

British hermits: the growing lure of the solitary life

By Henry Hemming Sunday, 6 July 2008

¹ By the time Sue Woodcock came to retire from her career as a policewoman, she'd had enough of Hampshire, where she was based, and longed for a more traditional and natural way of life – one where she could 'live by [her] own rules'. In her old life, back in what she calls 'that England', she had become *disillusioned* by politics, by society as a whole. So she moved north to become a crofter in the Yorkshire Dales.

² In 2004 she bought Mire House: a deserted heap of stones with no running water, no electricity and not much of a roof. What remained of her savings she spent on rare-breed sheep and an old Rayburn cooker. Before long she was installed in her leaking hermitage along with a family of dogs, cats, chickens, sheep, goats and Henry the turkey.

³ Her plan had been to do all this with the man she was seeing at the time, though that didn't work out. Instead of *wallowing* in heartbreak, she discovered she was excited by the idea of solitude. Surrounded by 'bats, owls and plenty of animals' she says she never gets lonely.

Sue Woodcock is a modern-day hermit.

⁴ 'I love it,' she explains, from the unplastered interior of her home, which smells of stone and damp and where everything in sight is functional and worn. 'It means I can fart and belch as I like. I can wander round in my pyjamas, make as much mess as I like, go to bed when I want, and there are no arguments.'

'The English have ... a peculiar affection for hermits'

⁵ Being a hermit is about much more than just living an *uninhibited*, single life. As well as being someone who lives alone, a hermit is seen to have gone back to nature, leading a life of asceticism free from materialism. With the prediction that, by 2010, up to 46 per cent of UK households will be lived in by only one person, perhaps the hermit is about to come back into vogue.

⁶ For Woodcock, there is more to it than just the freedom of living alone: 'I have no morals, see,' she continues, 'personal principles – but not morals. They're things others impose on you.' Her desire for a people-free existence was perhaps formed in her youth. 'At school I was the fat, red-haired girl with freckles and no parents – they decided they didn't want me and moved to Australia, which led to bullying. I've always been the odd one out. When everyone else was mad about the Beatles, I liked Frank Ifield. He could really sing.'

⁷ For centuries, Englishwomen beyond child-bearing age who lived alone would arouse suspicion. As recently as the early 20th century women were sectioned for offences such as living by themselves, not cutting their hair or not tidying their kitchen. Historically, our understanding of what is eccentric or threatening has been *articulated* by masculine elites threatened by female non-conformity.

⁸ 'There's no way I could have done this 100 years ago,' Woodcock says. 'They would have called me ➡'

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➡ insane.' Which is not to say she has escaped persecution. Less than two years after moving in, the local park authority decided they wanted her out, claiming the house that she had bought legitimately should remain a ruin and that by patching her roof with tarpaulin she had altered its state illegally. Arguably, it was her lifestyle that was *deemed* unacceptable. An eviction notice was pinned to her door, which she chose to ignore and she has since – after a hearty battle – won the right to stay put. As a result, Woodcock became something of a local hero. Amid all the suspicion, the English have always had a peculiar affection for hermits.

'my house is my castle'

⁹ Lawrence Durrell once called us a nation of *islomanes* who are drawn instinctively towards islands. With the hermit a human island, it makes sense that the English find something *inherently* admirable about them.

¹⁰ Hermits are embodiments of doing your own thing, knowing your rights, minding your own business, my house is my castle;

18th-century landowners would even employ 'ornamental hermits' to live in grottoes on their estates. Charles Hamilton of Painshill Park advertised for a hermit who was not to cut his beard or nails, leave the grounds, talk to the servants, attack the guests, or wear anything other than a camel-hair robe. The only known applicant was *sacked* after three weeks when someone spotted him at the local pub.

¹¹ Tom Leppard is by no means an ornamental hermit. I interviewed him, along with Sue Woodcock, for my book on English eccentrics.

¹² After a brutal convent education, and retired from the armed forces, Tom Leppard moved to London, which he loathed. It made him realise that every time in his life he'd been unhappy people had been involved. So Leppard vowed to become a hermit and moved to a remote part of the Isle of Skye. Before leaving London he had 99.2 per cent of his flesh tattooed with leopard spots, projecting his acute sense of apartness on to his skin.

¹³ That was more than 20 years ago. Tom is 73 now and – when we finally meet, after I track him down in his remote *lair* with the help of a local fisherman – he is wearing a woolly hat, a fleece with a flap that

covers his groin, and very little else. His home, Paradise, as he calls it, is very neat. Most of his daily chores are aimed at keeping it that way. At the heart of his encampment is a cave made from the remains of a sheep pen and bits of timber from nearby beaches. He survives on tins of food he buys with the pension he picks up when he kayaks over to the mainland.

¹⁴ Before we can chat, he has to find his dentures. 'Haven't spoken to anyone in a while, see,' he explains. Leppard says he was lonely in London but never gets lonely now. But why choose such an extreme path? Leppard puts it simply: 'I'm selfish. I've got all this,' he nods at the view that sweeps past a flank of Scottish scarp. 'And I want to keep it. I don't want to share it with anybody.'

¹⁵ As well as reminding us that it's possible to live without material possessions, by their example Woodcock and Leppard remind us not to confuse the words 'alone' and 'lonely'. Companionship is not always a *prerequisite* to fulfilment. As our population gets older and we grow increasingly fond of living on our own, this is more relevant now than ever before. ■