

# **Scotswood Natural Community Garden**

*An early attempt to unite a land-based design with a community-based design*

**1994-2001**

## **Introduction**

This was my first design and the one on which I based my portfolio presentation. It evolved over the several years I was involved in it and has remained a flourishing project to this day – see their website – search for Scotswood Natural Community Garden. It is located in Scotswood in the West End of Newcastle. I had the initial vision of a flourishing permaculture site in the city of Newcastle, to whom I had recently moved. I was inspired having recently completing Rod Everett’s design course in Middlewood. I did the landscape design for the site and began implementing it. A team of us coalesced and helped it grow through its early, tender stages. The setting up phase was from summer 1994 until 1997, when it became a full-blown working project with (part-time) staff. I did both volunteer and part-time paid work (as a self-employed permaculture practitioner) until 1998 when I stepped down and served as a trustee until 2001. Therefore, I was involved closely with this project for seven years: a good length of time to practice my design skills.

## **OBREDIME design sequence**

### **Observation**

This involved a number of steps.

#### **Finding a suitable site somewhere in Newcastle.**

To begin with, in the summer of 1994, I decided to approach Newcastle City Council who proved extremely helpful. I talked to a number of departments including Planning, the Allotments sub-committee and, eventually, the “Participation in Leisure” team who

worked at grassroots level in disadvantaged communities. Their main effort was concentrated on productively using the greenspace that occurred within council wards, but which was currently being gang-mowed. They responded at local community level with tree planting initiatives and outdoor arts projects. My idea for a permaculture project fitted well with their objectives and they proved a great source of assistance.

Planning offered me 3 possible sites which I visited personally and assessed for their potential as permaculture sites.

Eventually I chose one in Scotswood.

### **Why Scotswood?**

It had a number of distinct advantages over the other sites:

It was a discrete area, with well defined boundaries (see Boundaries).

It had the potential to feed into and physically unite two existing organisations: the John Marley Centre (a teaching centre of Newcastle College) and the Drift Garden Centre, a local charitable organisation which sold hanging baskets, bedding plants, horticultural products, tomatoes and grew champion leeks. I described this as having plenty of “edge” in the community sense. I got on well with the West End Participation in Leisure team. The greenspace officer, Giles Carey, “got” permaculture – or, at least, respected my somewhat whacky ideas – and I was inspired by his arts projects in the area.

Also, it “felt” right. I remember getting a feeling – a feeling that grew on me as I explored the site and spoke further to those involved in it – that this was the place where it would work. I smelt the soil and had a actual spiritual feeling about it – which was later to manifest itself in powerful dreams as the project developed.

### **Boundaries**

The site I was allowed amounted to around an acre, though I could see that there could be a potential to later expand into another acre. This seemed a manageable size. It formed part of the playing fields surrounding the John Marley Centre, a Grade 2 listed school

building constructed during the 1930's. The fields themselves were bounded by terraced housing. The boundary of the site went as follows: a walkway beside the John Marley Centre, a semi-circular arbitrary line crossing the playing field to enclose the acre which I was allowed, terraced housing and a brick wall behind which was located the Drift Garden Centre (so named because it occupied the site of an old clay drift mine).

## **Resources**

These were impressive, being in the middle of a city. All I needed were the keys to unlock them; the keys in this case being various larger local organisations notably:

City Council with its fleet of crew buses, flat bed trucks and access to leaf mould, timber, machinery, trees and manure.

Newcastle College with its classrooms, teachers, staff and adult education programme based at the John Marley Centre. This meant I was able to be employed part-time as a lecturer there delivering practical gardening courses; thereby gaining access to a dry staffroom plus desk which enabled me to progress the project.

Drift Garden Centre with its gardening expertise and knowledge of where to get manure.

The other key resource (situated as it is in the middle of a large city) is people in general. As well as having a number of distinct communities living around the project itself it also had a large community of interest living fairly nearby – ie motivated, green-minded people who were willing to get involved as volunteers and apply for jobs as the project developed.

## **Evaluation**

In order to evaluate the site I needed to compare it with another urban permaculture project. Fortunately there was one which I already knew quite well having visited a few times whilst I lived in Wakefield: the Springfield project in Bradford. Their site was designed by Andy Langford and the principal driving force at the time was Jamie Saunders, who worked for Bradford City Council

whilst at the same time being an active permaculture practitioner. Jamie and Springfield taught me that, for my own project to work, it needed to develop a partnership with the Council, and to explore and develop other partnerships as well.

Above all, it gave me the inspiration to make the Drift Permaculture Project a success.

## **Design**

I designed the site using Bill Mollison's Mandala design in the Designers Manual. I remember it has an outdoor shower in the centre! I rather more modestly planned a specimen fruit tree – a medlar (in later years it was to boast a solar powered fountain in the form of an opening bud). The design used zones and sector planning and the concepts of stacking and edge through the creation of a forest garden.

## **Implementation**

Firstly, I needed permission from the owners to develop the site; secondly, to get some funding behind the project. I succeeded in both and in April 1995 the project began ceremonially with the planting of a wildlife copse and willow boundary.

The implementation was a “rolling” implementation which had many phases and lasted from around 1995 till about 2000, by which time the garden was largely established. What follows are key points along the path to establishment (or “milestones” to use some jargon!)

**1 Hard landscaping.** I put in of a wheelchair-accessible footpath network. This involved me supervising a JCB driver who dug out sunken paths for me, which were then revetted with brick walls (this was made possible through the supply of trainee bricklayers at the college) and finished off with a type 1 surface. I had help with this from the Participation in Leisure team who made such paths all the time. The “brickies” enjoyed the challenge of making the curved, sometimes circular walls which the mandala design demanded (see **fig. 1**)

**2 Planting up of forest garden.** The paths were surrounded by over 100 fruit trees, themselves surrounded by soft fruit bushes. They came from Rogers Nursery (North Yorkshire), and J. Tweedie (Scotland) – chosen because they were not that far away from Newcastle.

Borrowing flat bed trucks from the City Council I succeeded in getting several loads of manure which I dumped in a row surrounding the forest garden and dug into planting pits for the fruit trees. Our first real harvest was a year later in 2006 and can be seen in the picture in **fig.4**.

**3 Water features.** Almost as soon as I started work on the site a volunteer appeared who quickly became a co-designer and implementer. His expertise was in ponds and wetlands – he had turned his own garden up the road into a thriving wetland ecosystem.

We started off with a modest clay-lined pond which we puddled ourselves with the BTCV, and moved up several gears with the awarding of “Scotswood Waterways” funding. This enabled us to use the natural fall of the site to create various ponds connected together by a stream fed by recirculated roof and surface water treated in a reedbed.

**4 Wildlife areas.** These were phased in over a number of years and involved extending the site to include the rest of the playing field area. They included flower-rich meadows, hedges, banks, copse, bogs and wetlands.

**5 Beehives,** vegetable growing, areas, willow cuttings nursery, permanent sculptural artworks. The beehives were able to go into courtyard areas within the John Marley Centre itself – and have been maintained for many years by the local beekeeping association.

**6 Use of building.** At the entrance to the garden there is an old porter’s lodge which was refurbished and used during the 90’s for a children’s group. When this moved elsewhere we negotiated to take it over and now it serves as the garden’s office, an activity and events centre (including cookery), place to hold meetings etc.

7 None of the above could have happened without the parallel growth of an **organisational structure** to support its development. As well as working outside to physically develop the garden a lot of my time was spent supporting the growth of a committee. Ex-students of mine stepped in to become treasurer and secretary and soon a local ward councillor was persuaded to chair it. We became a registered charity in 2000.

**8 Partnerships.** As well as the partnerships mentioned above, we forged links with local mental health teams, nursery and primary schools, community workers, after school groups, local faith groups, the City Farm, the local nature park, were assisted by the City ecologist and supported a group trying to revitalise a large park in the centre of the city. Last but not least, the Permaculture Association itself (we are a feature project in the first Members Handbook). I am convinced that these partnerships were vital to the success of the project.

### **Maintenance and Monitoring**

Maintenance was achieved in the early days through inviting groups to use the site in various productive ways eg minority ethnic communities came to grow and harvest their own vegetables and herbs, the summer playgroup grew and harvested their own wheat, a local breadmaker built us an outdoor brick oven, pruning and grafting workshops were held to look after the fruit trees, permaculture courses were held and the College moved its horticultural department out to the centre, so that students began maintaining the site as part of their course.

However, when funding started coming in for staff we ensured that part of the job specifications involved garden maintenance either as a full-time gardening post, part-gardener and part-project manager or volunteer supervisor.

**Monitoring:** I monitored the growth rates of all the trees and shrubs on the site over a seven-year period. The fruit trees came into production in their second year, and by the third and fourth were yielding serious amounts of fruit.

Various experiments were held by different groups using the site eg. vegetable growers would compare different plots treated in different ways eg one fed by manure compared to another that was mulched, and another treated with a green manure.

My wetland-expert volunteer carefully monitored the steady growth in biodiversity, particularly the wetland ecosystem which soon supported unusual species of dragonfly. His observations agreed with those of other experts: that species were moving north due to Climate Change. A ranger was also employed who happened to be a bird expert and carefully monitored bird populations. As a birdwatcher myself I noted how the kestrel was replaced by a sparrowhawk as the ecology changed from rough grassland to woodland.

All flowering plant species were recorded. I remember us quickly passing the 100 mark.

We also recorded group visits, volunteer inputs, events, workshops and festivals – all of which were vital in terms of obtaining funding.

## **Evaluation**

### **Development Plan – 2000**

During my time at the garden our chance to evaluate came during two funding bids to the National Lottery. They gave us a great opportunity to see what was going well, what wasn't and what the barriers were to us achieving success. The second evaluation involved us producing a Development Plan that was independent of any one funding bid.

The garden was now established (though there was always room for new features) and what was now needed was increased use. Paid staff were needed to encourage more groups and individuals to visit and work in the garden, and to supervise them whilst at the garden, ensuring they had a rewarding and fulfilling time.

We were successful in gaining Lottery Funding and this enabled us to progress the Development Plan. To get an idea of what was achieved as a result look at the colourful drawing of the garden

made in 2003 (**figs. 2 and 3**).

**Design successes: seen from the vantage point of 17 years.**

- **Physical design point.**

The **mandala, circular design with a circular, nested “core”** proved to be a robust design.

The central core of the design had three radiating spokes: one of which went to both the John Marley Centre and the other to the Garden Centre (one of the key partners in the original project). Unfortunately the Garden Centre did not survive – the men who ran it had to step down and retire. It was plagued with burglary problems and we couldn't find anyone willing to take it on (apart from a shortlived attempt to make it a sheltered business for people with mental health difficulties – not in hindsight a good idea considering the burglary issue).

This meant that one of the spoke's branches stopped at a brick wall (we were meant to break through the wall and join the garden centre to the garden).

However, the **mandala design** coped. The other branch to the Marley Centre flourished and one of the other branches (originally intended to end in the garden) was made to curve round and also connect with the Centre, reflecting the growing connection. As the garden physically expanded, so branches of the spokes were made to connect into this additional space.

The original semi-circular boundary is now subsumed within a larger design. It has an organic feel to it, with the older part full of mature fruit trees and the original copse (now called the wild wood), and the newer part being more open, with ponds, hedges and meadows. (**see figures 1-3 and appendix**).

**Second design point: choice of site**

Another change that has taken place is that the housing surrounding the site has been demolished. It was not in bad condition and some of the properties were being lived in.. However, the Council had a surplus of social housing and

commissioned a Master Development Plan for the area which demanded an extremely large site; so the housing had to go to make way for the Plan.

It was fortunate that I chose a “secure” site within the grounds of the College and close to the main western artery of Whickham View (all of whose adjacent housing was fully occupied, sought-after and therefore protected from demolition).

Urban land projects are always in danger of being bulldozed for development and I was aware of this in making a decision between the three initial sites (see observation section above). Of the three, this one was one of the most secure as well as being a lot more central than the other secure one.

**The project seen in its historical context: a manifestation of the Nineties.**  
*an instinctive community design – proto-Transition*

As well as the physical design of the garden, it was also infused with the Agenda 21 concept. The “big idea” was an Agenda for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century which came out of the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Interestingly this global summit was the first (and – to date – the last) to conclude that sustainability could only come about at devolved, localised level and got countries (including UK) to sign up to deliver this. This meant local authorities appointing Agenda 21 officers who were to empower communities to achieve sustainability.

UK Permaculture in the mid-90’s was very excited by this largely urban phenomenon. Springfield on the outskirts of Bradford, with its Local Authority/Permaculture link in the form of Jamie Saunders, was an example of Agenda 21 in action. I saw the Drift Permaculture Project as being in the same mould and Jamie and I had many fruitful discussions on the subject.

In this sense my design was a community-based design. Indeed, the project soon evolved from being a permaculture project to a community garden (from now on referred to as SNCG –

Scotswood Natural Community Garden).

The appropriate permaculture design language had not yet been developed (there was a chapter on “strategies of an alternative global nation” in the Designers Manual in those days but designs were still very much land-based). We had to wait for Transition and designers like Looby MacNamara to come along and provide us with people-centred language.

Nevertheless there are two aspects to the project which demonstrate SNCG as a proto-Transition initiative.

**\* Smallscale, neighbourhood – what we now call localised**

Bill Mollison in his Manual talks of community-based, smallscale initiatives as being the way forward. People are comfortable in small groups of no more than 20, and I note that the team we got together to “grow” the project numbered about a dozen, with half-a-dozen others floating at the edges. We were a mix of implementers (doers) and those were not that physically active but who didn’t mind committee work – who nurtured the project in its early days. We grew to be comfortable together – although from different backgrounds we were united by the vision of a fruitful, wildlife-rich garden that kept us going through thick and thin. We didn’t have a theory behind us – it was just the natural thing to do. We had to do what was necessary: form a committee to establish financial probity and an organisational face to the rest of the world. We were a self-organising system. It was truly inspiring and all those involved speak of those times with great affection.

**\* Partnerships.** As well as bonding with each other we also reached out and formed lasting partnerships with other organisations in Glasgow, mentioned above under “Implementation”. Indeed, very early on in the project we won a BT/WWF Partnership Award in recognition of this.

**Conclusion – developing a community-building design language for use with land-based projects**

In the 90’s I was working with the design language available to

me. Jamie, me and others (including Andy Goldring in Leeds) were wrestling with it in order to find appropriate ways of describing what we were doing. We were trying to create our own, UK, devolved strategies within Bill Mollison's "Strategies for a Global Nation" and used the Rio Earth Summit language of Agenda 21 to describe it.

However, waiting in the wings was Pattern language, which Bill explored elsewhere in his Manual, and to which Rob Hopkins turned to in 2010 to develop a fractal pattern for Transition.

In a **fractal design framework** the partnership-forming which we did instinctively and which is described above represents a scaled-up level of capacity-building. Another way of looking at the design is as a "**nested**" **design**, systems of different scales nested within one another (see Holmgren – Pathways beyond Sustainability). The smallest nest was SNCG, and the "nest" that surrounded it comprised of its partners. Or, going back to the fractal or dendritic "tree" pattern, SNCG was a twig, its partners a branch and the trunk was...well, it hadn't yet manifested itself – but was to become Transition Newcastle.

Please look at my **Bioregional System design**, also available on this website. This uses a fractal pattern and nested system to design a resilient rural bioregion.

In describing this it is important to keep sight of the fact that the vision that united us in growing SNCG was a vision based upon a productive, bio-diverse garden. This kept us grounded in the natural world and was – in itself – a great tool for urban regeneration because it brought nature – and an orchard – into the city centre. The **community design** was always anchored and grounded in the **land design**.

### **Appendix: Explanation of garden plans (figs.1-4)**

**Figure 1** This is my original design for the Drift Permaculture Project in 1995. The path to the garden centre became a cul-se-sac like the keyholes in the mandala core (developed at one point as a hibernaculum for bats). "Spokes" and branches off the spokes

grew organically out of this design to follow desire-lines in the developing project.

**Figure 2** A colourful drawing of the garden made by one of the team in 2003. The dark green areas (wildwood and forest gardens) correspond to the original garden with its semi-circular willow boundary. The two ponds to the left were also part of the original design. The green crown sits in the centre of the mandala.

The pale green areas comprise the additional garden area which we gained permission to extend into, largely taken up with wildflower meadows plus associated hedges, and the Scotswood Water Ways project with its ponds, stream and associated wetlands.

**Figure 3** The above drawing was illustrated with 11 picture icons which **are** described here in detail. The wildwood is the original copse which was planted right at the beginning in Spring 1995; the forest gardens were planted up that autumn. The Green Crown displaced the medlar tree which was replanted elsewhere on the site. The lily pond is the largest (and to this day the most spectacular) feature in the garden and is part of Scotswood Water Ways.

**Figure 4** This picture was taken by me in Autumn 2006 as local schoolchildren and volunteers celebrated our first harvest. On the left is Ian Cameron who sadly passed away some years ago: he was my fellow designer (we always joked that he did the wildlife and I did the permaculture). This design is dedicated to his memory. He was a great, instinctive designer of natural living systems.

The picture appeared in the original **Permaculture Association Members Handbook** on page 5. Some fruit trees can be seen in the background along with the John Marley Centre.

## **References.**

Above-mentioned Permaculture Association Members Handbook issued to members in 1996/7 (must have been superseded long ago).

Permaculture Works issue no.22 summer 1999 pages 6-7.

Permaculture Magazine issue no. 26 p.20 “A Drift on the Tyne”.

For current status of the garden simply look up the website. It was on T.V. a couple of years ago (2009) as part of the Secret Millionaire Series.