

RECLAIMING THE LAND: BANKING ON SUCCESS

Way back in 2003 we uncovered a new 'plot' which our then Planning Manager, Rick Sanderson dubbed 'Plotlands'. This was the practice of buying up farmland, dividing it into house-sized plots and selling it on at a vastly inflated price to unwary investors. The plots are highly unlikely to be given planning permission.

These sites 'mushroomed' all over the county, and the practice was not confined to Hertfordshire. It became more familiarly known as 'landbanking'. Thanks in large measure to our campaigning, the practice is far less widespread and some measures are in place to curb it. The Financial Services Authority has taken an interest and we have some good news stories to report, both nationally and locally.

Nationally

At Isleworth Crown Court in December 2012 two men were successfully prosecuted for 'land banking' fraud and sentenced to six and seven years in prison.

Locally

Farmer Tim Acheson was so dismayed at the deterioration of a landbanking site in his area that he decided to do something about it. Tim told us: 'A few years ago, a land banking operation acquired a large agricultural field in Braughing in north east Hertfordshire, carved it up into pieces and sold them off as small building plots. From the day when the land scammers arrived, proper agricultural management of the site ceased. A swathe of productive farmland was lost and a period of chronic abandonment and neglect began. The plot buyers were long-distance property investors, none of whom live in the area or care about what happens here. It's a tragic but familiar pattern afflicting rural England.'

'From the day when the land scammers arrived, proper agricultural management of the site ceased'



Before: on site rubbish

Fate of the field not accepted

'We couldn't accept the fate of that field, so a few local farmers got together and we resolved to do something about it and restore the land to proper agricultural and environmental management. Farming is, I believe, the single most important factor in ensuring sustainable management and conservation of England's countryside.'

'So far we've succeeded in acquiring plots (or in some cases farming rights) comprising about half of the entire site. It's a challenging process which has taken years and will require many more to complete. The plot merchants bashed thousands of wooden and metal posts into the ground, which damage

farm machinery despite our best efforts to find and remove them. Plot purchases sometimes fall through at the last minute and abortive purchases have cost up to £4,000 per plot in solicitors' fees alone. Many hours of time are spent on complex negotiations over extortionate overage clauses, elaborate covenants, etc.'

Farmland conservation project

'I feel we're doing something worthwhile with this little farmland conservation project. I now refer to it as 'farmland' not 'plotland' anymore. I feel privileged to live in a village surrounded by such beautiful arable landscape. Here in Braughing we are very proud to hold the title of CPRE Hertfordshire Village of the Year Overall Winner 2012.'

This is excellent news. To our knowledge there are 19 such sites in the county. It would be marvellous other like-minded people could do what Mr Acheson has done.

Kevin FitzGerald
www.cpreherts.org.uk



After: Mowing reclaimed