

# Holy Innocents' Parish/School Allotment Journey

The arrival of Covid 19 and the subsequent lockdowns that began in March 2020, led to a significant change in the way the volunteer group of parishioners had previously worked with the children at the allotment. Following discussions with Ryan Langford (Headteacher) it was decided to maintain the allotment, by continuing to grow crops so the children that were in school would be able to visit the allotment and see the growing crops potatoes, onions, carrots, peas, beetroot, lettuce, tomatoes, herbs and flowers etc although the group would not be working directly with them during this time. And this is how things have been for most of 2020 and 2021.

## The Orchard 2021

While the volunteer group have missed the interaction with the children, It also gave us time to think more about the possibilities for the field adjacent to the allotment. For some time, we had entertained the idea of starting a fruit orchard, because of the many health benefits as well as creating havens for biodiversity



But planting an orchard is a responsibility. And unlike the crops grown at the allotment it is not a one-off crop to be enjoyed over a few months; an orchard will transform a field into a landscape, provide an ecosystem and become a place of fruitful abundance; the hope is it will continue to do this over decades to come.



With these and other exciting thoughts in mind there was much to consider especially whether the field would make a suitable orchard; looking at one or two specimens that the school had planted over the years they did not seem to be doing too well!

So, we would need to test the soil and improve it, if needed. Before considering which fruit trees apples, pears, plums, cherry etc would be most appropriate-while ensuring, pollinator groups were compatible, the height of trees, cropping times to coincide with term times and a host of other things. Our aim being to enlist the help of the school children in the project from the outset so that they would be engaged and involved in the growing, care, maintenance and harvest of the fruit trees. And this took up our time pre and post Easter. We were also delighted by parishioners and others who when asked what they thought about the idea of starting an orchard? Responded positively by offering to buy and donate fruit trees.

## But where to start?

While the volunteers have a good knowledge of growing vegetables, we needed to augment our basic knowledge about fruit trees. We turned to various specialist nurseries for guidance, to better understand the task that lie ahead. And so, it was by a fortunate stroke of serendipity, one nursery in particular after hearing our explanation that we were gathering information on behalf of our local school told us about a considerable opportunity for our project! Briefly the Harmony Project began an orchard regeneration project to mark the 70th birthday of HRH The Prince of

Wales in 2018. The project saw the planting of heritage apple trees in ten primary schools across the UK. Since then, they have encouraged the planting of fruit trees in other schools across the country.



## Green for Go...

This information was immediately shared with Ryan Langford (Headteacher), who was equally enthusiastic and extremely supportive. Briefly, it meant that the school would receive twenty Heritage apple trees, to start the Orchard. These trees can cost c.£50-65 for each tree. So, what a terrific start! While the trees are free the school agreed to fund the stakes, collars, nutrients, soil and bark needed to get things off to a good start...

A site plan was drawn-up taking into account boundaries and the need for distance between the trees. Members of the volunteer group dug trial sites through May 2021, to help improve our knowledge of the site.





As you can see the field has a thick layer of grass, once the top layer of grass was removed, we found the soil looked reasonably good. We had also discussed soil compaction with the experts who suggested the area recommended for each site 0.75m.sq at a depth of 30 centimetres (1ft). would be a sufficient size for the trees. They confirmed what others had said that tree roots are robust and would be able to travel through the compacted soil. There were several large pieces of flint found in the test sites, these and all the grass around the tree had to be removed.



Two members of the group agreed to meet on site at the end of May, to map out the trees and spray the grass with a circle to denote each site. Nick had made a start on three squares by removing the grass layer. All went to plan however Tony's dog Amber managed to get herself caught up in a laurel bush and long story short, he had to unclip her lead to free her. Once Amber was free, she shot off following a fox trail and disappeared. We were distraught as Tony was leaving for holiday the next day and faced the prospect of telling his wife and daughter that Amber had disappeared!!! Frantic calls and looking up and down the road yielded no sign of Amber but several prayers later a lady living close by called Tony's mobile (Amber had a collar tag-thank God!) to say she had found Amber. What a relief!!!

## No Easy Dig

With the site marked out we were ready to start the dig the following week. But as we started it did not seem possible that just one small site could produce one wheelbarrow of turf, ditto earth, ditto flint and stones. What was thought to take thirty minutes took the best part of two hours.

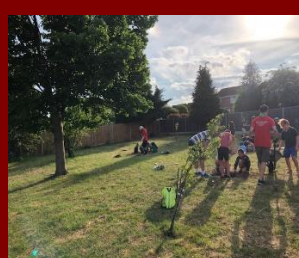


We were not prepared to find, at a depth of six inches, a shelf of flint, which was a feature of every single site, bar one. Spades were redundant, forks were a life saver. This meant the process of digging the twenty plus sites would be extremely slow! Steve Westcar generously offered to join the group and help and he has provided invaluable improvisation beginning with making a template for the sites so that they would be the correct shape 'square', 'not round'! With our volunteer group Agi, Angela, Olwen, Kathy, Nick, Tony and Maria, augmented by Steve and the Mum's from the school, Darshana, Katerina, Bhavesha, we continued to strain every muscle and by June 9 we had 7-8 sites dug.



## A Community Endeavour

Mentioning the need for more muscle to Steve Pallett at Mass one day he said, "What about the Scouts?" An excellent suggestion! So contact was made with Gary Leggett Group Scout Leader 9<sup>th</sup> Orpington Air Scout Group and he came on site to see the sort of challenge we were up against. But more importantly, we were bowled over by his offer of help, by arranging for the Cubs, Scouts and Beavers to lend a hand. Within a few days and with the sun shining on 15 June, we were delighted to welcome the Cubs: Sebastian, Amber, Mia, Daniel P, Myah, Sophia, Enge, Harvey, Xanthe, Rosie, Florence, Leo, Dominic, Michael, Sophie, Tilly, Adit, Nathaniel, Lizzie, Lewis R Georgie, Ethan, Meridy, Lewis J, Oscar, Daniel and their leaders Jerome, Chris, Kenny, Don, Sam...)



It was such a joy to see the Cubs in action their enthusiasm, commitment and work ethic, created such a lively buzz on site as working together, they helped transform a



significant number of the sites, removing large roots, stones and large pieces of flint to make them ready for planting.

One of the adults brought along a new tool 'the mattock', a bit like a pick-axe but it was invaluable in crushing the unyielding flint.

The following evening a large group of Scouts: Sean, Ethan, Izabella, Isabella Rosalind Tristan, Olivia, Katie, Jessica, Jacob, Lilly, Dylan, Benjamin, Alice, Phoenix, Arjan, Sophie, Billy who continued the work and led by their leader Dave...



Their enthusiasm, infectious as they brought their problem-solving skills to bear on the flint, roots and stones; they made a valuable contribution achieving much in a relatively short space of time!

The Beavers were due on site on Thursday evening but unfortunately heavy rain meant they were not able to come. We received a message from Gary Leggett:

“ I am so glad that we were able to help you with this project. I know that the cubs and scouts enjoyed themselves too.”

## Blessing the Site

We now had twenty sites that were ready to receive the trees; it also meant that we and the Year 6 children would be able to invite Father Victor to bless the site on Monday 21<sup>st</sup> June before he left for a short holiday in Malta. And he brought with him, much needed rain, his timing perfect! Things were looking up!



Everyone is getting excited as the long wait is over. We expect to take delivery of the twenty heritage trees with planting scheduled for Thursday 1st July.

## Selecting and Planting

Ryan Langford (headteacher) arranged for the year 6 children-Bella, Aoife, Connie, Aaron, James, Andrew, Aaron, Lucia, Naomi & Kenzo to come and select a tree and they worked together in small groups and having listened intently to the instructions for planting, carried them out to perfection and in such a calm and professional manner.



The Orchard now has 20 heritage apple trees planted

Parishioner donations so far include an apple tree and  
Victoria Plum both are planted but we have been promised  
more trees!



An effective irrigation system has been established to ensure the trees get sufficient water especially in the next three months as they settle into their new home...





We will continue to monitor the trees to make sure they are healthy and putting on growth. Then once the trees are firmly established, we will begin to think about companion planting



We can't wait to see the fragrant blossom the promise of fruit in the future but also the many health benefits that these trees will bring to this place. Children will be able to picnic under the trees , perhaps some sketching...the possibilities are endless... And we must be ready in due season for the fruit so please do let's hear your thoughts on what to do with, an abundant harvest, if not this year, then perhaps in 2022!!!



Grateful thanks to all those who have contributed  
and helped in any way