

# Brighton Permaculture Trust

“Land” site at Stanmer

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*This is a very potted history of our Stanmer Organics plot site*

*November 2006*

On a wet day in November 2006, a group of us arrived up at the Stanmer Organics site to view a land share possibility with a plot holder called Re-evolution. They were struggling to maintain the area and wanted respite, and we were thinking about a nursery for our new orchard project. We had also identified a desire for practical opportunities in support of our Permaculture design courses and a place where Permaculture could be seen in action: a place for experimentation and demonstration beds for such things as composting techniques.

Seven of us ultimately signed up for the project, and a design team was born. We spent the first few months surveying, planning, designing and mustering our resources. By April the following year, we were already under implementation as we had timetables and deadlines to meet.

Our strip of the land was the whole of the right-hand side of the site, which rolled downhill. It included a very established eclectic forest garden at the edge. Within this, we inherited several ornamental and “sentimental” trees that had to stay as part of our agreement. These were some of our *limiting factors* and also our resources, as they gave us a fully-fledged shelter belt and rabbit distraction to the overall site.

One of the first things we observed was the amount of rabbits skipping about the place. Recognising they would be absolutely fatal for young fruit trees, we immediately designated areas for fencing off. We had fairly quickly created a 5-year implementation plan for the site, as we were under the cosh to get some areas up and running to meet our target deadlines. This meant taking less time for deep, detailed analysis of the area than is recommended

All hands were called for this first leg of the implementation process, as effective fencing that lasts is reasonably high in effort. We enlisted the eager and all-important help of our course graduates for this and getting the rootstocks into the ground and manured for next year’s grafting.



It was during this period that Stanmer Organics, the overarching organisation to which we now belonged, recognised the need to be Soil Association-accredited.

After only a few short months in situ, two more major things occurred. First, our partner group, Re-evolution, decided to pull out, completely offering us the whole site, including a magnificent polytunnel. This meant revisiting our design and re-evaluating everything. The second occurrence was that a few of our team decided to migrate to Devon for a new, more rural life, while others had some family commitments arise. This reduced the core team to about four of us. We then had to look at the viability and resilience of four people running the site, and so we made adjustments accordingly. We chose to put much of the site under weed suppression sheeting to do the hard work of de-weeding for us.



A year on, in 2008, we found ourselves upping the rabbit fencing by two meters to keep out deer. We had also discovered how poor the soil was for growing apple trees! We also found our weed suppressant sheeting let in light so did not do what it said on the bottle. And, lastly, the poly tunnel was still full of our predecessors' tools and materials, so we could not really use it yet. This, however, turned out to be a good thing, as we were struggling to make enough regular visits to the site to keep the plants *alive*, let alone ones that would require much more attendance! We had lost control over the weeds, meaning that much of our good work on rabbit fencing was hidden and compromised.

An arson attack on a colleague's site had made it impossible for him to function there, so we were able to host him for two and a bit years in our polytunnel, growing his delicious herbs in return for some regular watering of our baby trees. *A beneficial relationship* if ever there was!

Over the next few years, our energy levels at the plot waxed and waned, but all the while we were observing at a micro level what was happening. Slowly we inched



ourselves along the 5-year plan. We invited other users to the plot, such as Forest School and a Nurture through Nature group, to help increase activity and use of the space.

Our biggest sticking point has always been people power at the right times of the year. This is primarily because the team are voluntary. We were often called away to earn money from other sources, and the summer months were prime for this. This in turn impacted on any harvest opportunities beyond our tree nursery. One of the other deficits we observed was the involvement of the course team which, once identified, we were able to encourage a core group from the teaching staff to engage with the plot. This was a very pivotal time, and much enthusiasm was mustered. Just as we were reaching an equilibrium, however, something devastating happened.

In mid-2009, there was a change in the inspector who came to Stanmer Organics. It was discovered that much of the practices we had all worked out with his predecessor turned out to be woefully inadequate for the standards required by the Soil Association. So, for a few agonising months, the whole of Stanmer Organics were temporarily suspended from the Soil Association while we sorted ourselves out. This caused massive upset in relationships within the various groups, as only some of us were substandard, but it also meant the groups had to pull together to save each other. This sense of co-dependency has been a challenge for many of us, as we were fairly autonomous prior to the event. People had to practice saying “We” a lot more instead of “You lot”!

For our site, it meant more *limiting factors* from a permaculture perspective and a great deal of frustration from within our ranks, as anything that we knew to have been organically grown could not be brought to site unless it was carrying the Soil Association badge. Several things had to be undone and taken away, and this impacted on morale. Many of us felt out of our depths at managing such strict systems. It caused a drop-off and a big shake up in our infrastructure, but ultimately it was for the better in terms of communication and systems that were then centralised and formalised.

During this phase of reorganisation, in early 2010, we decided to become a “Land site” for the Permaculture Association. This meant we would be on a national map with information about how folks could come and visit us to see what Permaculture looked like in our region. A few in our group were fairly appalled at this notion as they felt “good” Permaculture seemed to be lacking at the plot, but we were planning a multiple site which also incorporated our two large orchards, a forest garden and a Permaculture garden belonging to Pippa Johns, one of our longest established Permaculture design course tutors.

So, on another cold wet morning in February, several members of the core group and management committee met up with Louise Cartwright from the national Permaculture Association to get confirmation that we could join.



*Above: Louise Cartwright, Jan Mulreany, Mischa Hewitt and Bryn Thomas*

I always like to tell folks how much I appreciate *limiting factors* as a design tool, so, rather than seeing how badly the plot was currently falling short of its permaculture vision, I saw what things needed to be attended to and what tweaks were required to bring the site back into its true purpose. It would bring an important focus for our volunteers and be a working example of Permaculture in action.



A new team formed to help the plot through its transition, and a new survey was undertaken of all the elements on the plot, including the people. I had to take a sabbatical at this point for personal commitments at home and so only rejoined the team about a year and a half later, in 2012. What I found was that several mini forest gardens had appeared on site with own root apple trees at their centres, and several natural building courses had occurred, like Building with rammed earth. It was very exciting to see the changes.



At this point the two giants of our plot, Peter and Stephan (each over 6ft 3!), collaborating with Nick Blewitt and myself, designed an outdoor classroom.

In early spring 2013, many volunteers turned up to help implement it. For about three months, there was a very vibrant flurry of activity. Sadly, the energy and availability of the team again dissipated, leaving our plot without a core to run it. Many new plants had been ordered and planted, soil surveys done. However, much of the labelled markers had washed off in the winter/spring storms, leaving the plants anonymous and overgrown.

What this meant for me was that something drastically needed to change. We needed to implement all that was still relevant from the previous designs but with new tweaks. It also meant that someone needed to commit to the site for a whole year or more to really get the systems and the growing up to its full potential and our core ethics back at the helm. We needed to build in succession and resilience in a way we had not yet achieved.

Each year, I focus on one of the key designing Permaculture principles. Recently it had been the ones about placement and how putting in a small slow solution in the right place can have a positive ripple effect. I felt that, if I could commit to being on site for one set day a week (Thursday from 10.30 am until 3 pm), then we could invite volunteers up and we could potentially build around it. I also felt I could be happy for one day a week being on my own there if it came to it, so I knew it would be sustainable. It would mean that one person would see what was going on and be able to communicate with the absent team members.

So, in the summer of 2013, with the premise of “Earthcare, People Care and Fair Shares” in mind, we designed a slightly different bias for the next 5 years.





These new plans included using our organic status to grow food and plants we could sell. This would help support the continued evolution of the site.

We are currently also growing some food for the volunteers and plot users to enjoy, and we are running workshops and courses on site to generate more interest and funds while skilling people up.



One of my major desires is the spreading of skills and knowledge across the spectrum, not just to folks who can afford to pay but also to people and places it might really make a difference.

The people who currently come to site are varied, and their experiences vast and diverse. Some know nothing of growing but much about food or building, while others have 40 years of horticulture under their belts. Still others have buckets of enthusiasm.



We say thank you to our volunteers with discounts on other courses and, where applicable, with references. I see it as an intricate web of beneficial relationships and possibilities, where ideas can be discussed and explored, where niches are created and biodiversity is maximised ... a place where people can get soul food from working the land and real nutritious food and knowledge for their bodies.

We hope we have created a welcoming and open space for people to come for a long or as little as they like, a place where they can realise some of their goals and dreams and make it theirs, a resource that can truly be shared, run on virtually nothing but the sheer will and cooperation of ordinary people.

It has been a fantastic nine months, and we have been rewarded with a new lease for a further four years from the council. We are now beginning to see the fruits of our labours. The next few years will be about reaching out further and really making us a "Land mark" for Permaculture and reconnection with the earth as our primary source of food and wellbeing.

So now, as we arrive at the usually quiet summer months, it will be interesting to see how many people stay for pizza!



