

On the trail of the land grabbers: The British imperialists snapping up swathes of Africa to cash in on the world's food shortage - and forcing out small farmers

By [Fred Pearce](#)

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It is an odd retirement hobby. Britain's top soldier, the former commander of British Land Forces and the man who capped his military career by presiding over the funeral of the Queen Mother, has been planting crops in the African bush.

Not personally, you understand. But Sir Charles Redmond Watt has been mixing with Chinese billionaires, Saudi sheiks, Wall Street whizzkids and a motley array of British adventurers who agree with the financial guru George Soros that 'farmland is one of the best investments of our time'. And for those wanting lots of land, nothing comes cheaper than a slice of Africa.

I have spent the past two years on the trail of these land grabbers, who have between them taken control of an area roughly ten times the size of Britain, most of it in Africa. And I discovered that Britain is the world's biggest centre for private land grabbers. City financiers are the new imperialists, returning to colonies we walked away from half a century ago.



Harvest time: Huge tractors on a soya bean farm in Brazil. Farmland is now considered to be one of the best investments of our time

Upon leaving the Army, Sir Charles, who once commanded 125,000 military personnel, became chairman of a shell company, Las Vegas-registered Kryptic Entertainment, which later changed its name to Farm Lands of Guinea.

The company, set up by British sheep farmer Mark Keegan, controls 250,000 acres of bush in the West African state of Guinea, bought on what it describes as 'extremely generous' terms from the government there. It will plant 8,000 acres of maize and soya this year.

Fellow board member Nigel Woodhouse, a trustee of Labour peer Lord Melchett's Soil Association, told me one village handed over its land for 'the equivalent of £3'.

It doesn't sound much for a company that says it is 'unlocking the riches of an African agricultural treasure trove', and which is on such good terms with local leaders that it has also secured exclusive rights to market a further 3.7 million acres of Guinea – an area roughly the size of Yorkshire.

His job done, Sir Charles resigned from the outfit last December. He declined to comment on his African sojourn, but who can doubt that his prestige helped clinch deals in the former French colony?

Many of the big beasts of British business have joined the global land rush. Sir Richard Branson, who famously bought two of the Virgin Islands in the Caribbean, has now bagged 25,000 acres of prime South African safari country.



Squeezed out: Zam Zam Juna on her plot in Tanzania, where a biofuels firm is snapping up farms

Jim Slater, a notorious asset-stripper from the Seventies, is growing genetically modified maize on

Brazilian prairie once owned by the father of racing driver Ayrton Senna. City 'superwoman' Nicola Horlick is investing the pension funds of Hampshire and Merseyside councils in Brazilian farmland.

Meanwhile, feted bond trader Guy Hands bought cattle stations three times bigger than Wales from the estate of the legendary TV mogul Kerry Packer. And Joe Lewis, the owner of Tottenham Hotspur, has invested a chunk of the fortune he made betting against sterling two decades ago to buy a slab of scenic Patagonia.

Then there is Phil Edmonds, England's wily Test bowler of the Eighties whom Wisden praised for his 'aristocratic manner'. Maybe that manner helped him persuade the government of Mozambique to let him have 75,000 acres for growing sugar cane.

But some villagers claimed the land was used without their consent. When the scheme went belly-up, he bounced back with a beef ranch on an area recently cleared of land mines. Will the master of spin prove a better cow-puncher than sugar baron?

Farmers need support not an eviction notice

Investors say farmland is the new big thing because the world is running short of food. They insist their efforts will be good for Africa, too, because they bring much-needed investment.

But what I saw was small farmers being bumped off their land and replaced by big machines. As Graham Davies, of British investors Altima Partners, told a conference last year, the 'vast majority of investors in Africa are focused on commercial Western agriculture, largely ignoring the continent's 60 million small farmers who produce 80 per cent of its food'.

Instead, I'd like to see investors help those small farmers grow their businesses. All over Africa I found peasant farmers experimenting with new seeds, and selling products such as vegetables, honey and milk in the cities – or even green beans to British supermarkets. What they need is support, not an eviction notice.

Some of the land grabbers themselves appear to agree. British farmer James Siggs joined a venture to run 'US-style large-scale agricultural systems' in the Congo. But he left and now says 'industrial-scale farming displaces and alienates people, creates few jobs and causes social disruption'.

Sure, big farm projects could do some good, and there are people behind them who are genuine. Peter Bayliss, with whom I had a beer in Liberia, struck me as one of those.

Job done: Former Army chief Sir Charles Watt

He was rehabilitating and expanding a big palm-oil plantation that the Getty family had left behind when civil war broke out there 20 years ago. He showed me the clinic he had started, and a new primary school.

Other would-be land grabbers get lost in the wilderness. British banker Leonard Thatcher's Nile Trading and Development company claims 1.5 million acres – about the size of Devon – in Lainya county in South Sudan.

But I have a copy of the lease he signed with a local chief and provisional government officials. He can't possibly have that much land because the whole of Lainya county is only just over half that size.

Thatcher's American partner Howard Douglas, a former ambassador for President Reagan, admitted to me that there is no map marking Thatcher's land. A proper survey was not possible during the country's long independence war.

He said: 'We can renegotiate if necessary.' But who with? The chief who signed the lease is one of four in the county. The others had not signed. And when the BBC's local reporter went to interview him, the chief claimed he didn't know what he had signed.

There have been several corporate failures in recent months as the claims of some land grabbers – and of the people selling them land – have rubbed up against reality. Many involve the new supposed wonder-crop, jatropha, whose berries can be made into biodiesel. Native farmers have always regarded it as a weed – now it looks as if they were right.

In March last year, International Development Minister Stephen O'Brien went to Mozambique to bang the drum for Sun Biofuels, a British company growing jatropha there, but the oil yields have been poor. Five months after the ministerial tour, Sun Biofuels went into administration.

There are plenty of rogues, too, ripping off investors here as well as African villagers. At their offices in Twickenham, West London, I met would-be jatropha profiteers Philip Peters and Lawrie Smith.

They told me about their 99-year lease on farmland in the tiny West African state of Togo. Heaven knows how they got the land, but their company, Greenleaf Global, was sub-leasing five-acre plots to small investors. I could have one for £6,000, they said. Greenleaf would plant my jatropha and harvest my profit for me.

I was right not to be tempted. In April, a British court ordered the company into compulsory liquidation after Government investigators found 'a clear intention to mislead would-be investors'. The company had lied about its harvests. Promises of a 20 per cent return were 'not evidence-based'. The scam had been nipped in the bud, but investors had lost about £8 million.

That's the trouble in Africa. A few of the land grabbers are good guys, but many ride roughshod over people in search of a quick profit. And some defraud investors as much as their hosts. If I were an



African, I'd be telling them to go home.

The Landgrabbers by Fred Pearce is published by Eden Project Books, priced £20. To order your copy for £15.99 inc p&p, call the Review Bookstore on 0843 382 1111 or go to mailshop.co.uk/books

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