



REWILDING THE FARM

Hugh Crossley says his father feared he would become a 'feckless environmentalist', but after inheriting the family estate he was determined to prove rewilding and farming can go hand in hand

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THERE WILL BE NO WOLVES on the Somerleyton Estate. No bears, either. Perhaps, in a distant, much wilder future, a lynx might stop to drink from the estate's lake or prowl beneath the woodland canopy. But for now, Hugh Crossley, the fourth Baron Somerleyton, is focused on supporting some of nature's less celebrated creatures – namely adders, white storks, beavers (if the authorities permit them) and possibly the rare natterjack toad – as he sets about an unlikely rewilding project.

His estate is already home to red and fallow deer, Welsh Black cattle (alongside their red-haired Highland cousins), black pigs and flash-eyed Exmoor ponies, plus a handful of free-roaming water buffalo. Breeding programmes for white storks and turtle doves are under way, and Black Welsh Mountain and Polled Dorset sheep act as 'wildstock', helping restore and re-engineer this East Anglian estate to a long-lost, ecologically balanced site.

More than 4 sq km of arable land at Somerleyton Estate has been 'rewilded' to date. Located on the Norfolk-Suffolk border, Crossley's home is a juxtaposition of 19th-century formality and 21st-century idealism. The handsome, Jacobean red-brick hall – which remains the family home of Crossley and his wife Lara, and which stood in for Sandringham in the TV series, *The Crown* – is surrounded by more than 40,000 sq m of manicured formal gardens. Beyond it, visible over trimmed hedges and decorative urns, sprawl 7 sq km of arable woodland, grassland and rewilded landscapes. In all, the estate hits 20 sq km; Crossley aims to return 20% of it to nature.



The fourth Baron has not turned into the ‘feckless environmentalist’ that his father, William, feared he would become in middle age. Hugh Crossley is measured, tentative and acutely aware of the delicate dance that he is required to perform between the traditions of farming and the potential of rewilding. The Crossley family have owned the land since the middle of the 19th century. They were West Riding industrialists, newly made up and enticed down to the East Anglian countryside by the healthy air and a sense of the sublime. In 2005, the current Lord Somerleyton took charge.

Under Hugh Crossley, 50% of the land continues to be farmed, while 30% is conserved as woodland and grassland, with native breeds helping the estate’s human caretakers to keep the greenery in check. The remaining 20% of the land has been earmarked for complete rewilding; so far, the figure that has been let go is 5% and rising.

‘It’s an evolution, not a revolution,’ Crossley says – and he’s not kidding. Brambles crawl across the released parkland surrounding the estate, and thistles have shot up, trifid-like, over the summer, creating a drift of snow-like seedheads. The Welsh Black cattle will be encouraged to munch on these aggressive growers come winter. In the early days, when he was beginning to explore rewilding, Hugh Crossley focused on small, achievable aims. He nurtured the hedgerows his father had left between fields and allowed the strips of land that the farmer’s spray booms didn’t reach to thrive. As those wild edges creep out from under the hedge, he recognises their worth.

Crossley is more comfortable talking about the possible tweaks that make farming regenerative than he is discussing the technicalities of growing a wilderness. In fact, he thinks the rewilding/farming divide has caused unnecessary friction between the two ideological camps. ‘The rewilding movement would have done itself a huge service if it had talked about itself as just a different type of farming,’ he explains. He is at pains to point out that the farming community, to which his family belongs, is often unfairly criticised. In the 1950s, he says, the wonders of science gave us pesticides, herbicides and fertilisers, and modern agricultural techniques were heralded as the future, a way to feed the world. Opinions have swung so dramatically the other way in the last decade that farmers are now considered to be the problem, not the solution.

‘Our culture is slow-moving and traditional,’ Crossley says. ‘I knew

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I wanted to change, but it still took 10 years to feel my way, change the management, change the people and change the system.’ Change continues today. Keenly aware of the difficulties the farming industry faces, he has ensured Somerleyton’s survival by diversification. The estate is farmed, producing both arable crops and high-welfare meat, but regeneration now offers a secondary income.

Earlier this year, the government introduced a new voluntary subsidies scheme, and Crossley has been able to draw on support for the conservation measures he has put in place on his land. His third income stream is Fritton Lake, the part-hotel, part-members’ club of 100 privately owned Koto cabins (prefabricated, Scandinavian-style, sustainable structures) and two self-catering cottages available to rent (or buy), with 3km of open water on one side and dense woodland on the other.

This summer, the estate’s wilderness has been filled with pioneer plants – flora that rebounds quickly when land is regenerated. Freckled candles of wild foxgloves (*Digitalis purpurea*) sway above the much-maligned yolky-yellow blooms of ragwort (*Senecio jacobaea*). Unlike animals, plants aren’t introduced to the estate, but they are removed – and rhododendrons are the No. 1 enemy. ‘We’re never going to get rid of the rhododendron completely,’ says Crossley of this unwanted floral inheritance from his Victorian forebears. ‘But we can control it and break its dominance.’

Crossley reckons that he will need 20 years to embed a functioning ecosystem. For now, the fickle nature of his land makes balancing its biodiversity difficult. He compares his lot to that of the UK’s leading rewilding project at the Knepp Estate, near Horsham in West Sussex. There, clay ground and 25cm more rain a year supercharge the soil, encouraging rambunctious growth. At Somerleyton, light, sandy soil and dry conditions, coupled with fiercely hot summers, mean slow growth. Last year, Crossley had to take the animals out of the wild grasslands to preserve the scrub.

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choices made, on what is the 'right' kind of growth and what must be removed. 'The floral predator is bracken,' says Crossley. 'In the context of heathland, bracken is a wolf. Unchecked, it will take over everything and kill everything.' So bracken has to be managed for the space to become a biodynamic floral tapestry that supports insects, heathland birds and the 'wild' livestock of cattle, pigs and sheep. Pigs are employed to snuffle up the bracken shoots. Crossley has hopeful plans for introducing pelicans and beavers and is already preparing to reintroduce white storks on the estate, courtesy of a pair of captive breeders. The birds' future chicks will be released into the wilderness.

The estate is part of a wider push to make room for nature in East Anglia. But the rewilding sanctuaries dotted throughout the landscape have little chance of making a widespread impact, sitting isolated and unconnected, amid vast fields of monocrops. These wild pockets of land need safe pathways for creatures (and plants) to wander along and spread. Under the WildEast project, of which Crossley is a founder and trustee, some East Anglian residents are trying to change that. Currently, more than 80 sq km of land across East Anglia has been committed to rewilding through the programme, which asks landowners in the region to devote 20% of their land to nature and aims to free up more than 1,000 sq km across the region.

Crossley is almost sheepish when I ask him about it. The project's initial approach was wrong, he says. The message of rewilding 20% of the land was badly communicated. It wasn't about a sudden change but offering a future goal. WildEast has been taken up with gusto by those with window boxes and roadside verges to offer, but enticing the large landowners of East Anglia to get involved has proved more difficult. Today, Crossley says that he is focused on encouraging his neighbours to add wild edges to their fields – perhaps a more realistic, if tamer, goal.

Back at Somerleyton, progress is necessarily slow. Small signs point to a creeping change: the arrival of nightjars, with their moth-like feathering and croaking nocturnal calls; the return of woodlarks; and increased bat activity. However, with his farmer's hat on, Crossley is quick to admit that a bumper crop of wheat is equally rewarding. When you are winding down chemical usage, and growing less dependent on fertilisers, any crops can seem like a miracle. But, as he points out, financial success is also important if you are going to convince other landowners to join you.

There's something down to earth in this vision for Somerleyton. Here, the message of rewilding is one of working with nature and not against it – hardly a radical endeavour, as befits a Baron with an inheritance to manage and an estate to regenerate. But whichever way you look at it, it's good news for adders, beavers, white storks and the odd warty natterjack toad. •

