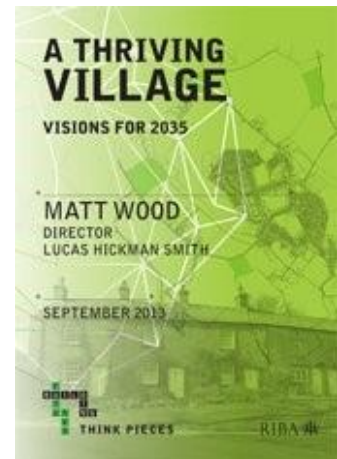


TOWARDS A RURAL RENAISSANCE: CARWOOD, 2035  
BY MATT WOOD | SEPTEMBER 2013



---

At first glance the Norfolk village of Carwood does not look very different in 2035 from how it did back in 2013. The village maintains many of the qualities which make so many Britons yearn to move to the country: low-density living with large gardens and discreet distance from neighbours, fresh air and greenery, easy access to the countryside, and a strong geographical sense of location and community. The village population is still a mixture of long-standing and 'new' residents – a badge which seems to last at least a decade before starting to fade.

The traditional politics of old and new Carwood is still at work, but in a subtly changed way. In the late 20th century, 'real' villagers generally worked the land or in related businesses, and newcomers were for the most part commuters, travelling to Norwich and back each day by car. These distinctions are now blurred. In 2035 relatively few residents were born in the village, and many who have spent their whole life here have always commuted. In contrast, newcomers are more likely to work in the village than was the case twenty years ago. The number of businesses based in the village has risen steadily over the years – not just new 'niche' land-based operations (mainly in food production and tourism) but also on-line businesses with customers spread across the country and abroad, that could previously survive only in towns and cities. It seems odd to recall that back in 2013 the village had only patchy mobile phone coverage, let alone broadband access. Broadband has also allowed more of the village's commuters to work from home for one or more days a week, though business-culture has been slower to take advantage of this than many had predicted.

As such, the village is still heavily dependent on its private cars, despite ever-increasing fuel costs. Environmentalists feel that the failure to grapple this issue has been a cop-out by successive governments, but libertarians and realpolitiker point to a sustainability quid pro quo between town and country. Successive versions of the Common Agricultural Policy have greatly reduced the competitive advantage given to large-scale intensive farming; the rolling clay plateaux of Norfolk are still dominated by high quality grain crops (mostly aimed at an ever-more diverse brewing industry) but around villages like Carwood, smaller-scale mixed agriculture is undergoing a renaissance, boosting ultra-local food-chains. Rising fuel costs have maintained the trend towards micro-renewable

energy in rural areas – woodstoves, biomass boilers and PV – whereas the adoption of renewable energy in cities seems to have stalled. As such, residents of Carwood have gone a long way towards closing the carbon 'gap' between them and their urban counterparts in Norwich, despite cars still being a fact of life in the countryside. And the city certainly couldn't do without the country. Urbanites still enjoy the countryside at the weekends, and realise better than ever that villages and farms are essential in maintaining Britain's 'green and pleasant land'. In 2035 more of the land around Carwood is open to the public via concessionary footpaths or new rights of way, as local farms embrace the diversification potential of the ever more popular 'staycation'.

Holiday and weekend customers have certainly been important to the renaissance of the local pub, The Plough. In 2016 it closed after struggling for many years, and a residential conversion seemed its most likely future. So the village rallied round to save what it regarded as an important community asset. In one of the earliest successful uses of the new Community Right to Build (CRtB), the community granted a local planning consent for 20 large new homes on a piece of farmland just outside the village Development Boundary, donated to the project by a local farmer. The profit from the sale of the land was used to buy the pub, which re-opened as a community-owned not-for-profit business including a small shop, replacing the one that had closed several years before. Galvanised by the success of this community effort, the village prepared a more comprehensive Neighbourhood Plan. The centre-piece of this was a second CRtB Order which gave permission for ten more houses on the site of the old and run-down village hall. The land was packaged up and sold as self-build plots, with the profits being used to build a new community hall on the back of the pub. Combining all the village's communities in this way (pub, shop, village hall) has produced significant operational efficiencies, and each provides 'passing trade' for the others. The result is a viable, bustling community resource at the very centre of the life of the village. Three further small housing developments have been completed in the context of the Neighbourhood Plan, with the increased share of the Community Infrastructure Levy on the developments used to improve the sports pitches and pavilion at the Recreation ground.

So the most visible change in the last twenty years is that Carwood is significantly larger than it was in 2013. The new families have been good news for the school, pub and wider social life of the village, ending nearly half a century of decline. This growth has also been good news for a number local architectural practices and builders. The sites brought forward for development under the Neighbourhood Plan were too small to appeal to the national house-builders, so local builder-developers have built them all out, except the smallest, which was bought by a group of self-builders. A local architect led the Community Right to Build projects and the subsequent redevelopment of the pub, and no fewer than six other practices have completed residential projects in the village for developers or self-builders.

All the new homes have been built at low density and have been carefully planned around three key views: one outward from the centre of the village across the village green, and two key views towards the village on approach – a development strategy set out in the Neighbourhood Plan. All the practices involved in projects at Carwood have developed a particular ethos of building in a village under a consensus-led local plan. The houses are clearly of their time (no Victorian repro' here), but still seem to fit comfortably into their village context. It is a gentle shift in thinking which has been replicated across the country wherever communities have embraced change in the way that Carwood has –

but it still isn't recognised as a real architectural 'movement'. In 2035 mainstream architectural culture remains suspicious of the countryside, and disparaging of the brick-built, pitched-roof 'new rural vernacular ' which is emerging...but the locals love it!

---

Architect Matt Wood is a director at Lucas Hickman Smith, based in the market town of Wymondham in Norfolk, where he grew up. Prior to joining the practice Matt trained at the Bartlett School of Architecture and was a director at Conran & Partners in London, working mostly on complex urban regeneration projects in the UK and abroad, mainly in the residential, hotel and retail sectors. Since then his interests have shifted towards issues of rural development and sustainability, and regional distinctiveness. He has written on the subject extensively on his website [Ruralise](#). He is a member of the Greater Norwich Design Review Panel, a Regional Ambassador for the National Self-Build Association and director of Norwich architecture festival (FANN13).

Update 2017: Matt is now Head of Housing at Norwich-based Hudson Architects.