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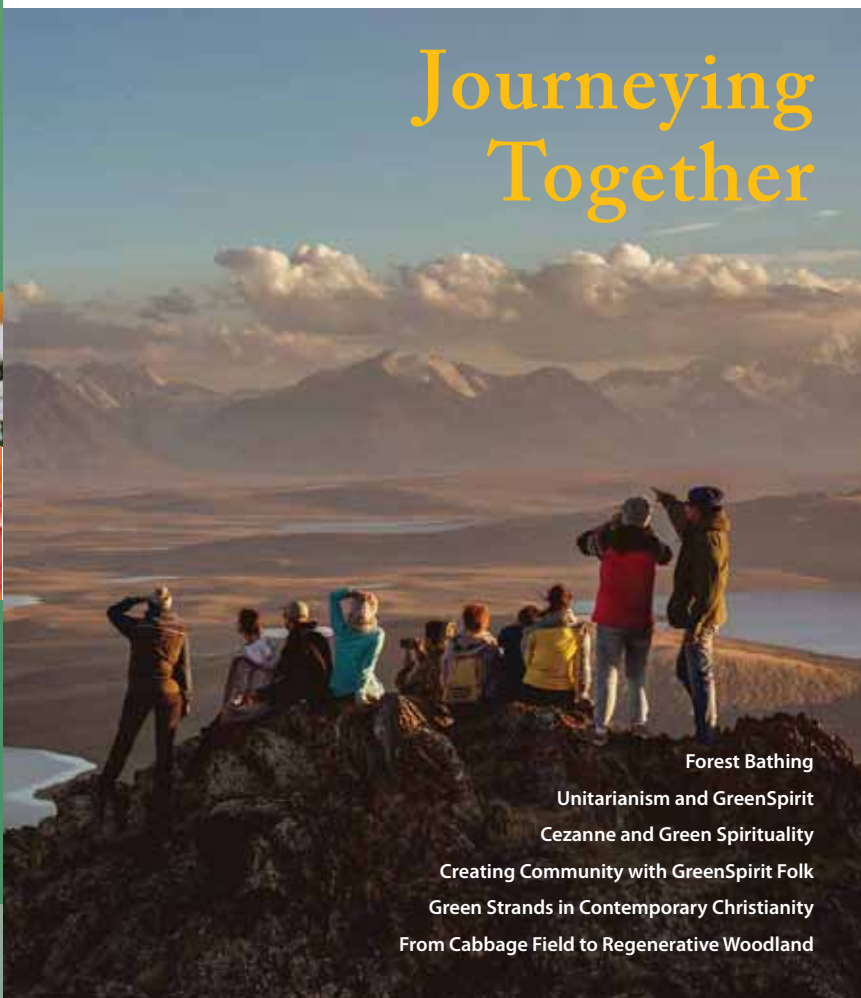
Engaged spirituality for a living Earth

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From Cabbage Field to Regenerative Woodland

GRAHAM J TRUSCOTT

On a wintery January Saturday afternoon when ill-clad families fighting mud, wind and rain, are (somehow) still enjoying the experience of planting trees; when, on a warm autumn night, children are fascinated by confused insects around a lepidopterist's lamp; or when, on a bright summer day, youngsters are running, hiding and playing in the long lush grass, there's at least the possibility that something good is happening.

Unanticipated delights such as these are amongst many encountered since ten acres of former cabbage field in South Derbyshire began the process of turning into something else in October 2013.

Projects often start with a vision – and there was one here: a hope that if we were lucky enough our small group might rent a parcel of land on which we could demonstrate permaculture techniques, educate our neighbours and increase the resilience of our community.

That hope came from a small group of deeply worried visionaries (certainly the worried bit!), determined to do something locally about the big scary anthropogenic threats – resource depletion, the climate crisis, soil

degradation, loss of biodiversity, plastic pollution and so many more concerns.

The group – Melbourne Area Transition – had a track record: successfully placing 10kW of solar PV on the roof of the grade 1 listed parish church, creating a food forest at the local primary school, giving talks about the issues to any local organisation potentially willing to listen. It seemed like a different league to become landowners, but why not? If we could reach more people...?

What then is Whistlewood Common?

Well, it is the name that we gave the land that we bought through a community share issue. It is also the name of the cooperative that was created to facilitate ownership of that asset, but 'Whistlewood' is far more than the legal and financial necessities...

Today's Whistlewood Common, nearly seven years on from first sight of the commercial 'for sale' sign on a rural bus route, is simultaneously a physical reality, a practical space for all manner of activities to take place, a tiny healing point on a grievously wounded planet and also still something of a state of mind and an attitude. Perhaps this is best illustrated with a few examples.

The physical reality is a transformed landscape. More than 3,500 trees have been planted, 300 or so orchard trees, nut trees and other specialist perennials including medlars, mulberries and currants in profusion. Ponds, swales and even a small amphitheatre have been created. Infrastructure has been built: field shelters, composting tree bogs, stores and a kitchen. A magnificent load-bearing strawbale roundhouse, completely off-grid, completed in spring 2019, is already nestling into the changing landscape as the sylvan shelter belts and orchards grow around it.

As a practical space, much now happens here that would not be possible elsewhere in our community. Throughout



Well attended talk on permaculture under the field shelter



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Children playing in the willow dragon

the year, enthusiastic and experienced workshop leaders run courses on everything from wild food foraging to stone and wood carving. There are regular yoga and other classes. Evening events include educational 'Luna' suppers with guest speakers to challenge and inspire us, music and wholesome food. Group camp-fire evenings, astronomy and arthropod study sessions, wedding parties and sessions for scouts, guides and other organisations all interact with the landscape here. The big events include Whistlewood's annual Midsummerish Music Festival and a highly informative 'Ferment' food festival in the autumn.

Community resilience at the local level, education and human happiness are counted as 'yields' every bit as important as the fruit, plant and wood yields of a typical agroforestry project.

Whistlewood provides a supportive base for fledgling local enterprises that fit its ethos and which can benefit from such a unique resource – very much part of the original plan. These enterprises include forest schools, pop-up food, a wedding business, mindfulness, and human wellbeing.

Caring for our trees is a core activity. Some of us are (we admit) tree nerds or geeks, others are tree spirits, but all

the care, attention and love we can provide is returned with fruit, shade, shelter and (probably from next year as we begin to coppice hazel and willow) wood of course, for fuel and crafts.

The environment here is being healed. The soil is rich, but what was once a monoculture brassica patch maintained with chemical intervention and subsequently over-run with grasses, now carries flora and fauna in great abundance and variety. Biodiversity is returning to this landscape.

One of the regular wildlife surveys here produced the first harvest mouse to be captured in an official census in Derbyshire for more than ten years. Abundant voles, shrews and mice explain the significant raptor and owl populations. Roosting barn owls leave their calling cards beneath our field shelter and herons stalk the swales hunting newts, frogs and toads. The Whistlewood hares challenge us to spot them before they see us and run away.

But there is another healing going on too. A human one. Several in fact. There are, for example, the autistic children who become calmer in this setting. Amongst the adult volunteers helping to create and run the site, mutual help and support appear naturally in the supportive culture



The new stage, roundhouse and amphitheatre are inaugurated at the 2019 Midsummerish Festival

that we do our best to encourage. People find strength and purpose in giving back to the environment of which we are all part, and in discovering each other. Individual stories of compassion, empathy and growth emerge: a young man despondent from a messy divorce and childcare issues; people with 'hidden' conditions and sometimes more obvious physical illnesses, find new strengths by being part of the community purpose here.

This is good practical stuff, but the vision has not gone away. Far from it. Whistlewood's small role as an educational model becomes more relevant and essential with each passing snippet of environmental disaster dawning on the local and national consciousness.

Whistlewooders are becoming more vocal about – and the project ever more relevant to – the challenges that our local



A hiking stick making workshop at Whistlewood

community is beginning to face. In November 2019 massively heavy rains onto already sodden ground created unprecedented floods that blocked almost every road into our small town for several hours. Yes, 'fun' is certainly still to be had at Whistlewood in numerous ways, times and events, but the emphasis is, more and more, on the resilience that we need as a local community when these external problems impact on us. Happen they will – with increased frequency and intensity...

We gravitate perhaps towards the global rebellion against the sixth mass extinction of Earth's so-very-vulnerable lifeforms, including, ultimately, our own. Our attitude is becoming more serious, the relevance of what we are doing more immediately obvious.

The effects of the Climate Crisis may outpace us but seeing what is coming leads us to respond as best we can or know how. We are, we think, doing something worthwhile and regenerative at our local level: we wish we could do more. Can we reach more of our own community? Can other communities learn anything from us? What can we share and encourage more widely?

In just over six years much has been done to realise the vision inspired by that 'for sale' sign by the side of the road. More than we thought. We have now a thriving multi-yield community asset, a growing woodland and wildlife haven. But, as the children who ran through the long grass in 2013 become young adults, might the honest answer to "Will our efforts change the world?" still not be what we really, really in our deepest hearts, wish that it could be...?

Graham Truscott, a systems geographer by training, is a founder director of Whistlewood Common Limited (www.whistlewoodcommon.org), a commercial advisor to The National Forest, a mentor to several other cleantech and regenerative enterprises and a reluctant participant in the Anthropocene.