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Ben Goldsmith: I commissioned a history of my house. The findings were unbelievable

In the annals of his beloved home, the environmentalist uncovers its serendipitous secrets with the help of researchers

By **Anna Tyzack**, Senior lifestyle writer



When Ben Goldsmith commissioned a hardback history of Cannwood, his home in Somerset, he discovered he wasn't the only one to have struggled with the land. Over the past 150 years, more than a dozen farmers have been beaten by Cannwood's clay soil. "They all tried, failed and moved on, which makes a lot of sense to me," Goldsmith says. "I really tried to be a proper farmer with 50 sheep and 50 cows, but whenever it rains the fields look like Verdun." The 15,000-word book, which was produced by house history researchers Historic Productions, plots the farm moving in relatively quick succession from one farmer to the next, eventually becoming a cheesemaking school in the 1950s. "As an outsider buying or inheriting a piece of land, you feel such pressure to farm it – the whole

countryside is a factory floor – but the book proved what we'd already discovered: our land isn't productive at all," says Goldsmith, an environmentalist and former government nature champion, who divides his time between London and Somerset with his wife, Jemima Jones, a chef and restaurateur, and their children. Buildings tell better stories than people in some ways, according to James Hooper, who founded Historic Productions with historian Dr Oliver Cox, a former heritage engagement fellow at Oxford University. "You end up exploring multiple generations through the lens of a specific place. The end result is a social, cultural, spiritual and economic history." The written history of Cannwood begins before the house was built, when a coven of local witches lived in nearby Selwood Forest,

and continues through the tenures of the Bennetts, who lived there from 1713, the Willises and then the Burfitts, who were forced to sell off possessions, including a wheel barometer and pianoforte, when the farm did not break even. In the 1950s, the farm, like many in the area, became a dairy farm before being bought by Goldsmith's predecessors in 1982, "glamorous townies" Andy Garnett and Polly Devlin, who, like him, did not earn their living from farming. They installed central heating and hosted friends from London. "The book draws together a lot of threads that fascinated me. I recognise many of the surnames in the book – a lot of the same families are still living around Cannwood and the local pubs are still the same," says Goldsmith, who bought the farm with his first wife, Kate, and has brought up his eight children there.

Cannwood has also been a place of profound sadness, however. Goldsmith's daughter Iris died in a quad bike accident on the farm in 2019, aged 15, which is recorded in the book as an important part of Cannwood's history. "Iris always loved the wilder bits of the farm and nature like I do," he says. "She was always galloping around on her pony with the children next door. I had a huge bell on the side of the house which I'd ring when it was lunchtime," Goldsmith says. After her death, he says he wondered if he could bear to stay before realising that it was the only thing to do. "It was the key to survival. It's where I find Iris. Where all my memories of her are and where I feel her today." Even owners who think they know their houses explicitly can be caught off guard by what it is hiding, however. For Goldsmith, the most moving discovery was a poem about Cannwood by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney, the brother-in-law of Polly Devlin. It was written to celebrate a marriage at the house and is introduced by Iris, one of Prospero's spirits in Shakespeare's *Tempest*. "It was written three decades before Iris lived and died there. I just couldn't believe it," Goldsmith says. House history, the process of researching the former occupants and architectural evolution of a particular residence, is more popular than ever, according to the ancestry website Findmypast. The dedicated address search tool was used more than 70,000 times in the first 48 hours when it launched in 2022, while research by Polaris notes that household genealogy is expected to grow more than other types of genealogy until 2034. "In a house you uncover the history of seemingly ordinary people with a personal resonance as they occupied the same rooms as you," says house historian Melanie Backe-Hansen, a presenter on BBC Two's *House Through Time* series. Even the most mundane historical detail is significant when it applies to the house you're living in, agrees Ben Taggart, a south London-based house historian who creates scale models of buildings at his studio. "Ever since I discovered that a domestic servant called Beatrice Benstead lived in my house from 1903 until 1951, I've thought of her as I sweep the ashes from the fireplace in the sitting

room." Amateur historians can find information about previous occupants on Land Registry deeds and census data, as well as in drainage installation databases, tax records, auctions, old photographs and newspapers, suggests Taggart. While the internet has made the source-gathering process much easier, it's still important to search offline, too, Hooper adds, as often the most interesting material isn't in archives but in forgotten attics and boxes in cupboards. "We spend time in the locality, talking to locals and exploring nooks and crannies," he says. Fascinating stories are not only linked to grand houses like Cannwood of course, and the past has uncanny ways of linking to the current owner. Taggart recently created an illustrated house history for a client in south London who happened to work at the same address in the City as the man inhabiting his home in 1912. "Two people, separated by a century, have become united by their daily commute," he says. Hooper recently found himself writing his own name into a client's house history, as the house in question once belonged to his father and while writing Cannwood's history, he discovered that both Goldsmith's maternal uncle, Alastair, Marquess of Londonderry, and his paternal uncle, Teddy Goldsmith, were regular guests of Andy Garnett at Cannwood. "It's always rewarding for us when we uncover something meaningful that the owner didn't know about," Hooper says. He regards documenting a house's history as akin to keeping your garden or wine cellar in order. Old plans and historic information about the house can be useful during the planning process and for legacy and sale purposes, he explains, although owners only tend to explore a house's history if they feel a deep attachment to it. "The stories of the people, the former residents, are what they find most interesting," agrees Backe-Hansen. "They're what bring it alive." Goldsmith says he commissioned the history out of a love of his house. He fell for the area from the window of the First Great Western train on weekends travelling to visit his brother in Tavistock, Devon. "It was heaven as soon as we got here, but Kate and I were 26 at the time with very young children and

felt quite daunted," he says. "We found ourselves spending all our time at the rough edges of the farm, which weren't being farmed. It's heavy clay, like the rest of Selwood Forest, and farming simply wasn't working." Then one weekend a local digger driver let him play on his machine. "I started knocking things over and opening areas up. I had a rough idea of what I wanted: a Transylvanian-style circular homestead comprising a few acres containing the house, raised veg beds, orchard, chickens, children and dogs within a circular track, and the rest of the land rougher and wilder," he says. "That remains the idea now. We have a firepit in the lawn at the front of the house and on summer evenings we sling deck chairs around it and light a fire. I've spent more happy hours sitting by that fire than anywhere else." The final chapter of the book, *Cannwood Today*, includes an interview with Goldsmith and reflections from his memoir, *God is an Octopus*, as well as a photograph of the circle of Cornish granite boulders all constructed to celebrate Iris's life. "It is likely that the stones used at Stonehenge, that most celebrated of stone circles, once came along this route on their way to Salisbury Plain," he says. The chapter also marks the farm's evolution from a patchwork of fields bordered by hedgerows and barbed wire to an open "savannah" with Longhorn cattle, Tamworth pigs and Exmoor ponies. "You can now gallop several directions for three or four miles without coming across a fence," Goldsmith explains. "The rewilding is really a love letter to Iris." A client's own life history is a key component of a house history commission, says Hooper; it marks their time in a particular place. Taggart agrees: his models are more than a representation of a property, he says; they illustrate a journey. "Many of my clients are moving on or have just arrived. Either they have something to discover within the fabric of their new home or they have lived and experienced, changed and decorated, extended and restored, and want to represent that."