

## The hobby farmers

### The urban couple who live the free-range lifestyle

Ask Shane Durston when he first thought about living off the land and he can pinpoint the exact moment 27 years ago. He grew up on council estates in Hackney and Catford. His parents were both 16 when he was born; five years later they broke up. By the time he was a teenager, he was getting into trouble with the police. Petty stuff, he recalls, like shoplifting. Finally he was given community service clearing up some woodland near where he lived. He was 15.

'I thought it was rubbish,' he recalls. 'I thought I knew everything about everything.'

But the quiet man who was in charge of the teenage boys for the day showed them where they could find wild mushrooms. Not only that, he picked some and took them back to his shed where he fried them in butter.

'It stayed with me,' says Shane, 42. 'The idea of foraging, of the countryside, of getting something for nothing. There was this world out there I knew nothing about.' He stumbled across a copy of *Food for Free* by Richard Mabey in the library and started to find out more.

It would be another 17 years, and one failed marriage, before he found someone who would share his dream. He met Emma at the Abbey National in Milton Keynes when she almost ran him over in the car park. He was working as an IT specialist; Emma was in the insurance department. 'I'd left school at 16, bought a house, got married, but it hadn't worked out,' says Emma, 35. 'I just sort of struggled on. I didn't know me. I didn't know what I wanted.'

When the couple got together they started growing vegetables in their back garden (as well as clubbing, and driving a convertible and having foreign holidays. 'Oh, yes, we had all the toys,' says Shane). One day they went to a children's farm in Luton and, on the spur of the moment, came back with six pet hens.

Five years on they're living in a modern three-bedroom house in a village called Spalding in Lincolnshire. The landscape is as flat



as a dinner plate. The wind has a tendency to whistle through. On their 12 acres they have: 50 chickens (many rescued from battery farms), 14 Portland sheep, 10 pigs including Tamworths and Gloucester Old Spots, six ducks, five Dexter cows, five turkeys, two goats and two geese. Recently there's been a new addition to the menagerie. In the living room there's one baby boy, eight months. His name is Finley.

There's a copy of John Seymour's updated classic *The New Complete Book of Self Sufficiency* on the coffee table. 'I don't mind the term hobby farmer,' says Shane. 'This is like my golf.' They have a small mortgage on the house which they bought for £250,000 as a result of a couple of judicious property deals in the Nineties: doing up houses and selling them on.

'I'm a strong believer in mixing the new with the old,' says Shane. 'Look around: we've still got a big telly, but we've also got a wood-burning range. There is no reason why the two can't mix. Hobby farmer is an apt description: we

mollycoddle our animals. They are a step down from pets.' Their pigs are named Del Boy, Rodney and Cassandra after the Trotter family in *Only Fools and Horses*.

At the moment Shane has dipped into their savings to take a year off work while Finley is a baby. But more usually you'd find them both ankle-deep in mud feeding and watering the animals at six in the morning before starting the hour-and-a-half drive into work. ('Helmets with torches on are invaluable,' says Emma.) All the jobs are shared, whether it's mucking out or taking the animals to the abattoir. They make a little extra money by advertising their pork from their website and selling jam and eggs at the gate.

Emma loves the idea that they can sit down to a meal and know that everything they're about to eat they've either reared or grown from seed. Although not everyone agrees with her. One time some friends came to visit and when she served up one of their pigs as a roast ham their guests squeamishly pleaded to go to the pub for lunch instead.

Ideally Shane would like to be able to cut back on his IT consultancy work and spend more time on the smallholding. He's built a biodiesel processor which means he can make 80 litres a day, all from waste vegetable oil. He hopes to run courses to show other people how to do it. Maybe, says Emma, they could do half-day chicken-keeping courses, too.

'To be honest, if it meant that I could spend more time here,' Shane says, 'I'd flip burgers for a living.' We both did our own thing before we met each other, but speaking for myself I am the happiest I have ever been.' Emma bounces Finley on her knees and nods in agreement. ▶

[www.durston.org.uk](http://www.durston.org.uk)

“**Usually you'd find them both ankle-deep in mud, feeding and watering the animals at six in the morning**”

**'If it meant I could spend more time here, I'd flip burgers for a living': Shane and Emma with baby Finley on the 12 acres they own and farm in Lincolnshire**