

## Hope for Zimbabwean farmer Ben Freeth after Mugabe steps down

Kent Online By Natalie Tipping

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A Zimbabwean farmer who had to watch his livelihood go up in flames has reflected on life in the country since Robert Mugabe stepped down.

Sheppey-born Ben Freeth became a farmer in Zimbabwe after marrying his wife, Laura.

The pair built a home for themselves and their three young children on land at Mrs Freeth's parents' farm, Mount Carmel, in the Chegutu district.



Ben Freeth outside the ruins of his house on Mount Carmel

The farm was forcibly taken away from them under the government's land reform, and Mr Freeth and his father-in-law, Mike Campbell, took the Mugabe government to court.

The Southern African Development Community (SADC) Tribunal ruled in their favour, finding the government's land repossessions were racially-based, and thus violated SADC's principles of human rights.

The Mugabe government ignored this ruling however, and in 2009, Mugabe supporters invaded the farm and burnt down the homes of Mr Freeth, Mr Campbell, and the farm-workers.

Nine years later, Zimbabwe is out of the grip of Robert Mugabe's dictatorship, and is being ruled by Emmerson Mnangagwa, who was Mugabe's right-hand man.

Mr Freeth spoke to us about the country's prospects while he was in the UK visiting his parents, who live in Oad Street.



Ben with his two sons, Joshua (left) and Stephen at Mana Pools National Park, a World Heritage Site on the Zambezi river in 2014

"Right now we are in the interim stage, I suppose we don't know where we are exactly," he reflected.

"We're heading towards an election in the summer, and the big question is whether it's going to be free and fair, or whether there will be violence as there has been in the past.

"We are still not able to get back to the farm, I tried the other day and was threatened quite severely.

"We are living in a country that's hungry, the financial situation is very dire, so I believe sense will prevail and we will move to a more democratic and lawful future.

"It could be a great future, I really believe that. I think a huge step was taken when Robert Mugabe was finally unable to continue, but we need to get to the step beyond where we are at the moment.

"I think the first aim was to get rid of Mugabe, but everyone realises Mnangagwa was his right-hand man, therefore there is not going to be a huge change until he is gone as well.



Ben Freeth's home on Mount Carmel farm in Zimbabwe goes up in flames

"I think the vast majority of the population are aware of that.

"We're in this kind of limbo land waiting, and that next step needs to be taken before the future does become brighter."

Land reform in Zimbabwe started in 1980, aiming to distribute land more equally between indigenous Zimbabweans and white Zimbabweans of European descent.

After independence from the UK, the Zimbabwean government was given the power to start the reforms, and the British government agreed that it would finance half the cost as long as land was bought and sold on a willing basis.

In the late 90s, Tony Blair terminated this arrangement after funds from Margaret Thatcher's government were exhausted.



Ben and Laura's children (from the left) Anna, Joshua and Stephen in the ruins of the home where they had been so happy

The Mugabe government therefore started a "fast-track" redistribution campaign, where it forcibly confiscated white farms without compensation.

Analysis by the United Nations in 2010 found that more than 10 million hectares of land had been acquired since 2000, compared to just 3.5m purchased from voluntary sellers between 1980 and 1998.

<http://www.kentonline.co.uk/sheerness/news/farmers-hopes-after-mugabe-steps-161624/>