

Dick Strawbridge

The multi-talented TV presenter and author is a great advocate of living a self-sufficient and sustainable life, says **Charlotte Reather**. Photograph by **Hamish Mitchell**

DICK'S energy, rather like his moustache, is impressive. He bounds around his well-known four-acre smallholding, New House Farm in Cornwall, like an excited labrador. He is inquisitive about everything. He shows me his vegetable beds, all rotated seasonally to maximise nutrients in the soil. I meet his pigs, Norfolk black turkeys, geese and ducks that will be slaughtered by Dick or at the local abattoir. Everything grown or raised on the farm is for the Strawbridge table or to share with friends. Dick is an eccentric mixture of countryman, hippy and madcap inventor. On the one hand, he's an eco-hero with a tiny carbon footprint, on the other, a petrol head with a Triumph Rocket – a seriously hard-core motorcycle.

Dick shows me his latest horticultural experiment – a tiny vineyard. While looking at his young vines he suddenly remembers his tea crop. We rush to the next plot. When Dick was a finalist on *Celebrity Masterchef* earlier this year, he wanted to cook tea-smoked fish using only Cornish produce. “The producers asked me whether the tea had to be Cornish as it was sold only in Fortnum & Mason and was roughly the same price as caviar. So I thought I'd grow my own,” he says, weeding and talking at an impressive speed. “I do it because I can. It's important to try everything. Life's too short.”

I wonder whether his illustrious career as a Colonel in the Royal Signals shaped his *carpe diem* approach to life. Dick was involved in counter-terrorism in Northern Ireland in the Eighties and was stationed in Berlin when the wall came down. “I believe in passion. You've got to care about things,” says Dick. “The army taught me that if you don't care, you cannot encourage other people to care, let alone follow you. I never preach to people about what I do. I encourage them to follow me by showing how great my lifestyle is and how with a little know-how they could have it, too.”

Dick has packed an inordinate amount into his life. After leaving the Army, he became a

managing director of a blue chip company before carving out an impressive career as a TV presenter and author. His most recent publication is *Practical Self-Sufficiency*, co-written with his son, James. Such achievements are testament to his have-a-go attitude, backed up by an armoury of talents. Dick is an engineer, gardener, forager, hunter, farmer and cook.

It all ties into his dream of a self-sufficient and sustainable life. “I like solving problems, such as our farm's water system,” says Dick. “We needed water but didn't want to pay for it, so I thought how can I channel spring water up to the house?” His answer was to make a pump run by four car batteries and charged by solar panels. His invention supplies the house with water for bathing and washing. A water-wheel he built on the BBC show *It's Not Easy Being Green* still generates the farm's electricity.

“I believe in passion. The Army taught me that if you don't care, you cannot encourage other people to care, let alone follow you”

Dick's passion for a self-sufficient rural idyll was inspired when he was growing up in Northern Ireland. “We used to love exploring the countryside. We'd go to a nearby stream and tickle trout. We went everywhere with a packet of matches and a penknife, so we could cook and eat what we caught,” he says. “When I was 11 my grandfather taught me to fly-fish and gave me a Hardy Palakona rod. I'm a trout fisherman who has never caught a salmon. I've tried and tried but I always end up with a brown trout on the end of the line.”

With Dick's intense schedule, time spent fishing is precious. “I have a rod on the Fowey and go out whenever I can. There's nothing better than being by the water. Fishing is food for the soul,” adds Dick. “The other day I saw two stoats and a deer on the river-bank. For me that's what life's about. I feel sorry for people who've never spent a day out fishing or

shooting. I want to take them out and say 'look around you, suck it in'.”

Growing up in Northern Ireland at the start of the Troubles meant owning a gun was prohibited. “I now have a beautiful Cogswell & Harrison 12-bore side-by-side that my son James bought for me,” Dick says. “I shoot game on the neighbouring farm and I go pigeon-shooting whenever I can. I was out the other day and forgot to turn my phone off. During one call to my London agent I got a right-and-left. I was ecstatic but she didn't know what the hell I was talking about.”

Dick's love of the outdoors has been firmly instilled in James. “He had his first penknife by the age of four and could recognise every animal dropping by at age of six. We both love nature and enjoy talking about it,” says Dick. However, James and Dick's daughter don't always share their father's views. Over lunch with the family, comprising of delicious home-made sweet-corn chowder and Moroccan courgette soup, Dick tells me about his passion for field-to-plate food. “I love the process. You experience a greater appreciation for an animal when you eat it. No one loves an

animal like a hunter. It's illogical to someone who doesn't hunt but it's logical to the hunter.”

It's a complete anathema to his daughter Charlotte, who, even though a meat-eater, struggles with the smell and taste of home-butchered meat. “I agree with the concept, it's just too close,” she says. After much discussion around the kitchen table, Dick announces he's glad they have opinions but only he is right.

Charlotte leans over and mischievously tells me, “No one's ever seen Dad's top lip. He's had a moustache since he was 17.” She dares me to touch it when he's off guard. I tell her it's not particularly professional behaviour but then remember Dick's maxim: “life's too short”. Charlotte tells me Dick's other classic quip: “better to beg for forgiveness than ask permission”. I seize the opportunity and make a grab for his walrus tache. Dick growls before breaking into a smile. Everyone laughs. ■

