

# COUNTRY LIFE

EVERY WEEK

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## How to find Utopia



The best countryside apps  
Living in the villa: what the Romans did for us  
Beefy beetles and where to buy in Europe

# Their way to heaven

One hundred years ago, a utopian community of artists, farmers and thinkers sought ‘a country life worth living’ in the heart of West Sussex, finds **Russell Higham**

**S**USSEX has always attracted the avant-garde. The last county in England to convert to Christianity, it has been a magnet for bohemian artists, radical writers, revolutionary thinkers and the sexually liberated—libertine, even—ever since.

The Bloomsbury Group frequently escaped London’s squares—both the architectural and intellectual kind—for the unbounded horizons of Sussex. Sculptor and calligrapher Eric Gill co-founded an artists’ community in Ditchling and Vogue-model-turned-war-photographer Lee Miller hosted Surrealist picnics, attended by Picasso, Miró and Man Ray, at her farm in Chiddingly. But in 1923, a Christian Mystic and her artist husband attracted global media attention when they created, in what is now a well-heeled, middle-class residential estate between Storrington and Washington, in West Sussex, a rural utopia that challenged the world order.

## ‘It was to be a new Eden, free of avarice and the conflict it brought’

Vera Pragnell (1897–1968), the wealthy daughter of a textile magnate, had worked as a Red Cross nurse during the First World War. The death and destruction she witnessed caused her to lose faith in urban society and its pursuit of material gain—an approach that, she felt, had led to so much human suffering, including the death of her own brother.

Guided by a literal interpretation of the Sermon on the Mount, she used her inheritance to purchase 50 acres of land (costing £850 at the time, just under £41,500 in today’s money), which she divided into small plots and distributed, free of charge, to those she thought deserving. These plots, with basic cottages, were used for growing vegetables and rearing livestock by like-minded settlers, who practised traditional arts and crafts, such as woodwork, spinning and weaving. After work, they would recite poetry, sing folk songs and discuss politics and philosophy around the campfire. This community, which she named Sanctuary, was to be a new Eden, free from



*Facing page:* **Founder Vera Pragnell, painted as a nun by her husband, Dennis Earle. Above: The couple in the Sanctuary**

avarice and the conflict it brought. It was the start of a bold project that represented a ‘challenge to capitalism’, as she put it.

After the First World War, there was a global move towards a new, kinder way of living, as proposed by the Fellowship of Reconciliation (FoR), which sought to establish a federation of communal settlements founded upon Christian principles, such as those Pragnell subscribed to. Indeed, many newcomers were recruited to the Sanctuary through the pages of the FoR’s newsletter *Reconciliation*.

And come they did, from all walks of life. There were writers such as Laurie Lee, who lived in a caravan on the site; resident artists, including William Heaton Cooper and Dennis Earle, both Royal Academy-trained painters (the latter married Pragnell); and occultists, such as Victor Neuburg, an associate of Aleister Crowley (often labelled ‘the wickedest man in the world’ for his drug use and libertine lifestyle). Other visitors included H. G. Wells and, in later years, Jomo Kenyatta, the first president of post-independence Kenya.

In Pragnell’s *The Story of the Sanctuary* (published by Neuburg’s The Vine Press), she credits the utopian philosopher and poet

Edward Carpenter as her inspiration, dedicating the book to him as ‘a splendid pioneer who paved the way’. Cambridge-educated Carpenter was famous for expounding his theory of how modern urban living was anathema to human happiness, a disease to the soul. Country life, in its simplest form, was the cure he prescribed. Pragnell’s husband, Earle, had, in fact, been a former lover of Carpenter, who, as well as being an advocate of vegetarianism and the author of a book entitled *Civilisation: Its Cause and Cure*, was one of the earliest activists for gay rights.

Jonathan Addis, the grandson of Pragnell and Earle, recalls visiting the Sanctuary as a child and says he was profoundly affected, even at an early age, by the natural beauty and light of Sussex. ‘I remember visiting my grandparents and being struck by the woodland road heading into Sanctuary. The beautiful smell of the ferns and pine trees, the sunlight glinting through the woodland leaves. It really left an impression on me.’

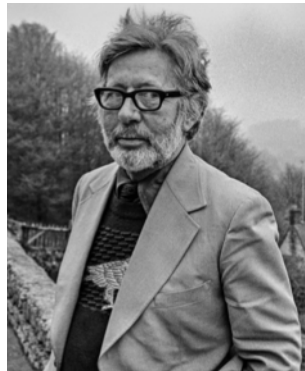
Mr Addis (second cousin to Sir Timothy Laurence, husband to The Princess Royal) has since become a sought-after artist, particularly known for his renditions of London houses—Viscount Portman and former Prime Minister Gordon Brown have commissioned hand-drawn maps and a painting by him of properties in, respectively, Marylebone and Downing Street ([www.jonathanaddis.com](http://www.jonathanaddis.com)). He ascribes his initial interest in art to Earle’s work: ‘Growing up with my grandfather’s delicate watercolour pictures on the walls influenced me to pick up a pencil and teach myself to draw.’

Mr Addis recalls his grandfather’s attraction to the supernatural, as well as the natural: ‘Dennis, being a friend of Crowley and Neuburg, was very much into “magick”. Even my mother was born on exactly the day of the summer solstice.’

It was the regular appearance of characters such as Crowley, as well as anarchists and activists from the Communist Party, that contributed to the rumours and bad press about the Sanctuary, both here and abroad, which eventually contributed to its downfall. Much of this was undeserved, however. Although there were clear socialist undertones to the project and Joe Matthews, one of the first settlers, organised summer camps there for the Young Communists, neither →



Pure 'country life', the cure for modern ills, enfolded the rustic buildings of the Sanctuary



From left: H. G. Wells, Victor Neuburg and Laurie Lee, supporters of Pragnell's utopia

the Sanctuary nor Pragnell herself were aligned with any particular political ideology. She envisaged her community as being a home for followers 'of any -ism, or none'. And, as local historian and director of [historypeople.co.uk](http://historypeople.co.uk) Chris Hare points out in his book *The Washington Story*, 'although much was shared and freely given, the produce (grown by the residents) was not "held in common". The Sanctuary was always the free association of individuals; it was not a collective'.

Tales of wanton behaviour abounded, too. In 1929, *John Bull* magazine published a sensationalist story accusing Pragnell of leading a young girl, after her short stay at the site, into a life of petty crime. Sordid gossip spread around neighbouring villages of nudity and orgies, yet it was mostly unfounded. Although Pragnell was no prude, she was guided by her Christian beliefs and was striving towards a higher reward for her fellow man than mere pleasures of the flesh. And however worthy her aims were, she, like her mentor Carpenter, was derided by intellectuals of the day, such as George Orwell, who labelled the denizens of the Sanctuary 'impractical dreamers'.

Unkind as that may seem, Orwell may have had a point, says Prof Clive Webb of the

University of Sussex: 'This was essentially a group of middle-class people who held a romantic idea of the countryside. Escaping the overcrowding and disease of the city is one thing, but that doesn't mean that the countryside is a paradise. There was a simple (Orwellian-like) binary that people like Vera Pragnell constructed which was "urban life bad, rural life good". Yet what Orwell was saying was: rural life can actually be tough. And he was ultimately right, because when they started to farm the land at the Sanctuary, they found the soil was infertile.'

It wasn't only the crops that failed, either. As the value of surrounding land and property increased, the residents of the Sanctuary demanded legal rights to the plots and homes that Pragnell had given them, so they themselves could profit. By the late 1930s, as developers and speculators moved in, her dream of a rural arcadia untouched by Mammon had withered away to almost nothing, just like the vegetables.

These days, not much remains of this experiment in utopian living apart from a sign in a wooden shelter at the crossroads of Vera's Walk and Sanctuary Lane. That and a couple of cottages, improved and extended,


## Fellowship of the raking: the other Sussex sanctuary

Less than 50 miles from where the Sanctuary failed, along the South Downs Way, in the village of Robertsbridge, East Sussex, lies another community, also founded upon the principles of the Sermon of the Mount. But this one still thrives today. Darvell, part of the century-old Bruderhof (German for 'place of brothers') network, was established in 1971 and is now home to 300 people of all ages who live, eat, work and learn together — they even run their own school, which is attended by pupils from both within and outside the community. Tending their farm, gardens and a community business that produces classroom and play equipment for children, they follow the Anabaptist Christian tradition, which is rooted in Europe's Radical Reformation. As pacifists and conscientious objectors, they state: 'While we love our countries and countrymen, our faith transcends political and nationalistic affiliations.'

David Hibbs, who has lived at Darvell for more than 30 years, explains that the reason he joined the community is the same reason it is still going. He says he wanted to live in a place 'where people share everything and live not for themselves but for others'. Mr Hibbs also volunteers as a chaplain in the local hospital once a week.

'People think you have to cut yourself off to live like we do, but it isn't true,' he explains, before adding an invitation: 'Come along and see for yourself.' For more information, visit [www.bruderhof.com](http://www.bruderhof.com)

but hidden from view behind large detached houses. One of those cottages belongs to Joy Gunton, who moved to the Sanctuary with her parents in 1929, aged one. Attributing her longevity to a life of vegetarianism (her father owned a health-food shop), she remembers the Sanctuary as 'a very happy place. Vera was a lovely, kind person'.

Neighbouring Miss Gunton's small kitchen garden, where sandal-wearing artists, craft-people and idealists once made their plans for humanity, Range Rovers now sweep into private gravel driveways. Yet, however brave or naive Pragnell's attempt to make the world a more peaceful, kinder place may have been, it was, as she wrote in her book about the Sanctuary, for a very short time at least, a 'country life worth the living'.  *Storrington Museum, West Sussex, maintains a permanent display about Sanctuary. For details, telephone 01903 740188 or visit [www.storringtonmuseum.com](http://www.storringtonmuseum.com)*

