



GREEN BUSINESS NETWORK

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investing in the environment

INCR-EDIBLE GREENSPACES

... in spite of (or because of!) its challenging educational setting, Ferney Lee has "exceptional" community links. Not least of these is the Wild Garden project ...



Background

Once the grounds of an old grammar school, the two acre site behind Ferney Lee School had been left unattended for more than a decade (budgets had prioritised spending on teachers over spending on gardeners). An application for housing was considered, but the land was deemed unsuitable. Children spent their playtimes in a tarmac yard, and the area lay forgotten. Slowly, it returned to the wild, just like the Secret Garden in the classic book by Francis Hodgson Burnett.

In February 2001 the School appointed a new caretaker, Matthew Harrow. With his background in conservation, Matt realised that the years of neglect had left the school with an invaluable wildlife and educational resource. In July 2001, a botanical survey was carried out by a member of the local Wildlife Network, who identified no less than 69 species - one of which, the Lesser Meadow Rue, had never previously been recorded in South West Yorkshire.

The site was also discovered to provide a number of diverse habitats - a pond teeming with tadpoles, water beetles and breeding damsel flies; elsewhere were grassland butterflies, such as large and small skippers and the meadow brown; plus bats, owls and a variety of woodland birds.

First Steps

The dream was to develop the site as a nature education centre for schools throughout the valley, as well as for the benefit of local residents. It was thought the site could be sensitively managed to maximise biodiversity, yet involve children in an active relationship with the natural environment. Specific projects such as a **tree nursery, living willow structures, and food-producing plants** could be integrated into the overall design. Fund-raising for paths and trails would make the garden accessible for wheelchair users. These ideas were taken to Susan Ellis, then Head Teacher, and met an enthusiastic response.

The next step was to involve local community groups and organisations such as **Treesponsibility** (a local climate change action group), a nearby **Community Centre**, plus **Todmorden Together** - the local town regeneration partnership. The idea was then networked with other schools in the area.

Finally, **the children of Ferney Lee themselves** were asked to add their creativity - a joyful expedition explored the grounds, examining worms and unusual insects, picking raspberries, and talking about possibilities. By the end of the session, the children were buzzing with ideas and excitement about the project - they liked the idea of living willow domes and tunnels which they could help to 'design'; they asked for more food plants close to the path; they wanted to make sculptures; and they felt that the garden would be incomplete without a tree house!

Last, but by no means least, to come on board was Green Business Network. It used its expertise to secure and manage significant Landfill Tax Credits funding, principally through a generous donation from the National scheme Biffaward.

Move to 2005 and the Ferney Lee Wild Garden vision was realised in full.

- √ Outdoor Classroom: by creatively restoring the former grammar school tennis courts (unused for many years)
- √ Living willow structures: creating shady space, and helping with many school curriculum activities
- √ Tree nursery: propagating trees which children plant in their final year at the school
- √ 200m of wildlife hedgerow: planted by children to launch the project in Oct '01
- √ Wetland area: extending the existing pond to further increase the wildlife value of the area
- √ Bird and bat boxes: sensitively sited to attract a greater range of wild birds to the garden
- √ Local food: raised beds made of recycled plastic were to become a very popular and inclusive feature via IET
- √ Paths: plastic boardwalk, wheelchair accessways and orienteering trails circle the site
- √ Education Resources: for structured sessions fulfilling the needs of visiting teachers
- √ Viewing Platform: a safe initial vantage point for the less able or less confident
- √ Recycled Materials: a "showcase" for i-plas.co.uk recycled plastic products (benches, planters, raised beds etc); an industrial cardboard shredder was also donated by GBN for recycling schemes

Key Success Factor

The outstanding success of the Garden is due in no small part to the vision, industry and downright hard work of Matt Harrow, with the full support, backing and management of a Wild Garden Group.

Extremely frugal and capable of adding significant value and leverage to even the smallest donation (whether financial or material) his role has been "hands on" and in a completely voluntary capacity. This was recognised in 2004 with the achievement of a DfES/Scarman Trust "**Community Champion**" Award to encourage and promote the spread of his best practise and inspiration to other sites.



Pushing the Boundaries

The Wild Garden went far beyond its initial vision and evolved into a site for outdoor skills training (70 young people completed certified dumper truck courses at the Outdoor Classroom) and for delivering an alternative curriculum to underachieving High School students (from an initial group of 7, 6 went on to full-time employment as a direct result of their time in the Garden).

Two "sister" sites were launched in close cooperation with GBN (both now national award-winners in their own right). Another innovative partnership "The Heart Project" was also completed in conjunction with the national charity Leonard Cheshire Disability & Pitstop 2000 (6 High Schools).

The Final? Word (2009)

Not content to stand on its laurels as a model urban greenspace (2009 Yorkshire in Bloom Gold Rose winner), Ferney Lee Wild Garden is now a key part of the internationally-recognised 'Beacon' project **Incredible Edible Todmorden (IET)**. The GBN's own ABLE Project also carries forward all of this work and much more on sites throughout the North of England.



***"is generating exceptional interest and involvement from the community through the wildlife garden ... the outdoor classroom, orienteering, birdwatching and facilities for disabled users are advanced and will provide a wonderful school and community legacy."* (OFSTED)**