THIS WAS
TOMORROW

CAMERON AND MEG

Residents at Tinkers Bubble

In conversation with Enrico Policardo
Tinkers Bubble, Somerset
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Edited from the recorded conversation.

01 Who are you, and what do you do here?

CAMERON: I'm Cameron. I live here at Tinkers Bubble - I'm a resident. Right now I'm planting lots of seeds. Two months ago I was chopping lots of wood. In two months we'll be making lots of hay and eating lots of vegetables. I do bits of everything, really, and our activities change with the seasons. A lot of my summer is growing, maintenance and projects - we'll be building a lot this year - and running the steam engine a lot. Then into autumn, lots of harvesting.

We've got a steam-powered sawmill, and all the forestry here is done without fossil fuels. The felling is with hand tools, the extraction is with horses, and the steam engine powers the sawmill. So until someone buys the timber, it hasn't been touched by fossil fuel - then it gets driven home and drilled onto a wall! But up to that point it's pure horse and wood. The engine needs someone running it, and the saw bench takes three or four people, so it's quite an intense day. I run the engine a fair amount at the moment. I guess I'm the engine master. Hello, I'm Cameron and I'm the engine master!

And bits of everything else: looking after the houses and buildings, helping with the animals - we had pigs in the autumn - lots of growing, forestry, preserving food, hosting volunteers, looking after the social dynamics, and the dynamics between me and the land. We did a mind map of everything we do, and it just kept growing and growing.

MEG: I'm Meg. I live here too - I moved here five years ago. Before that I studied art and had a studio, making sculptures, and I worked and helped a lot on my mum's community farm. We're all jacks of all trades, because the place needs us to be, but we do specialise - Cameron with the steam engine. We both do a lot of the growing and the food, and I've always particularly liked working with animals. We used to look after the cows, we've just had

pigs, and I'm learning things with the horses at the moment. I do lots of cooking - I really like it - so when we do events I'll often cook for those. We're all involved in the forestry season. I'm not so into felling big trees, so I've got into hedge laying, which is more my thing. I'm learning all the time. I also have a studio nearby, so I try to keep making art, which is often related to here. And I write. I live with Cameron and our cat, Benjie.

The food side is what I'm most excited about: the wild food and the grown food, processing it and eating it - the living food, loving the food, looking after it and killing it, all of that. We've been learning a lot of butchery recently.

02 Is this the future you were dreaming of?

MEG: It's funny. When I first volunteered here, I kept having flashbacks to things I loved doing when I was little - all the things that made me really excited when I was about six. They all came flooding back. I'd grown up and become an adult and they'd felt like separate things, and coming here reintegrated them. So in that way, yes. But I never imagined it. I first came here when I was sixteen and I didn't imagine I'd ever live here.

It would be nice if there were more people nearby doing similar things - growing the wheat, say. In some ways I love it and want to live like this for the rest of my life. In other ways it's hard. It can be hard being on the edge of things, not feeling integrated with friends and family in the way we live. That can be really sad and difficult sometimes.

CAMERON: People come and say, wow, everyone should be living like this. And I have this feeling: well, not everyone can, and we're lucky we can. People look in and say, that's amazing, and it's easy not to see the challenging

bits, or that not everyone could do it, or wants to, or even sees it as a good thing. Some really environmentally conscious people would say, my God, you burn so much wood.

MEG: It works for some and not for others. It's not necessarily a future for everyone.

CAMERON: But something that feels important is that so many people come through and experience it. Even if they just come for a week and they sleep better than they have in months, or do something they never thought they could. It's an important place for showing people they're more capable than they think. Or just giving them some space from their lives.

MEG: And being here, you figure out how to make a lot of what you need from what's around you - and a lot of that comes down to land access. I dream of a future where a lot more people have access to land, where people can go and make themselves a bowl if they need a new bowl. Really simple things that make you feel you can create what you need. I actually dream about the future much more since I've lived here, because I feel I can create things. Having a donkey here, or a milking cow - that's the future I'm dreaming of: feeling I can be creative in how I support us. But I don't think it's one united future for everyone. We all need to be doing different things. Though a bit of farming is good for people - a future with more connection to the food we eat. Not just "I know where this is from", but connection to the whole process of food, which is what being alive is about. You eat and you shit. That's the basics of being alive, apart from being born and dying.

CAMERON: I was on a community farm before, and after a while I had this feeling that I'm never going to not want to be in relationship with my food - having seen it grow and lived with it. It's alive, it's a living thing, and then at

some point it becomes part of me in a different way. When I came here, it was a space where that could happen. Where I have space to engage with my life actively, not passively.

MEG: That's such a massive thing - having a relationship to life and death, and responsibility for what you consume. You experience the plants when they're living, not just when they're picked.

CAMERON: And it's scary, coming here. Someone stayed here a year and was on the edge of staying longer, and the fear was: if I stay longer, I don't know how I'd ever reintegrate with the world. It's such a step out. I go back to my family, or somewhere, and I feel so removed from anything important that it just feels like madness.

MEG: That's the scary thing about the future as well. The future's exciting if I can dream about something like this. But going back to how I used to live is quite scary, if I can't find a way to make it work, because I feel reprogrammed.

03 What would you tell someone thinking about doing something like this?

CAMERON: You're going to get slapped with a massive mirror.

MEG: That's what I was going to say.

CAMERON: It can happen so many ways. You can come in socially really well and then get hit by the reality of the land work. There are places like this, but this one feels much more productive than others. There's the sawmill, the forestry, a big orchard, we grow all our own veg, we raise animals, there are working horses. You walk in expecting to do all those things, and the land is there needing maintenance. It could be let loose, but it's been held by people in the past, and you're coming in to be the steward of

this 45-acre allotment, and then you'll pass it on. You'll never own it. It's never yours. So either you come thinking one thing about the land work and find, wow, this is mental, this is really tiring - or you come excited about the land work and spend five or ten years figuring out the social side: living in a community, working together.

MEG: Everything has a cost. The freedom and privileges of being here are also limitations, and it really depends how you're feeling whether those limitations feel exciting or exhausting. There are compromises all the time - considering what the community needs and what the land needs more than what you need, most of the time. There's also lots of space for people to figure out what they need within that. It's really free, but you can't come and just do whatever you want. And yet you kind of can. You can cut anything down, walk anywhere, use all these things - but you have to think about it differently. And we don't use fossil fuels to work the land, or electric or power tools, so putting a screw in a wall can be really, really annoying, at a funny angle - like when we put the cat flap on the door.

CAMERON: Except for the sneaky bench grinder.

MEG: There's a sneaky bench grinder. And a sneaky drill.

CAMERON: It's a place that asks you to do without, and some people find that really challenging - their culture around food, or media, or entertainment. It's asking: do you need that? How could you get it for yourself? The way the place has developed, you always end up falling back on that question: do you really need that thing? While being very productive. Abundant. It's abundant if you can see the abundance in it. If you can't -

MEG: It can be really hard.

CAMERON: And it's all-consuming. A dairy farmer never really gets a proper holiday, and it's like that. You're around everyone before you start the day, you work all day, you haven't made any money - you've made something for yourself and the people you live with - and then you're with them all evening. We do have time away, but it's an intensity that takes a lot of adapting to.

MEG: And money - we feel like we're living in a different economic system, which is fine when you're here. When you leave, it's tricky to socialise the way you want to. But the flip side is that we don't need to make loads of money, because we have very small outgoings, unless something goes wrong. So we get different relationships with things. Someone who used to live here said, you never get to be with cows anywhere else the way you are here. We have such an intimate relationship with the animals and plants, without that pressure.

CAMERON: You don't need to extract -

MEG: - as much as you can to survive financially.

CAMERON: There are some really lovely growing projects near here that grow amazing veg and still have really tight margins. We're very lucky.

04 What truly makes you happy?

CAMERON: I like riding my bike and being silly. Riding silly bikes, doing ridiculous things.

MEG: Pushing the limits of what you think you can do, in a really silly way.

CAMERON: And there are hard seasons here, like the juicing season. But if there's a good atmosphere down on the press - and if we're making juice to sell, it's a paid day's work - it's just really fun. You have a laugh and it's a

really good day.

MEG: I'm never bored. I can't think of ever being bored here, which is quite big, really. There's always something to learn. The creativity of it makes me really happy - things coming in layers, and having to learn. We just learned how to make bacon. What's next? And we have fun together. You know people in a very specific way when you've lived together a while. A connection that feels very special.

CAMERON: Some of the meetings are terrible - stressful and long. But when they're good, it's such a nice atmosphere. Everyone's pinging about, you don't see people because they're somewhere else, it's all busy, and then once a week we all sit down together for half a day, and sometimes it's quite joyous. A reminder that everyone wants to be here.

MEG: I think we're in a really good place, generally. Even when hard things happen, I often feel very happy afterwards, because we deal with them really well. The more we trust each other that we'll be able to deal with conflict and tricky things together, the more joyful it feels.

05 What makes this place special?

MEG: The limitations, actually. The travel limits, the money limits, all the difficult things about not being able to engage with other things as much as we might want - that's what makes it special. When we all go out to a local gig and cycle there together, it's an adventure. We're all exhausted the next day. It's a bit mad. But things feel precious. And the land here feels like people are meant to live on it, which I find healing - one of the things that excites me most. In one of the first planning permissions, they wrote about this being a place where people could try to live in a way where humans are

good for the land, against the growing narrative that we're destructive. Which we are. We're all hypocrites, all working different edges. There are definitely places where I'm not good for the land.

CAMERON: Some people can be good for their environment on a massive scale. But here there are limitations the wider society doesn't impose, and that means you can be so much more inventive and creative.

MEG: People say it about art, don't they? When you're more limited, you create more.

CAMERON: If we're not going to use a tractor, how do we do it? A lot of it is looking to the past - how did they do it? And then imagining - how could we? Old traditional tools, modified. What did they use before wheelbarrows? Probably something better than wheelbarrows. A donkey.

MEG: It's going to happen.

CAMERON: And the houses. They're more structurally sound now - though this one's still quite odd - but in the past they were absolutely bonkers.

MEG: A tarp with a flue and a log burner.

CAMERON: But it's liberating. Someone can come and build their own house. For most people that's unimaginable.

MEG: The land has nearly everything we need. Woodland to build houses, soil that's perfect for cob, springs, fruit trees, vegetable gardens. We grow on Yeovil sands, some of the best growing land in the country. And we're on Ham Hill, which is ancient - Roman, medieval, Neolithic settlements. People have lived on this hill for so long. That feels special too.

CAMERON: Sometimes I think about everything that could have gone wrong - the planning not going through, a bad accident - and the chances here are quite high. It's almost as if the spirit of the place has kept it alive. We got permanent planning, people come and give their time and energy, people always come through. It's amazing it still exists, when so many things could have wiped it out.

MEG: Partly it's that one of the founders was already part of the local community. That was a good first step.

06 Could this be scaled up - not bigger, but more of them?

MEG: It would be so cool. It is a pilot - people come here and go and start new ones. It already does that in different ways. If you can build your own house, keep warm and feed yourself, that depends on nothing but your hands and the soil and the trees. So it's endlessly replicable. People live like this all over the world - we just incorporate the junk of the first world into our windows.

CAMERON: It could be scaled up, but it would take the planning system readjusting how it sees building materials. Straw bale is a totally fine way of building. They could build social housing with straw bales - well insulated, cheap, nice to build, natural materials. But it would take the planning office doing something. It's out of our hands.

MEG: We sometimes talk about it at the AGM. The land is owned in trust - not by any one person, but by people who've lived here before and invested, and the shares have been shared out equally. We're still putting money into a pot, and sometimes we say, maybe we could do a Tinkers Bubble Two. When we got planning permission, we felt we needed to share the story, because that's how things spread: people go to their council and say, we want

something like this - look what they've got. Our planning is quite mad, really. I imagine there'd be a process of quantifying and controlling it a bit more for anyone else. We're pretty lucky.

07 Have you documented how you do things?

MEG: We've got lots of documents - all the minutes from every meeting for thirty years, all the planning documents. But not a concise blueprint.

CAMERON: We have a residents' agreement. Someone moves in and ideally agrees to it - it's a sense of what this place is and its intention. And there's a handover when you leave, if you were holding something. I've thought about people leaving a "leaving document": these are the things I know about this building, I did this roof, here's a funny thing about the ram pump. We've recently been mapping where the water pipes and junctions are, because we had a few water issues. I wanted to do it for our house when we redid the wall: the house was built this year, the roof is this old, this is what the foundations are.

08 What's the secret of Tinkers Bubble lasting so long?

MEG: Sometimes I wonder if it's that there's quite a big footfall. It has to constantly transform. But I don't really know.

CAMERON: And I'm interested in how it might change with the planning. I've been asking some of the old residents what it felt like, renewing the planning every five years, knowing that if it didn't pass there'd be no planning at all, and a whole appeal. Why would you build something really solid to last fifty years if you don't know you'll be here in two? That's changed really recently, and I'm interested to see what it does for people.

MEG: Our planning is for a specific area at the top of the hill, with a certain number of buildings and a certain number of permanent residents. The buildings all have to be able to rot and disappear. We can't put concrete in the ground or have serious foundations.

CAMERON: Permanent planning for temporary buildings. So in the modern planning system, I can build a house the way it would have been built two hundred years ago, and that served people fine. We've got far enough to build spaceships, and we've forgotten how to build a home.

MEG: There's so much gatekeeping around figuring things out for yourself. In conservation, the conservationists decide what happens to the land. In building, there's a place for knowledge and expertise, and that's really important, but it also stops people figuring it out. Most people with a bit of woodwork practice could build a straw bale house. When we were fixing ours, we said, it's a bit like Lego, isn't it? If you've had time to ease into the materials and they don't feel too alien and terrifying.

CAMERON: Especially if you're not making the window frames.

MEG: The window frames are the trickiest bit.

09 What would you do differently in a Tinkers Bubble Two?

MEG: It totally depends on the land. Everything we do here responds to what's here. I'd have a massive pond. I don't think I'd change the general ideas. I'd have a stick blender for cooking! I really love it here. We've always had a bit of solar - it used to be rubbish, now it's kind of fine - and I appreciate being able to do things on my laptop, because it means I can be involved in projects outside, and that feels really important.

CAMERON: Thirty years ago smartphones didn't exist. Things change. People are using biodiesel more, so you can't just go and get old chip oil any more - it all gets recycled, which is great, but there was a chip-oil car here once. Like people who go bin-diving in the city and complain when there's no food in the bins - isn't it a good thing there's no food in the bins? It's about which technology we can trust. We were fine without phones; now we rely on them, and if they go away everyone will freak out.

10 Would some kind of technology improve how you do things?

CAMERON: It depends what you mean by technology. A book is technology.

MEG: Someone says AI and I'm like, no.

MEG: We could have much more efficient rocket stoves. A stick blender!

CAMERON: An earthship for growing tropical food. So many ideas. A hot shower would be nice - we just don't seem to prioritise it. And it would be even more exciting: how do I make hot water? I'll do it in this interesting way - instead of pressing a button and never thinking where it comes from. We couldn't call a plumber or electrician or builder to do anything here, because it's all been done by people here. So it's a mosaic. Sometimes it drives you mad, and sometimes you can see someone really put thought and design into something. Sometimes it's been forgotten and is derelict, and sometimes it's still working really well.

MEG: And once you've found where the pipe is, it's easy to fix. You don't have to study for five years.

MEG: It's innately human to have technology.

CAMERON: There's someone here who's like a constantly dry sponge - if he's interested in something, he'll learn it and do it really well. The one thing that's inaccessible is computers - circuit boards. I can understand how it works, but I couldn't fix it. If that's broken, the thing's dead. We can do so much, and we've given ourselves over to outsourcing.

MEG: I think one of the crises of our time is that disempowerment - not feeling we can meet our own needs.

11 So the message is that a happy life with low tech is completely possible?

MEG: It is. But the thing that keeps coming into my head is: we don't have any money. If everyone were low-tech, it'd be okay. I really do think happiness is probably more possible with lower tech, sometimes. But the money thing is hard. I think that's more a symptom of living on the edge of something than of being low-tech.

12 Is that a choice, in how the place is set up?

MEG: The shareholders hold the line that we don't run workshops to make money. There's a big belief that access to skills should be free. That's why we have a lot of volunteers, and the forestry weekends are free. I think that's wonderful. But it's also a way lots of places make decent money - even farms are becoming social enterprises. So that's a limitation. The other is meeting all our own needs and then turning outwards to earn money. Now the sawmill's running again it feels more balanced.

CAMERON: We've turned towards production: what can we produce? I could see someone turning up and making bowls and spoons at the weekend, selling them in a fancy shop nearby, and doing all right. Nobody's doing that at the moment, but there are little ways to make some money. The sawmill could be lucrative - but we're felling by hand, teaching people to fell, logging

with horses. It would be quicker with a tractor. You can't just wake up and get on your horse and go; you need a trained horse and a trained person. Running the sawmill takes four people and three hours to get the steam engine up to pressure. Everything's slower.

MEG: If we charged for the time that goes into our products, they'd be unaffordable.

CAMERON: We charge the market rate for local UK-grown timber. If we paid ourselves what other sawmill workers get, we'd probably be charging three times more. And we could sell our timber as chopping boards and shelves in Bristol and London for three times the price - and then we'd just be selling an image. It doesn't feel exciting, but there's something that feels right in saying: if you just need some timber, we'll produce it this way, and we won't compete, but we'll match what you'd get from a big company shipping it from the other side of the world, all diesel. And we want to be accessible to other people trying to do things like this.

MEG: Quite a lot of the time we sell timber to people building compost toilets.

CAMERON: Ex-residents, mostly!

13 Anything you'd like to say to inspire people?

CAMERON: I feel so lucky to be here. Part of me thinks everyone should be doing this. And then I think: we're so lucky. I just turned up, really up for doing everything - but the planning permission was sorted, people have a really good relationship with the place locally, loads of infrastructure is set up, there's a house for me to live in. That's quite a lucky opportunity. If I'd just bought a field and wanted to do this, I'd be in a very different situation.

MEG: It's grown over thirty years, with loads of different people working really hard in their own way. Simon Fairlie wrote a whole book about rural planning from the process here.

CAMERON: Someone who lived here bought a bit of land to do something like this on her own, and had quite a hard time. It's pretty special here.

MEG: I just think it's amazing what you can make out of string and sticks. That's my thing.

This Was Tomorrow – Is This the Future We Were Dreaming Of?
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