

Food, glorious food!



From plot to plate

Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group (HHEAG)

The urgent need to house people made homeless by bombing raids during World War II led to the creation of Hartcliffe, Withywood and Highridge, a series of sprawling housing estates in Bristol.

They were inspired by a post-war dream of modern living, but the dream turned sour as residents found themselves trapped in an isolated area with few local facilities. By the time recession hit in the late 1980s, the estates were blighted by high unemployment, health problems and social issues.

Thankfully, many residents understood the connection between these problems and their local environment. This self-knowledge led to the creation in 1990 of the Hartcliffe Health and Environment Action Group.

Healthy eating was put at the top of the group's agenda and a food co-op was formed to supply healthy dry foods at low cost. Later, cooking and nutrition courses began for parents with children under two years, after health statistics showed a high incidence of anaemia and other illnesses in local children. In time, similar courses and sessions began for people with diet-related illnesses, to give them hands-on cooking experience which they could use to maintain a healthier diet.

Healthy eating

Educating adults is important, but HHEAG also spreads the word about healthier eating to younger generations by running a range of childcare and play activities with a focus on health, well-being and an appreciation of the local environment.

Cooking and a good diet covers one end of the food spectrum. To cover the other end, HHEAG has developed food growing courses, a community garden and a community market garden, called Greens, which supplies fresh fruit and vegetables to both the cooking classes and the food co-op.

A thriving horticultural area has been established, used by local residents and by the local school as an outside classroom for Land Studies. The regeneration of three derelict sites for food growing has improved the local environment and there is now a waiting list for allotments whereas previously only seven out of about 45 were used.

Community development

Sue Walker, a community development worker with the group, is keen to stress that all these activities are very much community initiatives: "The organisation uses a community development approach in all its work, encouraging and supporting local residents to



take an active part in their community by working together to bring about change.

"The organisation is managed by a committee of local residents who respond to emerging needs within the population which broadly have a health or environmental focus."

Like many groups, lack of funding is a spectre that can never be fully banished, despite the group's impressive reputation: "We believe HHEAG's longevity reflects its community roots and the high professional standards it works to. It has gained an excellent reputation locally and has been acknowledged nationally for its work. But this alone does not secure funding for projects. We do feel that the investment of time in fundraising is out of balance with the time we need to actually deliver the project."

Opportunities to improve

But Sue said the hard work of all those involved made the struggle worthwhile and created real dividends for the community.

"We offer opportunities to improve or learn new skills, access to healthy, low cost food, increased understanding of health and environmental issues, increased social action and a chance to develop new friendships. Some of our project participants have used their new skills to gain employment, either in catering or gardening.

"Others have gained confidence and become active in the community as volunteers for a variety of organisations. Improvements in health have led a number of people to become more physically active and involved in the community."

Contact Details

HHEAG is always happy to show its project to interested organisations and groups. For more details contact:

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Fancy a dirty weekend?

Waltham Forest Food Hub

Publicity leaflets titled 'Dirty weekends in spring' or 'More pears in your back garden than you can handle?' might conjure up some odd images. But in reality, they are a fun way of advertising regular composting and scrumping activities, just some of the attractions of the Waltham Forest Food Hub.

Based in East London, the hub is a partnership between local groups involved in growing food, running a community kitchen/café and local recycling.

One of the principle partners is OrganicLea, a local allotment project whose core aims include growing more food growers and creating more local interest in 'food grown with integrity'. The other leading local hub members are Forest Recycling Project and the Hornbeam Environment Centre - the venue for many of the hub's activities.

Local interest

The hub is a pilot group for the Sustainable Production in Active Neighbourhoods (SPAN) project, funded by Defra's Environmental Action Fund. SPAN aims to make it simpler for people to grow and eat healthy, affordable and environmentally-friendly food produced in their own neighbourhoods.

A SPAN-supported workshop on local food in March 2006 attracted around 40 local people and community workers. The workshop demonstrated that there was already much local activity, enthusiasm and interest in food issues. Ideas generated at the event were then developed into a proposal for a 'local food hub' and the three partner organisations were keen to work together to make this a reality, aided by SPAN.

But what does a food hub mean for local people? Brian Kelly, a key figure in the hub, knows the answers: "It allows them to buy quality local organic produce, learn about food nutrition and food growing, receive training, run a community café and much more."



Fresh food

To get things off the ground, the three groups started running a weekly organic market stall. This now pays for itself and has given local growers somewhere to sell their produce. It also means local people access to fresh, sustainably-produced food. In addition, opportunities for work have also been provided for local residents, with 40 people already trained in the basics of organic growing.

There has been a positive response from others working in the areas of sustainable food and community activism. This is no surprise when considering some of the hub's innovative schemes.

"One of the most innovative ideas is the Scrumping Project, which began as an OrganicLea initiative," said Brian. "Surplus fruit is collected from local residents' gardens and distributed to people in the community. Since its launch, the project has saved and distributed a staggering three tonnes of surplus fruit."



Key support

These successes could not have been achieved without the support of several key organisations. As well as input from SPAN, the hub has received funding from the local Sure Start Children's Centre, London Borough of Waltham Forest, and Forest Homes, a local housing association. Strong relationships with local growers in London and Eostre, a food co-op in East Anglia which supplies organic produce, have also played a pivotal role.

It isn't all plain sailing. Controlling the process so the hub doesn't grow too quickly is a challenge and there are issues about being able to secure enough volunteer time. But the project remains ambitious and future plans will consolidate and expand existing activities. A proposed partnership with London Food Links and Food Links UK will help enable this.

"The key focus areas are increasing part-time work and volunteering opportunities, developing the food production sites and improving the Hornbeam Environment Centre as a community resource," said Brian.

- Visit the OrganicLea website at: www.organiclea.org.uk or the SPAN website at www.spanpartnership.org.uk

Food Hub Activities

- The Scrumping Project
- Demonstration permaculture growing site
- Weekly organic fruit and vegetable market with local suppliers
- Weekly organic vegetarian and vegan café
- Organic food training courses
- Workshops and events around local food issues
- Consultancy and support encouraging local food growing
- Development and support of local food buying groups

School farm is top class

Thomas Alleyne's High School Farm, Uttoxeter



The farm is not just for the benefit of Thomas Alleyne students. Its gates are open to a wide range of other schools, from nurseries and reception classes to young people with learning difficulties or physical disabilities.

Challenging students

One of the farm's strengths is its ability to engage challenging pupils - it can be the only area of the curriculum in which some students regularly achieve success. Every year a small number of disruptive individuals at risk of exclusion are withdrawn from certain lessons and work on the farm instead.

"One student came to the school in year 10 after being excluded from a school for students with behavioural difficulties," said Martin. "He progressed really well and was predicted several GCSE's above level C. Then changes in his circumstances meant he suffered setbacks to the point when he was nearly excluded again.

"We struck a deal which meant that if he could behave on a reduced timetable one day a week he could spend the day supporting the farm manager on the farm. He managed to complete year 11 and is now predicted good GCSE grades."

Fresh generations of students will also benefit from the farm, which always has its eye on the future. It recently achieved charitable status and is now raising money to construct a state of the art animal house and improve disabled access. Nothing, it seems, stands still for long at Thomas Alleyne's High School farm.

Outstanding Practice

After a recent Ofsted inspection, particular praise was reserved for the school farm. Ofsted said:

- "The farm provides excellent opportunities for students' personal development"
- "The animals are extremely well cared for and are therefore very sociable"
- "The importance of the school farm extends beyond the bounds of the curriculum. It provides an opportunity outside lessons for those who wish to work in agriculture and horticulture, or even veterinary science"
- "Students from a local special school ...very much enjoy their visits to the farm"

Starting as part of the Dig for Victory campaign during World War II, the school's farm site has evolved over the last 25 years, thanks to the hard graft of both students and staff.

These days it's a thriving working farm which is extremely popular with students - nearly 200 of them take GCSE Rural Science or vocational courses and there are thriving A-level and GCSE Environmental Science courses.

It all makes for a dynamic atmosphere on the farm site itself, which comprises a Victorian walled garden with four glasshouses, a polytunnel, classrooms and a number of animal houses.

Food production

Food production is a key element of the farm. Several soft fruit borders and vegetable plots have been organic for more than 20 years and the students take great pride in the quality of the farm's stock, which includes Tamworth and Saddleback pigs, Herdwick sheep, Jersey calves and a range of poultry.

Food from the farm is now on sale from the school canteen, thanks in part to TV chef Jamie Oliver's drive to improve school meals. It means students can buy meat products lovingly raised on the farm and humanely prepared by a local butcher.

"The farm helps pay for itself through food production," said Advanced Skills teacher Martin Wedgewood, a key member of the farm's staff team. "Bronze turkeys reared on the farm are sold at Christmas, while calves are reared on contract. Fresh, organic produce is sold throughout the year."

Local support

There are also strong ties with the local community. Local farmers provide work placements and loan equipment when required, while donations have included £5,000 from Uttoxeter Residents Association to provide a driveway for disabled visitors.

"We could not have developed the farm without support - both financial and practical - from local community groups, the NFU, farmers and district councils," said Martin.

