



Small Wonders

I've been interested in sustainability for as long as I can remember. I think I was one of those lucky kids. My father and grandfather knew all about countryside ways. When Greenpeace started up, I think that's what did it for me – I went on marches and found out what we could do, what was happening with the planet. I moved to Woodstock in 2007. A year later I noticed there was a sign saying we'd like to start up a Sustainable Woodstock group, anyone interested should come along to the community centre. About 12 of us went along. Somebody from CAG introduced themselves, I think it was Simon Kenton, and one other person, and we spoke about what interested us why we were interested in sustainability. And as soon as I retired, our founder said: 'How about you being the chair now? You've got time on your hands!'

We're all volunteers. The only income we have is actually from these canvas and jute bags that we produced many moons ago. We had managed to get a small grant which we invested in these bags. We wanted to reduce plastic, because plastic bags were just everywhere. So, we thought we'll go to all the shopkeepers in town and say: 'We'll give you these bags, you sell them at cost price, and give us the money afterwards.' That's how we started. Within each bag was a message to say who we were, what we were doing, why we were doing it. There was a great uptake. We also held swap shops where you take along things you don't want that are perfectly good for somebody else, and people in need take it away. One winter, we offered to survey people's homes to show them where their houses were leaking heat, using thermal imaging cameras... you have to do it in the middle of winter on a cold night. It was probably 50 houses in the end. We've had an arable farmer and an organic farmer give talks about their challenges and hosted others too and shown a few films. We do an annual litter pick. I enjoy that. It's instant and people feel really good about themselves as well as making things look better. And we're campaigning right now to have 20-miles an hour through the town. It's a busy main road.

We have had issues with the town council. I know people always laugh about town council things, but there were some pretty negative people on the council. New councillors have joined recently and hopefully things will improve. What we're about is positive action, as opposed to saying how awful things are. We work in the background, but what we want is for people to engage, and then through that medium of positivity maybe they spread it with their family and friends. We did have one member who was very forthright. There's a genuine balance to be struck between getting the



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message across for action and ensuring that you engage with people. But it's a difficult balance when there's a genuine emergency. What we're trying to build on is trust from the community.

We're on the edge of Blenheim Parkland, and Blenheim is a UNESCO world heritage site and a site of special scientific interest. It was to be the 900-year anniversary of the town and the town was looking to celebrate in some way. A few towns people came up with the idea of a community woodland. A narrow field, alongside of the A44 was noticed that wasn't being used so much, except cutting the grass once a year. 'Do you think we could have a community woodland there? We asked and they said yes! We got together with a few of the local businesses to buy some trees and tree-protectors. We were offered lots of second-hand ones so they said: 'If you're willing to clean them up, you can use them.' In 2010 we started planting 1,600 native trees and we got everyone in the community involved. We had the schools and even the Duke of Marlborough came along to plant the first tree. That made a bit of a splash. Now if you go to the woodland, you'll see the canopies just closing in, it's fantastic.

The woodland has been magical – how it develops ... at first it's just a meadow and there's lots of wildflowers, then the trees start, and then the canopy starts to close... it's very dynamic, it's always changing. And it's a great place to engage with people. More people have found the woodland during Covid and a number of people stop and talk to us about the project! One of our members, he's an environmental arborist, he designed the woodland that opens on to glades and we've got three beehives there now as well. In 2017 we expanded the area to plant 82 heritage fruit trees that have all been sponsored by the community. The orchard will be producing organic fruit, we'll be able to teach people how to prune trees, a site for a picnic, perhaps play rounders, etc with everyone. So, I see it as a much more community-spirited project, even though it's early days.

About four years after planting the woodland, a Christmas tree suddenly arrived. A guerilla planting. It looks out of place because we haven't got any pine trees at all. But it's taken hold, and it's grown, it's really established itself. It's a lovely Christmas tree. This Christmas, during Covid, somebody decided to walk by and put decorations on it. Slowly, it became more and more decorated. And it must be about eight foot tall now. Then after Christmas, the 12th night, the decorations came down. And then this Easter, during the pandemic, somebody crocheted hearts. On each heart they'd attached a message – take one of these hearts and give them to one of your friends or family members... who really needs it right now. I've gone all goose bumpy just thinking about it. We've no idea who did it.

I think we all need that – we all need to be excited about small wonders. This autumn, in the woodlands, my husband dug a pond, a small wildlife pond, and we were very happy last week because we saw a frog and four tadpoles! Goodness knows how the tadpoles got there already but must have come in from the plants we introduced. ...small wonders.



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