

REPORT REGARDING TRIP TO THE LOST GARDENS OF HELIGAN AND THE EDEN PROJECT

As a primary school teacher of 28 years, running a nurture room in a mainstream school, supporting children with social, emotional and special educational needs, we all caught the gardening bug. It all started with a bean.... The children were given a bean to grow for homework. At the weekly drop in session for family members, I mentioned that I would like to grow more plants with the children and the parents said they'd help me.

As part of the nurture room provision and with parental support, the children created their own allotment, digging a new small plot each week until there were twelve beds. The children lifted and moved the turf. The benefits were astonishing and immediate. Behaviour, well-being and attitudes towards work improved as the children could 'earn' daily time outside if they worked hard in class. The children chose what they wanted to grow, were taught to use tools safely, learnt how to nurture plants, to deal with disappointment if something didn't work, to problem solve and to be patient.

I decided to visit The Lost gardens of Heligan and The Eden Project in Cornwall. The first to see the productive gardens and the 'Giant's Head sculpture' and the latter to learn more about the community projects. As a volunteer myself, helping in the gardens in Marie Curie hospice and at a National Trust property, Speke Hall, I was also interested in their volunteer programmes.

The story behind The Lost gardens of Heligan was very poignant. Gardeners who worked there, scratched their names on the wall in the 'Thunderbox' room before going to war, never to return. The gardens became overgrown and undiscovered until 25 years ago. The restoration project has been a massive undertaking.

I met Katie Kingett, head of the productive gardens. There are a series of walled gardens and nine gardeners and two volunteers who tend them. The gardens are vast and include many glass houses containing heritage varieties of fruit. There is a pineapple pit heated by manure and cold frames. The gardeners use hand tools, grow mostly heritage varieties of fruit and vegetables and use gardening methods such as double digging. The plots are 45ft by 100ft and are worked on a 6 crop rotation. Flowers and produce are also grown within manicured parterres in another linked garden. The methods used are authentic to replicate the work of the gardeners who would have originally worked there. It is labour intensive, like the garden in school but on a huge scale. Some of the fruit trees such as the peach trees have to be hand pollinated using small brushes.

At Heligan, there is no designated education officer but Children's University workbooks have been written and schools often visit. The garden opens earlier at set times for people who have been prescribed visits by their G.P's either for fitness or mental health benefits. A group of children with special educational needs have visited the gardens, kitchens and livestock areas to make connections with what they eat. I have had similar success in school where the children have tasted new foods that they have grown and used them in recipes such as soups and salads. This has been of benefit to all of the children, particularly those on the Autistic Spectrum who will often want to eat a limited and familiar diet.

Community projects have taken place at Heligan such as Wildworks, where a community choir, musicians and actors have performed. Three Bays Wildlife host informative evenings. There is also a seed swap service. There were activities specifically for children to take part in such as arts and crafts near the livestock area.

At Heligan, I also learnt about jobs conducted in winter which will help in my school, such as cleaning, ground preparation and writing labels as well as learning which crops can be sown earlier under glass. I also saw the 'Mud Maid' and 'The Giant's Head' sculptures which could be replicated by children as a fun art project.

During my visit to the Eden Project, I met Peter Lefort who works with Community Projects. There are over 150 volunteers at Eden helping in a variety of roles. There is an education base which caters for the large number of educational visits which take place. Around Eden there are lots of labelled displays which would appeal to children, such as orangutans being like forest gardeners. There is a vast area with activities for children to participate in.

Like Heligan, the gardens open at certain times for people to visit who have been prescribed exercise for well-being by their G.P.'s. There is a walking group for people who have C.O.P.D.

Community camps are 3 day events run twice a year all expenses paid, for people who are championing community work in their local area. Workshops, practical activities and the opportunity to network are available. This supports existing community projects or offers support to set up new initiatives. There is a programme supporting grandparents looking after under 5's called Deep Roots New Shoots, where they can meet other carers and support each other. This resonated with me as in school there is a Friday drop in session in the nurture room where parents and family members meet to celebrate successes of their children and support one another. Grandparents often visit. The generations in families supporting each other is essential to well-being.

There is a nationwide initiative called The Big Lunch programme, where people are encouraged to connect with one another with their neighbours. In 2017 9.3 million people took part. The community team produce packs with advice and encouragement. It can be as simple as having a cup of tea and a sandwich with a neighbour, to hosting a street party. The community team also offer advice and encouragement to organisations supporting prisoners to work in horticulture as part of their rehabilitation.

It was wonderful to spend time in glorious Cornwall and to meet professionals in Heligan and Eden who are bringing such joy and encouragement to peoples' lives through the power of plants.

Many thanks for giving me this wonderful opportunity and for the ideas to support my future work through horticulture.

Emma Rhodes