

# ANOTHER EDEN

*He's the man who brought the iconic Eden Project to Cornwall and now he has plans to give Devon its very own slice of Eden too. KATHRYN KELLY catches up with Sir Tim Smit to find out more*

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SIR TIM SMIT is entertaining an audience with an anecdote about a group of Dutch dairy farmers, who, though hard-living and chain-smoking, have a remarkably low incidence of cancer. The reason for this, he says, is that “inhaling cow manure helps to keep them healthy”.

His talk, delivered to a small gathering of local people at The Hartnoll Hotel, on the outskirts of Tiverton, is his attempt to demonstrate just how vital agriculture is to both the health and the wealth of any nation. Sir Tim feels the industry in the UK, and Devon in particular, is under threat, due to a serious lack of investment in training the farmers of tomorrow: “If any county represents wholesomeness it's Devon, yet apart from Bicton College, there are few facilities.”

His passion for agriculture is the reason he's become the poster boy for the Eden Westwood Project, which plans a massive leisure, education, retail and visitor destination at Junction 27 of the M5, near Tiverton.

The scheme is being backed by AXA Real Estate and Friends Life, and would be run by the Eden Project. The envisaged complex would cover a 230-acre site on fields adjoining the

motorway. The developers say the scheme would create the Gateway to Devon, and give the Tiverton area its place in the sun by celebrating and supporting the countryside, capturing passing trade and bringing lasting social, economic and environmental benefits to the region. Chief among these is the creation of 900 jobs. They are currently seeking an allocation in Mid Devon District Council's Local Plan, before submitting a formal application.

The centrepiece of the complex will be The Ark, which the developers say will be an “iconic structure and educational facility showcasing Devon's finest produce”. This will be run directly by Eden's own staff, who will oversee every aspect from sustainability to construction and landscaping.

The Junction 27 site will also include a Logistics Park – a national centre for food and agricultural standards; The Lake, offering year-round waves at Devon's first surf centre; a designer retail outlet; a shop and café stocked with artisan food and locally-sourced products, and a state-of-the art visitor centre, promoting all that Devon has to offer and providing a hire



Sir Tim Smit: 'My vision is based on providing the best that Devon has to offer - food, agriculture, training and tourism'

An artist's impression of the proposed Eden Westwood project



## EDEN'S CREATOR

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Sir Tim Smit, KBE, was born in Holland.

He read Archaeology and Anthropology at Durham University, before working for ten years in the music industry.

In 1987, he moved to Cornwall and together with John Nelson, discovered and re-stored The Lost Gardens of Heligan.

He co-founded the award-winning Eden Project, which opened in 2000, and is now its Executive Vice-Chairman.

The Eden Project has attracted 16 million visitors and contributed over a billion pounds to the Cornish economy.



centre for electric cars to explore the county. Many are in favour of the plans, but there are also some dissenting voices. Chief among the concerns are the affect such a large, out-of-town development would have on small retailers in Tiverton and Cullompton.

But the creator of the world-famous Eden Project biomes in Cornwall says the scheme

***‘We will take young people and train them in all the skills needed for a life in farming. I believe The Ark could be a world-leading facility’***

will bring a huge jobs boost to the Mid Devon area, and help stem the daily flood of workers who commute to Exeter and Taunton.

When I speak to him, his passion and energy for the plan are evident: “This is all about the future, and bringing the Eden Project to Devon. I am not getting involved in this to build a glorified service station. My vision is based on providing the best that Devon has to offer - food, agriculture, training and tourism. We need to create a hub for these areas of excellence and give young

#### WESTWOOD

The developers say Eden Westwood would be constructed in a way that is environmentally sustainable.

The project is being welcomed by a number of groups, including Culm Valley in Business, Petroc College and The Taste of the West.

If the scheme is adopted as part of Mid Devon District’s Local Plan, a planning application could be submitted in 2016/2017.

If consent is granted, the scheme could open by 2021.



Eden Westwood

people the skills they need, or we risk creating a class of institutionally unemployable people.”

The Ark will have a working farm, similar to the one created by Queen Victoria’s husband, Prince Albert, in the Great Exhibition held in London in 1851.

“We will take young people and train them in all the skills needed for a life in farming. I believe The Ark could be a world-leading facility.”

The shops at Eden Westwood will not be taken over by big chains, but will be founded on ethical principles to create a lifestyle outlet village, selling designer seconds, home-wares and local crafts.

“What we mean by retail, is necessity and delight,” says Sir Tim.

The interactive, green tourism centre is another part of the project which excites him: “If you were a young person with a technical mindset, wouldn’t you want to be involved in building an electric car hub? And where better than here to rent cars to explore Devon and Cornwall? I believe Eden Westwood would act as a honeypot for travellers, and its strategic location would benefit local towns by sending visitor traffic to them.” ♦