



After a record wet winter, the weather - at the time of writing at least - seems to have returned to something more like its normal pattern and hopefully we can all look forward to a successful growing season. The main news item in this edition is linked to the EAP-AGM and the excellent presentations that accompanied it. The Northfields site, which like its sister Pathways site Haslemere is currently moving towards self-management, is the subject of our Site Profile. We also have a selection of “allotment oriented news items” which may have escaped your notice and we have our usual round-up of local site news in our “Around the Associations” section.

The 2014 AGM

The AGM was well-attended with about sixty members present. Copies of the draft minutes, the accompanying reports from Helen de Jimenez, the out-going Chair of EAP, and Stephen Cole, the Council Allotments Manager, together with the Treasurer’s Accounts can be accessed on the EAP website. A new Executive Committee was elected consisting of: Patrick Williams (Brentham) Chair; Helen de Jimenez (Haslemere) Secretary; Dominique van Dooren (Ascott) Treasurer; John Bradley (Blondin), Tony Donegan (Brentham), Andy Doyle (Braund Avenue), Christina Fox (Northfields) and Joseph Mangar (Horsenden). Patrick Williams introduced and led a discussion of the future plans of EAP in which it was agreed that the in-coming Committee would update the objectives of EAP so as to better reflect the strengths of EAP and the interests of its membership. Suggestions for new initiatives and ways of better involving those members who are not on-line were also discussed.

Formal business over, the remainder of the evening was devoted to two excellent presentations. The first related to self management. A topic very much in the air these days as Council budgets come increasingly under strain. Not an option for all sites, and indeed not necessarily a sensible choice for sites that have perfectly satisfactory management systems already in place, but potentially a very rewarding path for many sites where this is not the case.

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John Bradley outlined the key steps (and pitfalls) involved in introducing a system of self management of the type they have at Blondin. At the time its introduction, Blondin was in



a very run-down state with no local management. Under these conditions, the first step is the formation of a Local Association or “Friends” group. He emphasised the importance of going for a large Committee but recognising that if you aim for ten members and get six you are doing well. If all the talents required are not immediately available this, he stressed, is not a problem. Not everybody likes Committees but when tenants start to see the benefits of the new system, others will become involved and these talents will emerge.

The important thing, he explained, was to do the simple things first and do them well - tasks such as sorting out the correct names and addresses of the

tenants and collecting the rents. Another important first step is to organise workdays. This is easier than most people think. The Blondin experience was that they were surprised by the amount of support they got. Many tenants were frustrated by mess and inefficiency. Making workdays a fun thing – finishing off with a small barbecue, a bottle of wine etc, - really got people talking together and helped to create community spirit. With the benefit of hindsight, he advised that it was important not to be over-lenient regarding discipline (obeying the rules). Troublesome tenants given an inch will take a mile. He also advised getting on top of rubbish problems at an early stage but to be careful about spending time and money hiring a skip – it can be abused if not very carefully policed. Another factor is the necessity of accepting that some people hate change - even if they clearly benefit by it! Whatever you do will be wrong as far as they are concerned. He finished off by reminding his audience that others have been along this road before them. Advice is available and can stop you running into unnecessary problems - a view subsequently endorsed by Doig Simmonds who spoke to EAP on self management at Pitshanger two years back.



The second speaker was Igor Vaintraub, a soil scientist based at Imperial College in Kensington. He kept the audience thoroughly entertained with his presentation on “Soil Structure and Fertility – How to Improve it” that covered a range of information about soil science and new forms of compost making while still leaving time for stories of his earlier life as a professional chef.

Igor, who has a plot at Brentham allotments, is very familiar with our local soils – a mixture of heavy clay soil when poorly cultivated and clayey loams when properly looked after. As he pointed out, they

are normally close to neutral pH, have reasonable nutrient levels but if not properly looked after have a tendency to waterlog in the winter and dry out to something like concrete in the summer. He explained the basis of our standard approach of using compost to improve the structure – that incorporation of organic matter modifies the interactive forces between



soil particles making it more friable helping roots to penetrate, aiding water absorption and adding back nutrients. This approach, he pointed out, largely ignores one important aspect of soil - its role as a habitat not only of more familiar organisms such as earthworms but an enormous range of micro-organisms bacteria, fungi etc. Soil apparently is apparently home to a quarter of all living organisms.

He then introduced the audience to a novel type of compost - probiotic compost that he is working with and producing at Imperial College It has the same general starting materials as ordinary compost; twigs, green plant material, food waste etc. But whereas normal compost forms by a slow process of aerobic breakdown of the organic material by soil bacteria, fungi, insects, earthworms etc., probiotic compost is formed in an anaerobic bio-incubator at much higher temperatures. The process is much quicker – they can make two tons in a week! The degradation is also much more complete – the final product takes up about a quarter of the volume of normal compost. It has an extremely open structure and is highly water retentive, reducing water logging in the winter and wet conditions and acting as a water reservoir under dry conditions. Its main role, however, is improving the microbial health of the soil and its ability to generate humus. It also attracts useful organisms such as earth worms that feed on decaying organic material and aids the recycling of essential nutrients. This animal life in turn helps open up the soil creating a porous structure that plays a major role in maintaining its proper hydration and oxygenation. Properly used with mulches, it is ideal for no-dig allotment gardening. The bacteria, fungi and earthworms do all the work!

His presentation – aided by his obvious enthusiasm and willingness to answer questions - sparked of a lot of interest, discussion and hilarity He has kindly agreed to arrange a visit to the Imperial College Environmental Garden, situated near the College, so that EAP members can see the incubator and the process for themselves. We will certainly hold him to this offer and will publish details when available. He – brave man - has also provided his email address (igor.vaintraub@gmail.com) for use by anybody with queries regarding his presentation.

Initiatives, Shows, Competitions, Campaign

A few items that appeared in the “Latest News” section of the EAP website that you may not have picked up on:

Wild-life Workshop

Froglife is organizing free interactive workshops specifically designed for allotment holders to make their site attractive and friendly to all sorts of wildlife, especially amphibians and reptiles. The workshops, which will be held at weekends in May, involve two hours of action-packed practical and educational activities. They are suitable for all ages, ability or level of experience. Ideally the workshops would be held in early afternoon for 10-15 people per session. Framfield and Brentham have signed up for a joint course. Too late for anybody else to do so this year but as this could well be an ongoing initiative, worth considering for next year.

Their website is at: <http://www.froglife.org/>

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The Edible Garden Show

Advertised as “The Ultimate Grow Your Own Event. Sounds interesting. It’s an annual event. So if you go, we would appreciate a review!

theediblegardenshow

the ultimate
'good life'
event

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www.theediblegardenshow.co.uk

Their web site is: <http://www.theediblegardenshow.co.uk/>

The Big Allotment Challenge

Silver River Productions, a TV company based in London, are currently in production for a BBC2 prime-time gardening show ‘The Big Allotment Challenge’. It is a series that follows a handful of talented amateur kitchen gardeners as they transform a plot of earth into a patch of beauty and reveal all the wonderful possibilities that can be unlocked from allotment growing. They are looking for contestants to feature in the series, those who have the skill and dedication and who could dig their way to victory and be crowned the winner of The Big Allotment Challenge. Again too late to apply but something that might be worth keeping an eye out for on the TV schedules.

Grow Wild

Grow Wild is a four-year campaign funded by the Big Lottery Fund and led by the Royal Botanic Gardens at Kew. It is aimed at using native wild flowers to bring alive neglected



and run-down sites. Free wild-seed packs and funding are available to participating local community groups. This is a four year campaign so if you are interested it could be worth following up.

The Grow Wild website is at: <https://www.growwilduk.com/>

Farm Terrace Allotments

EAP has received a plea to help save Farm Terrace Allotments in Watford. Watford Borough Council is trying to close the site and relocate the tenants on the grounds that the land is required as part of a project to develop a “Health Campus” - a new hospital development including 700 houses. The case raises important issues both about the grounds under which the Secretary of State can change the usage of allotment land under the 1925 Allotment Act and the criteria for relocation of the tenants if such a change takes place.

The original decision of the Secretary of State to allow the change of usage of allotment land was successfully challenged by the plot holders on the grounds that the allotment site was not essential to the project – the Council had admitted that the project could still go ahead, albeit less profitably to the Council, without the allotment land. The case came up for review again just before last Christmas. The Secretary of State then granted Watford Council permission to continue with the development despite the normal criteria not being met. The Farm Terrace Community Association are continuing their legal battle and are seeking support.

Some EAP members may have seen the BBC1 coverage of the issue in “Inside Out London” on Monday 3rd March. Their battle has important implications for all allotment gardeners as its final outcome will certainly set a precedent for other future cases throughout the country. For more information, and details of how you can register your support, visit <http://savefarmterrace.wix.com/savefarmterrace>

Keep up to date by checking out “Latest News” on the EAP website www.ealingallotmentspartnership.co.uk and signing up for the EAP newsletter using the “Contact Us” link

Site Profile

Northfields Allotments

The Northfield allotments are at the top end of Northfield Avenue, with Mattock Lane along the north side and Occupation Road along the southern side. Prior to 1832, the land where the current allotments are situated, was known as Ealing Dean Common. It was also known as ‘Jackass Common’ as pony races were held there on holidays. These races were said to have continued until the 1880s, when the local council stopped them because of complaints about the 'evil they encouraged'. In 1832 Charles James Blomfield, the Bishop of London and Lord of the Manor of Ealing, ensured the enclosure of the land for use as allotments. According to Blomfield's biographer Malcolm Johnson, "The Bishop thought that the Church should provide rival attractions, such as mens clubs, and his Ealing

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allotments laid out in 1832 were an attempt to substitute his beloved gardening for drinking as a pastime."

Through the years, the plots have been managed by a succession of committees, charities and trusts. Today it is held in trust by the charity Pathways. When I sign up new tenants, I have to emphasise we are not a council-run site. They all assume the council will magically turn up to help them clear their plot and deliver compost (I blame Joe Swift, presenter on Gardener's World and one-time allotment tenant, for spreading this myth). Northfields has 71 full-sized plots and 56 half plots. Some people have more than one plot - a throwback from the days when allotments weren't so popular. We currently have 110 tenants and 95 people on the waiting list. In 1832, the Bishop stipulated that each tenant should be allocated no more than one Rood - which is about a quarter of an acre or 10,890 square feet, approximately 1,011 square metres. The rent was five shillings. Today, we only rent out half plots to newcomers - around 6m x 15m = 90 sq m. Tenants pay £120 for a full plot and £66.00 for a half plot.

The big event in 2013 was our new fence. The old fence had so many holes and openings that anyone could easily get on site and, of course, they did. We turned up one day to find all our metal taps had been stolen. They were replaced with plastic ones, which have so far stayed in place. That said, I have always felt it was a safe place. The new fence is two meters high and we now all pay a surcharge of £18.60 per year on top of the yearly rent - for the next 20 years - in order to cover the cost.



Up until 2013 Pathways employed an allotment manager two days a week to oversee Northfields and Haslemere - our sister site. But it became obvious to plot holders that this was too big a job for one person working on a part-time basis. Paths were not maintained, plots were left to get in a terrible state, non-cultivation letters were not enforced and many plots were not even rented out (even though we had a long waiting list). One plot had been abandoned for so long it was on their spreadsheet as uncultivable. A challenge, as shown above, we couldn't resist. Of course, we also have plot holders who keep their plots well-maintained and are generous with their advice.

So, we started holding impromptu meetings on site and then I launched a private online forum for tenants. The forum became a great way to share information and test opinion - with feedback coming back pretty quickly. Suddenly plot holders who had never spoken to one another had a rallying point and it is not an exaggeration to say we went from being a bunch of individuals to a community - intent on improving the site. Eventually there emerged a small group of troublemakers - I mean concerned citizens - who formed a steering group to move towards self management. Haslemere had also come to the same conclusion about self management. So, together we made representations to Pathways

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management team and then their board of Trustees. Back in October, Northfields and Haslemere got the green light to manage their own sites. At the start of 2014, we formed the Ealing Dean Allotment Society; we have a constitution and six elected and one co-opted committee members. We used the name Ealing Dean because the first committee in 1832 was the Ealing Dean Allotment Committee and we wanted to have that link to the past.

We have great plans for the site. But, I have to keep reminding everyone that we won't undo 15 years of neglect overnight. We don't officially take over the management until April 1st, but tenants are already starting to notice the changes. We have started on some general maintenance: clearing the main path of stinging nettles, preparing plots for rental and starting a metal collection and recycling scheme. Many sites run work days – but there doesn't seem to have been any history of them at Northfields. We want people to realise that the committee can't do it all (we all have full time jobs), we need plot holders to volunteer some time too... and they have. That "uncultivable" plot shown above was cleared over three mornings by seventeen volunteers. After that show of support – I knew self management could work. Plot holders and local residents have also answered our call to clear up the footpath that runs between the allotments and the back gardens of Loveday Road. This path, known as Radbourne Walk, will be cleaned up and replanted with local native plants and annual wildflowers. There will also be habitat creation for the endangered and protected Stag Beetles present on site. We have received support from the local council with volunteer schemes and will receive some financial backing.



Like most sites, we do have a regular turnover of plot holders. While our waiting list will always be run on a first-come, first-served basis, the committee feels we do need to do more to vet new tenants and help them in the initial stages of clearing a plot. With 95 people on the waiting list, we have decided to trial "Nursery Plots". These smaller plots will give the beginner a taste of allotment life. If they thrive, they will move up to a half plot. If they realise that it is not for them – well it only leaves us a small patch of weeds to clear up.

If you look at us on Google maps satellite view you can see that the site is quite long with a central path – The Long Walk – with plots either side. When I first got my plot, I rarely spoke to anyone at the other end of the site. While the forum has been invaluable at bringing us all together, my personal crusade has been to get a communal plot. I'd like to see a composting toilet there and a shed big enough for meetings, courses and social

events. We can use the plot for bulk deliveries of compost, recycling and the all-important barbeque. Having an online community is great – but nothing beats a real world burger in a bun and a glass of wine with friends. Although I'm not sure the Bishop would approve!

Christina Fox
Chair: Ealing Dean Allotment Society
(www.ealingdean.co.uk)

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Around the Associations

Friends of Ascott

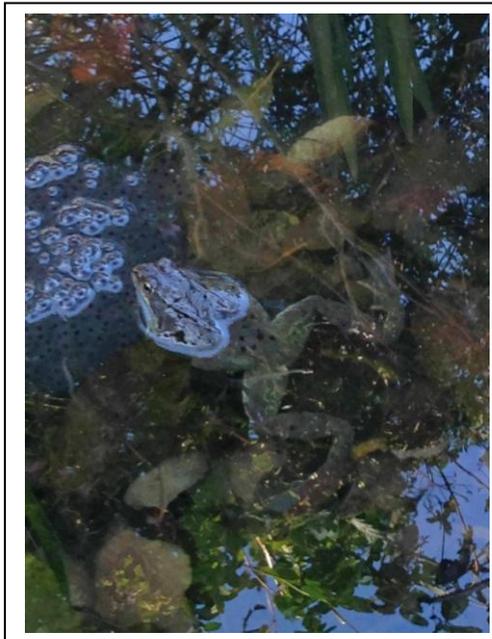
Our first workday of the year and we had perfect weather and a good turnout for it. The tasks for the day were cutting back hedges, wood-chipping paths and flattening a neglected piece of land in preparation for sprinkling bee-friendly wild-flower seeds over it. We finished off the day's activities with a tea party in the early-spring warmth of the afternoon sun.



With the workday now behind us, the next thing to look forward to is our

General Meeting that is due to be held at 4pm on Saturday 22nd March at the Orchard. This will be followed by a social event starting at 5pm which friends and family are very welcome to attend (please bring food and drink to share).

Carbery Allotments



Wild winds and wildlife at Carbery. The winds blew two walls into precarious positions and wooden fences snapped like matchwood. The surrounding residents were informed and now the allotments ring to the sound of hammering and drilling. One pink-faced handyman informed me that he also does "nice bathroom and kitchen conversions".

Just as soon as the end of the world storms subsided, the frogs got going; building mounds of frogspawn in the ponds on my plot. There is a bit of competition going on for this one, muscular female, who, when not occupied by their undignified clambering, gazes at the results of her dalliances.

Diana Cranshaw

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Blondin Allotment Association

The Blondin Allotment Association recently ordered over 100 bags of manure and compost but needed help in offloading it from the delivery vehicle. The pre-arranged cavalry arrived at the agreed time in the form of Community Payback “volunteers” and handled the task at a great pace. The feedback was that not only did they do a good job but that they actually enjoyed doing it - so much so that they will be coming back again soon to help out further. If you have a similar well-defined, communal task on your site where some muscle would be welcome, it might be worth contacting Linda Massey linda.massey@virgin.net to advise you about how help might be arranged.

Brentham Allotments and Garden Society

Quite a lot is going on just now. The Council fortunately timed their repairs to our perimeter fence to coincide with the end of the winter storms. We are currently letting out a set of eight re-organised plots. A group of tenants have set up a “Chicken Co-operative” and are currently constructing what is widely expected to be a “Chicken Hilton”. Hopefully, full details and photos will be available for the next newsletter. And - we are starting work on our planned “all-weather” main path.

Framfield Allotments Association

As usual, it is all systems go at Framfield. As shown below, building materials are arriving for their next set of building projects - a new meeting room, an access ramp to the toilets, and the creation of a new picnic area.



Ealing and Hanwell Allotment Association

Last but definitely not least. It will be back!

Plans are already under way for this year’s Ealing and Hanwell Allotment Show. Full details will be in the summer newsletter.

