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The Hidden Benefits of a Community Farm

Why **Horton Community Farm** is a vibrant hub for people of all ages and backgrounds

Horton Community Farm is a LAND (Learning And Network Demonstration) permaculture centre in the heart of Bradford, Yorkshire, which celebrates 10 years of being a worker's co-op in October 2022. It is a centre for food growing, wellbeing and community resilience and was designed as a space with multiple functions and strands of work in the hope of offering something for everyone. The space is close to two acres of a five acre allotment site which was once semi-derelict and now boasts a forest garden, wildlife area with pond, veg growing, therapy garden and community area. It also features a compost toilet and shipping container spaces, with activities primarily hosted outdoors.

The community farm is on a main high street and a residential area of Bradford. It is densely populated with approximately 373,000 inhabitants. Bradford is a former prominent mill city of the industrial era, and the site is next to mills in the heart of large migrant communities. Bradford has a strong tradition of migration, initially for trade, with rural folk moving to the city for work. Jewish and Irish merchant traders made their fortunes through the cloth trade here; workers primarily from Asia, Eastern Europe and the Caribbean helped rebuild after World War II; and most recently, people have sought sanctuary from persecution globally.

In 2009, a seed was planted and a permaculture bubble design for Horton Community Farm was created. A group from Transition Bradford approached the council for the use of some land, and were offered a farm tenancy on underused allotment plots. All involved were local and volunteers, wanting change.



We also include under 3s and those expecting babies, as these years really lay the foundations for healthy futures

Seeking Sanctuary

The community farm works with people living at the margins of society in our community: expectant mums and 0-3s living in an area with above average infant mortality; primary age children potentially at risk of child food poverty; young people from marginalised backgrounds; white working class people; people who are black, Asian and from diverse ethnicities; unaccompanied asylum seekers and sanctuary seekers of all ages. All people are welcome. We acknowledge people for who they are and what they bring. We hold space for the awareness that some communities, groups and individuals may be struggling more than others and we aim to make space for them.

The latest national census shows 26.3% of Bradford's population are under 18, compared to the UK average of 21.4%,¹ making it the youngest city in the country.² Bradford was one of the first cities in the UK to become a City of Sanctuary,³ with organisations working alongside asylum seekers and refugees. It has high indices of deprivation in the areas of income, employment, health and disability, and, sadly, food poverty, especially amongst children. It has an equally vibrant DIY community and voluntary sector with labour, union and socialist movements uniting to serve individuals, groups and communities, and lots of independent local businesses. The farm works in partnership with those who like what we're doing to bring people on site.

Horton Community Farm is volunteer-led, and initial energy came from student volunteers who helped clear the site of rubble and fly-tipping. Volunteers may come once, drop in from time to time or volunteer regularly,

sometimes for years. We are flexible, and this seems to work. Until the pandemic we operated regular drop-in volunteer sessions and now simply ask people to fill in a form they can drop in or fill in with us on site. Sessions have been long-standing. Our volunteers come with very differing levels of ability, experience, time, energy and focus and we expect people to come as they are. Volunteers with time and energy typically don't fit into a Monday to Friday work routine, so they are often students, outside the employment system or partially employed, young people, sanctuary seekers, or living with mental health difficulties or learning disabilities. Young mums with little children are also keen to spend time with them in this space.

Paid Interns

Through the student volunteer centre, we host student volunteer days and are registered with the university and local and national volunteer organisations. We offer a paid yearly 'Summer Experience' internship through the University of Bradford for second year university students. This works very well with young people coming from all backgrounds in terms of country of origin and ethnicity as well as interest in terms of their studies. We have found lifelong supporters, people who may not otherwise have considered outdoor work experience as being for them. They tell us their thinking evolves to see outdoor work in community and working with Nature bringing many benefits for individuals, communities and wildlife.



LEFT TO RIGHT

Dinara Hussain volunteering in the veg growing area with a posy of calendula

Positive pebble messages donated by Zaynab a young home educated supporter of HCF

Dinara's son enjoying cooking pitta bread on the fire to go with homemade stew!

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Clement Omoregie, a former student intern, came back to say hello. He's pictured here with Charlie Gray (left) in front of apple cordons in the forest garden.

We were one of the founding members of the pan-European Youth in Permaculture project. With a former intern, we crowdfunded and attended a sociocracy course where we co-designed the project and delivered several youth exchanges in Italy, Barcelona, Hungary, and Portugal, inviting local youths to co-design their futures, meeting other young people from across Europe. In these times it feels significant that young people are supported with design tools and spaces to explore together.

So, to the formative years! We have offered fully funded holiday forest school sessions so that all children could access them. These sessions were incredibly popular, and we offered them by linking in with specialist forest school practitioners, local schools and working with funders who focus on food poverty so we can ensure a good healthy lunch and snacks are provided for children. We ran these during the pandemic in all holidays, initially delivering food and activity parcels, and then in-person activities. We ran special sessions over winter where we cooked over a fire with children and families. We are researching how to fund this long-term which will involve registering with Ofsted.

We also include under 3s and those expecting babies, as these years really lay the foundations for healthy futures. We have worked with a big, nationally funded project, Better Start, who funded us to establish a three-year project, working in partnership with another local social enterprise, Grow to School, to offer a highly

popular series of activities and events for 0-3s and their families on our site, at nurseries and toddler groups across the area. We helped organisations set up new gardens, provided them with resources and activities, guided plantings and relevant seeds and materials. We recently implemented the design for our community area to welcome this age group with clambering rocks, sandpit, mud kitchen, shelter, demo beds, seed saving, outdoor kitchen and more.

We all Need a Place to Call Home

Bradford officially became a 'City of Sanctuary' in 2010 – the first in Yorkshire – and our first therapy programme focussed on sanctuary seekers, a group we already had experience of working with in general, as many people had volunteered with us on site since our inception in 2008.

Our bespoke Social and Therapeutic Horticulture programme gave participants a space to enjoy the many benefits of being in the garden and to feel at home in. We worked with a local housing association, a specialist mental health team and a specialist GP service, along with many other referrers to bring referrals to the site, where people were involved in the development, maintenance and tending of the space, and had access to therapeutic seasonal activities in our therapy garden.

We now run two therapeutic projects: the Mindfulness Garden for over 50s and carers of any age; and Growing Hope,

a re-launch of our programme for sanctuary seekers. One of our most fun and engaging ventures was a mushroom growing project for young unaccompanied asylum seekers. We visited local woods to explore what was growing and also inoculated cardboard and straw to grow mushrooms on our site and in their accommodation, growing king stropharia (*Stropharia rugoso*) and oyster mushrooms (*Pleurotus ostreatus*). A recent project, 'Seeds of Hope' (a seed library for Bradford), launched in 2021 with a pay-it-forward solidarity membership to ensure anyone can join for free should they want to, with people receiving seeds through the post.

We aim to bring cheer and connection where we can as well as a place many can call home.

- ¹ www.bradford.gov.uk/business/bradford-economy/about-bradfordeconomy
- ² www.theguardian.com/cities/2018/feb/05/life-britain-youngest-city-bradford-uk-unemployment
- ³ <https://cityofsanctuary.org/2022/05/18/welcome-to-our-newest-garden-of-sanctuary>

Charlie Gray has been part of Horton Community Farm in Bradford since the early days, when she was a volunteer. She became a co-founder of the farm as a worker's co-op and organisation, leading on community engagement and using permaculture design to set up and run community-led programmes. She brings her knowledge of plants and food systems through her ethnobotany studies and seed sovereignty work to land-based design, coupled with her training in people and permaculture with Looby Macnamara. She has been tutoring via the Permaculture Women's Guild on reciprocal relations and is currently finalising her diploma. <https://hcf.org.uk>

More on community and youth-focussed projects:
'Honouring the Next Generation' (PM98)
'The Upcycled Urban Farm' (PM98)

