

FIELD TO FARM

THE REAL SMALLHOLDING BOOK

DAVID ACREMAN

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FIELD TO FARM

When **Field to Farm** first appeared in 2010 it became an instant cult classic among would-be smallholders: a nuts-and-bolts handbook that swapped romantic daydreams for the gritty reality of UK planning law. Fifteen years later and after **thousands of copies sold, countless barns erected, and more than a few families now living legally on their land** the book is still the go-to guide for anyone who wants to turn a plain field into a working, income-producing farm and eventually a permanent home.

Why has it endured? Because the core idea is timeless: **work with the planning system, not against it**. Follow a proven sequence, acquire the right acreage, build the right structures, run the right enterprise and you unlock doors that most people think are welded shut. Thousands of readers have used these pages to out-reason planners, fend off enforcement officers, and build businesses that actually pay the mortgage. Their success stories and occasional missteps have fed directly into this fully updated 2025 edition.

Today the landscape is tougher in some ways (enforcement powers are sharper, policies have shifted), yet the opportunity remains. Inside you'll find every practical detail: how big your barn can be, how many goats equal a full-time wage, which caravan rules still let you sleep on-site, and the latest tricks to keep your permitted-development rights intact. No glossy animal portraits, no bucolic waffle, just the information you need, written in plain English and road-tested in real fields from Cornwall to Caithness.

Turn the page, roll up your sleeves, and start measuring that first acre because the journey from Field to Farm begins right here.

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INTRODUCTION

It does seem unlikely in our heavily regulated planning system that it would be possible to carry out any development on agricultural land without planning permission. However, as this book will demonstrate, it is possible to live, build a barn and start a business, all without planning permission, on ordinary agricultural land in the United Kingdom.

This book uses current planning law only and does not rely on the Human Rights Act, which has been used by some others to occupy land.

Many people, at one time or another, have wanted to get away from it all, escape the rat race and live the “good life”; to buy a piece of land, live on it and keep a few animals. If you are one of these people, and this is your time, then this book is for you. It will guide you through the process, explaining all you need to know, pointing out the pitfalls. The guide will cover the following:

1. Acquisition of the land, what to look for, what to avoid.
2. Explain why planning permission is not required.
3. Siting and construction of the 465 square metre (5000 sq ft) barn.
4. Selection and siting of the dwelling.
5. The infrastructure and services.
6. A selection of businesses that can be run, and the tests that will need to be met, to get planning permission for a house.
7. How to set up and run your own touring caravan park without planning permission.

The usual way to start a smallholding is to buy a piece of land then make a planning application to live on it. For this application to be successful you will be required to prove “functional need”, which simply means you have to justify why you need to live on the land. In effect, this always means care and welfare of agricultural animals. This can be problematic if you have no animals. It will mean that when you seek planning permission it will only be supported by a business plan, which you will need to get from an experienced agricultural planning consultant, and it will cost money and time. The most successful method is to have an animal enterprise up and running and then apply for

planning permission, although this can have its own problems. The council may well take the view that you have operated the animal enterprise without living on the land, so what is the need to live on it now? A “catch 22” situation. This approach can take a great deal of time and money, particularly if you have already bought the land. You will receive no help from the local authority planning department who, in general, are not keen to see new buildings and certainly not dwellings in open countryside. Generally you will be fed misinformation about what you can and cannot do on agricultural land; this book redresses the balance.

If you are successful in obtaining planning permission it will be for a mobile home for a period of 3 years (no extensions), and in this period you will need to prove “viability”. Passing the viability test means earning the minimum wage from the business for at least a period of 1 year out of the 3. If this test is met, then planning permission would be granted for a permanent dwelling which would be of a size commensurate with the income that can be earned from the holding, on the minimum wage. It would be a small house. It will also be necessary to demonstrate that the business is “sustainable” (in this context meaning “likely to continue” rather than environmentally friendly); this is normally demonstrated by continuing investment in the business or in an additional enterprise or building. Proof will normally be required that the business is on a sound financial footing; this is normally accomplished by the balance sheet showing a low level of exposure to debt.

The house is likely to come with some planning restriction placed upon it. The usual one is that the house and land can only be sold together or an “agricultural tie” is placed upon the dwelling which restricts the people who can live in it. Usually only people who are working in agriculture or forestry, or who have retired from the same, are allowed to live in an agriculturally tied house. Sometimes some of the permitted development rights are removed, which means you cannot extend the house without planning permission and this is unlikely to be granted. The right to have a mobile home within the curtilage of a dwelling house may also be removed.

If you use this book as a guide when setting up your smallholding, the outcome will be more positive: no costly planning application, only a 28-day notice (an agricultural prior notice consent form). You may move onto the land and live on

it for up to 5 years without making a planning application, which gives you ample time to establish an animal-based business, thus avoiding the “catch 22” situation”. This means that any land that is bought can, with certainty, be used as a smallholding. An additional advantage is that the work of setting up the smallholding can start in weeks, not months or years, thus giving you the time to become a viable profitable enterprise rather than having to be profitable in your 1 year in 3.

Be under no illusions that planning permission takes time, normally a great deal of time, it is not unusual in agricultural applications to take years and the outcome is usually disappointing. The planners ask for so much useless information not all at once but a bit at a time to stretch out the process in order to grind you down. Eventually the application is refused and if you decide to appeal this can take up to a year so be wary of making planning applications for anything, unless you have plenty of spare time.

Some people want their smallholding to give them a self-sufficient lifestyle; a laudable ideal, but this will be a difficult way to get planning permission for a house. There are Government guidelines given to planners whereby some smallholdings are allowed to operate at a subsistence level, so long as they contribute to the rural economy in some other way; an example would be by enhancing and maintaining the landscape (a Government example not mine). The only time I have seen this done successfully was by a wildlife sanctuary with charitable status. It did not comply with the viability test but was still successful albeit for temporary permission to live on site in a mobile home. Normally this would be a difficult route to take as I have never heard of Individual being successful in obtaining planning permission in this way. In the unlikely event that it was successful the house you would be allowed to build would be tiny. It will be far easier to follow the system set out in this guide with a more certain outcome. To do this you will need to make money, as much money as you can. The more income you have, the better the house you can build. After you have built your house you can be as self-sufficient as you like.

The only way this system will work is to be realistic. Forget the good life: every opportunity for making money must be exploited. This is why it is critical to buy the right piece of land, in the right place, and to diversify. You will need a main animal enterprise to satisfy planning, but you can also do lots of other

things at the same time. You could have a petting zoo or a touring caravan park, and do seasonal things such as sell bedding plants in spring, a maize maze in summer, pumpkins in October, Christmas trees and turkeys, or even a farm shop. The possibilities are endless.

The one thing that I will keep coming back to is the land. It must be right for what you want to do. It must be flat, at least in part, if you want a touring caravan park and not wet or heavy soil if you want to grow Christmas trees. It is better to read this book all the way through, decide what businesses you would like to run, and then see if the land is suitable. Do your local research to see if there are opportunities for what you want to do. If not, change what you want to do, or change the location. Whatever land you select, it must have road frontage. The road must go somewhere and must have passing traffic (as much as possible). Without this traffic you have little chance of selling things to the public without spending a lot of money on advertising.

For a relatively modest investment you should end up with a smallholding with an asset value of at least two to three times your initial outlay. It could be even more, so, from an investment point of view, it would be hard to beat.

The qualities necessary to create a smallholding are physical fitness, common sense, willingness to learn new skills, tenacity, and adaptability, and with a partner shared ambitions. Some degree of physical fitness is a must as there is quite a lot of manual work involved; if you are not fit to start with, you soon will be! Common sense, if you do not know, ask someone! If you decide to keep a particular animal, take a Course, these are normally run by people who specialise in that type of animal and have their own businesses. Other sources of information are books and magazines about smallholdings. You will soon learn; everybody has to start somewhere.

All of the books I have ever read on smallholding are beautifully produced and full of pretty pictures but completely devoid of any useful information. It is very frustrating for the beginner not to be able to find relevant facts about the business of smallholding. How would you know if you could afford to go into any particular enterprise or what it would cost to set up and what profit you would make? This book looks at all the options and all of the costs involved in setting up and running your business, even the type of tractor and the sort machinery that you would need. It looks at the most efficient way to produce food in the

best animal welfare environment. It covers all the aspects of smallholding whether you have bought, or are going to buy; an existing unit with a house and buildings or you wish to create one from a field. It will even appeal to the seasoned professional wishing to diversify into animal enterprises of which they have little knowledge.

This lifestyle change must be considered very carefully, however, particularly if you are moving to a new unknown area of the country to set up home. The main aim of a smallholding is to make sufficient profit so that it can support you and your family financially; that is, of course, if you are buying an existing smallholding. If you are starting from scratch to get planning permission for a house you must earn at least the minimum wage to qualify. Profitability is the one thing that is normally overlooked. It is always assumed that if you produce some of the food you eat, sell any surplus and have low overheads you must make a profit. If only life was that simple.

The complexity of running a smallholding only becomes apparent once you are actually doing it. You may have read books on the animals you wish to keep or the crops you want to grow but there is nothing that can prepare you for actually doing it. Your biggest fears, being a novice, are that all the animals will get sick and die or that the weather will kill off all your crops. This is very unlikely to happen and if you plan ahead all these risks can be eliminated. In reality the biggest problem you are likely to face is not treating the smallholding as a business and running it accordingly.

To my knowledge operating this type of rural enterprise has never been analysed and the rules of business applied so that it produces a good return on your investment and provides you with a decent living.

Below is a list of things that will be addressed in this book:

- 1) The selection and acquisition of the holding
- 2) Marketing, getting the customers to come to you.
- 3) Building a customer base.
- 4) Cash flow and profit.
- 5) Investment required setting up and running 15 different animal enterprises.
- 6) 30 non animal businesses that can be run from the smallholding.
- 7) Each enterprise is given a time value so that you can better utilise your day.

- 8) The tests that are required to be met to obtain planning for a house.
- 9) The types and number of animals required to meet the tests.

Don't let this list put you off the idea of starting or running a smallholding as most of it is common sense. The various enterprises are covered in separate chapters and give an indication of the daily and weekly labour inputs and likely levels of investment and profit.

This book covers very little about growing vegetables as it is very difficult to make any money from this type of enterprise. It does however cover areas of horticulture that do make money, such as:-

- 1) Lavender
- 2) Herbs
- 3) Capsicums (Chillies, peppers)
- 4) Bedding plants
- 5) Tree Nursery
- 6) Christmas Trees
- 7) Garlic