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## Taking the Tatton Estate into the next generation

Henry Brooks plans to preserve the land and provide jobs and recreation for the people who live there



Henry Brooks drives across Tatton Estate, the land his family owns in the north of England, in his battered red Land Rover © Jon Super/FT

5 HOURS AGO **Andy Bounds** at the Tatton Estate

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Henry Brooks stands on a concrete block by a potato field and sketches out the horizon. There are the aircraft taking off from Manchester airport, the new dual carriageway linking it to the M6 motorway and Birmingham, the rolling hills planted with maize and rapeseed stretching towards the peaks of the Pennines and a glimpse of the prosperous commuter town of Knutsford. At the end of the lane, the dilapidated farm is going to become a gastropub and shopping centre.

The entire area is owned by his family. Yet the Tatton Estate, one of the UK's most famous, has not been handed down through the generations over centuries like so many others.

Instead, it was bought in 1958 by Brooks's grandfather Harry, who came from Manchester and owned a chain of furniture shops. The estate is now owned by his son Randle and his wife.

Brooks has the impeccable accent and politeness of an English country squire. He drives the requisite battered red Land Rover. When he climbs down from the block — aimed at blocking the way through for construction traffic from the new road — he whips out his phone to show a picture of his toddler with spud in hand. “We were picking potatoes in this field with the kids a few weeks ago.”

But he admits that he can feel uncomfortable at meetings of the Country Land and Business Association, where he serves on a committee. “Everyone assumes you have had the land for 1,000 years. I feel a little awkward when I say my granddad was a self-made man who bought it.”



Poundary village was created by Prince Charles, Prince of Wales, in Dorset, with old-style architecture and lots of green space

The estate covers more than 5,000 acres south of the city of Manchester in north-west England. Brooks is coy about its value but the land alone is worth more than £40m and housing stock half as much again. It lies in one of the richest parts of the country so Brooks wants to put it to use.

He believes the landscape should be preserved but it should also provide jobs and recreation for the people who live there. One farm has become a wedding venue. The house is also let out for short periods usually to companies needing a temporary home for their workers.



Life for Brooks is rather different to many aristocratic landlords. We meet in his cramped office above a shop in Knutsford – the TEM Group has expanded faster than it can find space. Lunch is prepared by his wife, CarlaSinta. It consists of tomato, mozzarella and basil salad followed by nasi goreng. “She is half Italian, half Indonesian,” he explains.

Family – he has five children – was a big motivation for returning to the estate after time in Singapore with Macquarie, the Australian investment bank. His only sibling, a sister, is not involved in the business. “We are custodians and stewards. We want the estate to be on a sustainable footing to pass on to the next generation,” he says.

His ambitions are grand. He has secured planning permission for more than 200 houses, part of two developments of 450. They would be the first the estate has developed for decades because it is hard to build in the area, which is protected greenbelt.

“Knutsford is shrink-wrapped in greenbelt,” Brooks says. The pressure on scarce housing has driven prices to an average of £395,000 well above the national average of £226,000.

“We are not building enough houses and we are not building the right houses in the right places. It is criminal. More and more young people are being priced out.”



Brooks is planning to build a mixed use garden village similar to Poundbury on the Tatton Estate

But he eschews development at all costs. Rather than hand the land to a housebuilder he wants to control development by doing it himself. The family has also vetoed some ideas that would not have pleased residents. “We have often had inquiries from motorway service station operators. For decades we have said no. We want to be good neighbours.”

Prince Charles, the heir to the throne who owns vast tracts of England’s South West, is one inspiration. He created a village at Poundbury near Dorchester, with old-style architecture and plenty of green space. Brooks would like to build a similar “garden village” on his land. “We want a mixed-use community,” he says.

He says he has revived other communities. Bostock Green is a village built by a benevolent estate owner in the 19th century. He converted the defunct Working Men's Club into a pub and brought in someone to run it. It has provided jobs and given the village a meeting place again.

Harry's first foray into property was when he bought Peover Hall in the 1930s, in which his son still lives. It was requisitioned by the War Office and in 1944 used to lodge General George Patton as the headquarters for his US Third Army. After the war, Harry bought it back then sold up again to move to Canada, before returning a few years later. "Each time he bought it was the same price," says Brooks. "There was no inflation until the 1960s and 1970s. Land did not go up in value every year. Big houses were a liability."

The Tatton Estate was bought by Harry in 1958 when Lord Egerton died without an heir. The grand house and park went to the National Trust, a charity that opens stately homes to the public to pay for their upkeep. Harry kept the farmland and surrounding villages.

There were also swingeing death duties as left-wing Labour governments sought to cut the upper classes down to size and fund big housebuilding programmes and the welfare state. "In the 1970s we had to sell a few properties to pay tax bills. Otherwise the estate is intact."

Land-based businesses attract 40 per cent inheritance tax when passed on to children. But trading businesses are taxed only on their profits, provided they involve risk-taking activities. The aim is to encourage landowners to allow development and put their properties to productive use.

Brooks set up TEM Group five years ago and now employs 20 staff. It manages lettings, develops property and runs an events and hospitality business. As well as the estate, it advises other landowners.

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**His ambitions are grand, with planning permission secured for 200 homes**

TEM’s developments intend to contribute at least 3,000 jobs and £1bn to the local economy by 2030 as part of the government’s Northern Powerhouse strategy to boost growth in the north of England, which has lagged behind the

south.

“People who live here want to be able to spend their whole careers here. Why shouldn’t they be able to?”

The [High Speed 2](#) rail line from London to Birmingham and Manchester should arrive in 2030 and will cut through the estate and stop nearby at Manchester airport.

Brooks says that TEM has invested £3m since it was set up and attracted £5m more from partners. Tenants in Knutsford include Tesla, the electric carmaker, which has a showroom, and OKA, the homeware brand established by Lady Astor, the mother-in-law of former British prime minister David Cameron.

The estate includes two villages with about 250 residents, about 50 retail and commercial premises covering 200,000 sq ft and 30 farmsteads.



“There is a nexus of infrastructure here. There are 7m people within an hour’s drive. One-third of the country is within an hour’s drive time.”

He is in the process of developing Cheshire Gateway Park near the airport with 160 acres of logistics space, advanced manufacturing and science park. Alderley Park, the former base of AstraZeneca, which is now a home to dozens of biotech companies, is nearby.

About 75 per cent of the estate land is rented out for agriculture. Brooks says farmers already under pressure from rising costs could suffer as the UK leaves the EU and its subsidy regime.

“Brexit is going to make a big impact on the rural economy, much bigger than people realise. We are going to have to produce more efficiently and better quality,” he says.





Tatton Park mansion house in Cheshire

But many local farmers do not have the resources to make the change by investing in new equipment eking out a living simply because of the low rental costs of farm tenancies.

“The farmer has the right to stay for multiple generations. Even if the farm is struggling and the children don’t want to take it on it is a cheap house to live in,” says Brooks. “There is no incentive to leave. There is nothing you can do about it.”

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**Farmers already under pressure from rising costs could suffer as the UK leaves the EU and loses its subsidy regime**

Planning rules for farmers are also more lax. They can put up wooden structures and are responsible for their upkeep with the landlord only in charge of stone buildings.

One recently abandoned farm included a wooden chicken shed squatting behind the lovely stone barn. There are still faeces and feathers strewn about the place and the roof is in danger of collapse. The barn was used as an eBay second-hand traders warehouse by another tenant. It is crammed with junk. The clean-up costs will run into thousands.

But Brooks should be able to spare the money. “As a farm, it generates about £20,000 a year in rent. You can earn at least five times as much with commercial use,” he says. While agricultural land is worth about £7,300 an acre, that increases to around £200,000 if it has planning permission for commercial develop. Gaining permission for housing increases the value to more than £500,000.

Still, land itself has been a good investment despite a recent dip. The average value of bare agricultural land in England and Wales was £7,310 an acre in the third quarter of 2017, according to the Knight Frank Farmland Index. Over the past 24 months, average values have fallen by 12 per cent, knocking £1,000 off the price of an acre of land.

However, it has been a good investment in the past 10 years, up 83 per cent, more than the mainstream housing market (15 per cent) and even prime central London homes (28 per cent). So Brooks will not allow his risk-taking to go too far.

“The key rule is: ‘Don’t mess it up. Do not lose what you have got. Asset preservation is the first priority.’ ”