



From Celtic Tiger to cabbage patch

Michael Kelly always believed he'd be a millionaire – but he quit his job to grow vegetables, rear chickens and write. **Kim Bielenberg** reports

During the Celtic Tiger era, many busy young office drones have been tempted by the prospect of selling up and seeking the good life in the country.

Instead of slogging away for hours on end and then driving for long periods to an empty semi-detached in a new satellite town, they dream of cashing in their chips for a pastoral idyll, where they can grow their own organic spuds and rear their own chickens.

Michael Kelly, a computer sales executive from Dublin, did just that. He and his wife Eilish were almost stereotypical Celtic Tiger Cubs until recently. Although they worked in Dublin, they lived in a housing estate in Gorey and travelled 80km to work every day.

Then they decided to simplify their lives, downshift, downsize and opt out.

The only kind of rat race they now experience is the occasional pitter-patter of rodents under the roof of their cottage near Dunmore East.

The migration of the Kellys from the pressures of corporate Dublin to rural Waterford is chronicled in a new book by Michael, *Trading Places*.

The idea of downshifting and becoming self-sufficient has been around for decades in Britain, Germany and other European countries.

Back in the 1970s, *The Good Life*, the comedy starring Felicity Kendal and Richard Briers, showed a couple digging their own vegetable patch and keeping chickens in suburban England.

Self-sufficiency enjoyed a certain vogue in other Western



New wheels: Michael Kelly on his tractor lawn mower

countries in the 1970s with the arrival of the oil crisis.

Now, with petrol prices at an almost unprecedented high,

and the sheen coming off the Celtic Tiger, the middle classes are again turning to self-sufficiency.

In his new book, Michael tells how in his twenties he became convinced that he would be a millionaire.

"It was an unshakeable belief, so much so that I voiced it to other people, most notably the future Mrs Kelly back when she was my girlfriend."

As a salesman selling computer systems, he drove a 5 series BMW and notched up 40,000 miles a year.

Mortgaged up the hilt, Michael gradually became disillusioned with his job, and the prospect of staying in it until retirement filled him with terror. He could not sleep on Sunday nights as he faced another week.

Eilish jacked in her job as an accountant and became a primary teacher, while he gave up his job to become a freelance writer.

The couple started to grow their own vegetables in their Waterford plot when they discovered that a small bulb of garlic in their local shop had been imported all the way from China.

On the next day, Michael and

his wife got to work on a vegetable plot down at the bottom of their garden, planting potatoes, celery, onions, leeks and carrots, and, of course, garlic.

Michael was pleasantly surprised by the results. "I cannot tell you how much I enjoy the self-satisfied smugness that I feel when I walk right past those measly plum-sized bulbs of garlic on sale in the supermarket, looking down my nose at them."

Vegetables turned into an obsession, and within a short time he was growing exotic vegetables in a polytunnel.

This obsession inevitably led on to a compulsion to rear hens, and a pair of pigs called Charlotte and Wilbur also loom large in the book. Having started his career selling IT systems, he seems happy enough wallowing in pig manure and describing its consistency.

At times, however, he seems to be in two minds about his self-sufficient anti-consumerist vocation. In his own mind a constant battle of wills rages between a penny-pinching, green-fingered environmentalist and a fun-loving BMW-driving capitalist.

"I know that I should sell my BMW and replace it something more in keeping with the down-sizing ethos – maybe a little battered-up Fiesta with roll-down windows and a rust problem. But the part of my personality that enjoys nice things, that wants to be seen, at least, to be doing well, has won through thus far."

At times, Michael seems hopelessly naïve when he suggests that the simpler, supposedly less materialistic, life of the 1950s was superior to the prosperous modern era that we now live in. Materialism has always been with us and nearly a century ago WB Yeats was complaining about the modern Irish fumbling in the greasy till, and "adding the halfpence to the pence".

Naïve he may be, but Kelly's enthusiasm for his new life

seems genuine, and he is honest about the pitfalls.

He seems to have taken to the self-sufficient life, almost by accident, like a free range hen to fresh pasture. He may not want to give up his old life entirely, but Michael Kelly seems quite content with his new life away from the Big Smoke.

And he doesn't dread Mondays mornings any more.

Trading Places is published by O'Brien Press, price €10



Back to nature: Michael feeds the chickens