesn't need thermal assistance this summer – not if the large squash Chris shows off is anything to go by! Of course, water isn't wasted on the Sunshine Coast. Rain running off the roof is captured. There's storage capacity for about 4,000 litres. Number 193 Burrs Road is more than self-sufficient in terms of electricity, too. Chris and Rosie put 10 solar panels on the roof. They cost £4,000 and Chris reckons the whole system was a little over half what a mainstream company would charge for a similar-sized, grid-connected, set-up. Some electricity is stored in gel batteries for later use. In the summer, there's more than enough power to meet the bungalow's frugal energy needs, so electricity is sold to the national grid. They get back about £1,500 a year. Low-tech ideas work brilliantly, too.

Soaking up the rays on the drive is a solar cooker/drier made from an insulated box and a double-glazed panel scrounged from a window firm's skip on the industrial estate. It can dry things like fruit and herbs, and even heat water. On a sunny day, the cooker has registered 75C, and water in a kettle has reached 55C. A great installation was a wood-fired central heating stove and cooking range. Burning wood saves a lot of electricity, particularly in the winter, because the stove negates the need to use a microwave oven, kettle or toaster. The couple have been lucky enough to buy eight acres of ancient woodland a few miles away, which is being coppicing and re-planted. It provides habitat for wildlife, and fuel and building timber for the bungalow.

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