

Making an art out of a living



‘To be many selves, all at once’, writer, broadcaster, conservationist collector, film-maker and Columbia University lecturer Polly Devlin, in Cannwood Meadow, Somerset
Photograph: Heather Edwards

The writer Polly Devlin and her husband, Andy Garnett, have worked hard to conserve a rare orchid-rich meadow in Somerset. Now, with the help of botanist Chris Smith, they have created a record of its life over a year. **Patsey Murphy** wanders through its tangled beauty.

“If you stick around I’ll start talking instead of being silent,” says Polly Devlin devilishly over her shoulder as we try, and fail, to keep up while she leads us around Cannwood, the farm and Georgian house in deepest Somerset that the writer and her husband, Andy Garnett, bought as a near ruin in 1983. Field by field, their fiefdom has grown from nine acres to more than 100, with not another house to be seen in a 360-degree turn. Not so much as a telegraph pole or phone wire. It’s a landscape unscathed by intensive farming, such as Constable might have painted.

We are here primarily to visit Cannwood Meadow, the subject of a book that Devlin and Garnett have just written, recording its life over a year, but it is impossible not to be drawn by the gardens and the house, crammed as it is with art, books, sculpture, antiques and uncommon imagination and style. Not to mention children, grandchildren, guests and a clatter of dogs, cats, geese and hens.

“The simple life isn’t easy. If it wasn’t someone else’s doing I might be modest about it,” she says as we gallop through a perfect kitchen garden. Lavender catmint tickles our shins as we trundle on beneath an archway scented with philadelphus and old roses into another garden, where tall blue delphiniums and white foxgloves stand watch. A statue of Diana is listing, backwards - “everything sinks in this clay, eventually” - as we careen past a fruit cage, tennis courts and a folly of a tree house called “the stumpery”. Children’s squeals come from the swimming pool, which is swamped by roses. Then we walk through a more formal herb garden.

Across the laneway Devlin feeds a clutch of prize hens - “look at that eiderdown of a thing coming towards us” - and boasts that she sells the eggs for £1 apiece at a fish shop in Notting Hill. The gate to the vast vegetable garden is opened then, its well-tended drills just about ready to burst into summer excess. Roses clamber up the walls of the house, and house martins zoom in and out of the eaves. “They arrive like clockwork on April 23rd. I wait for them.”

And the meadow? The meadow is home to an abundance of wild orchids, which Devlin noticed when it still belonged to a neighbouring farmer. By chance, as she tells it, she encountered Stellar-the-farmer just as he was about to spread slurry on this untouched field of gems, which would have ruined it forever. So she fly-tackled him on his tractor. “I pleaded, coaxed, cajoled and negotiated while he sat there unmoved. But eventually, worn out perhaps, he agreed to think about selling it and turned back.” The meadow was theirs and the seeds were sown.

“It was really Polly’s bright eyes that spotted the meadow and saw just what a special place it was,” says Garnett, her husband of more than 40 years and an inventor and engineer who endures a form of multiple sclerosis with good grace. They had the meadow surveyed, and in 1987 it was designated a site of special scientific interest and is thus preserved. Years of careful husbandry ensued.

Just now the wild orchids are at their peak, and the meadow is studded with their white and magenta-

speckled spikes. Splendour in the grass. The names of the early summer wild flowers and grasses trip off her tongue: bitter vetch, glaucous sedge, quaking grass, dyer's greenweed, devil's bit scabious and ox-eye daisies, to name but a few - and this in a county of place names such as Compton Pauncefoot, Gurney Slade, Peasedown St John, Creech St Michael and Sampford Peverell.

"Would you like to take off your shoes?" Devlin asks as we tease our way across the meadow to a distant corner, mesmerised, with children in tow and a dog in arms lest we startle any creatures. Only a tawny pheasant seems put off by our arrival. We settle on an old tree trunk and Devlin, the conservationist, describes the sequence of summer colours that will shimmer and fade - after the orchids, the blues are next up. She explains the advantage of sowing yellow rattle, which keeps more aggressive grasses in check. A small flock of self-shearing Wiltshire horn sheep is also vital to crop the field down to the bone after the annual mowing in mid-August.

We peer into a medieval oak wood that lines one boundary, part of the duchy of Somerset. Its benign neglect for centuries - apart from coppicing - has contributed to the joy of species in Cannwood Meadow.

"When I was a child in Ireland in the 1950s," Devlin writes in the book, "we lived rather like I imagine the Amish do now in the United States. There was no electricity; no telephones, no modern contrivances; and the community was so close-knit and so remote from modern civilisation that a stranger was a phenomenon, and not always made welcome. There were few tractors. The air was heavy with silence, and the smell of the grass, leaves, dampness and, at certain seasons, new-cut hay or rotting flax shimmered like a vapour over the land.

"When we ran through our meadows there arose from the grasses such a humming and a fluttering as made the eyes and ears dance in trying to accommodate it. You had to watch where you put your feet. Corncrakes, mice, hares, rabbits and birds scuttered and scolded away from you. Butterflies and insects of every kind rose in a cloud. You didn't know where to look, but then you weren't so hungry to look, since such things were common, unregarded, everyday affairs, immemorial parts of life."

Not so today. The tools and greed of intensive farming have changed the landscape, sometimes irrevocably, and in no time at all. Here's a statistic to bring it home: Somerset had more than 700 wild-flower meadows as recently as 1984. Today it has fewer than 20. Apply that to the changing landscape that is Ireland. The story cannot be very different.

Cannwood is a reminder of that rare and bountiful thing: the natural, unmanicured landscape. All the boundaries are dark with green hedges, bushes, scrub oak and saplings; over the years they have planted more than 6,000 trees. Extensive paths and laneways are sown with grass. Dew ponds have been restored, and you cross them on suspended plank bridges engineered by Richard La Trobe Bateman.

"Make a wish," Devlin says as we are crossing. I will surely. She points to one of many "sit-outeries", or hidden seats designed for a tryst.

A long table is set for lunch beneath a sailmaker's canopy, and Daisy Garnett, a food writer and, along with Bay and Rosie, one of three accomplished daughters, is preparing a feast.

But first we meet in the Big Room in the barn, with vast studio windows as high as the rafters, a large hearth and a sea of Persian rugs hiding the dance floor underneath. Paintings cover the walls, and there is an wonderful tall obelisk by the sculptor Ben Jakober, faced with early computer memory boards.

An oversized ottoman in the centre of the room is what Garnett would rescue first in a fire; his grandmother spent 20 years stitching its tapestry cover. Devlin would opt for Yoko Ono's A Box of Smile, given to her by John Lennon.

Everything has a story, and this is a house crammed to the gills with good stories. Everything speaks of a life fiercely lived, including the Urn at the End of Its Tether, a sculpture made by Shane Bernard to Devlin's specifications. Or a dragon acquired in Hong Kong by Tony Snowdon and Princess Margaret during their marriage, which was curtly returned to Snowdon after their divorce. "It ended up here somehow," shrugs

Garnett. “This must be the only room big enough for it.”

To produce their meadow chronicle they enlisted the help of Dr Chris Smith, a botanist. “When he went into the field for the first time he said it was like being in a concert hall, hearing the instruments being tuned in preparation for a concert,” Garnett says with contagious delight. Amid the clamour, Smith identified 130 species, including the marsh fritillary, a rare butterfly. There’s some corner of an English field that is for ever . . . saved.

- *A Year in the Life of an English Meadow* , by Andy Garnett and Polly Devlin, is published by Frances Lincoln, £20 in UK

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