

no straight lines

Matt Willer and two former students, **Lilly** and **George**, share how vital outdoor learning spaces are to student's education, wellbeing and life-skills

Being at school can often feel like passing through a loud and chaotic railway station; trains constantly coming and going, and people rushing to get to their final destinations as soon as possible. When problems arise, the customer service desk is busy, and it can become very overwhelming. As a full-time history teacher up until last year, I felt strongly that the bustle of secondary school education really needed to be slower-paced, and significantly more balanced. In *PM95*, I wrote of my attempt to strike this balance at Reepham High School and College (RHSC) by creating, along with students, a school allotment on unused land. I believe that a school allotment can become a space where children and young people are constantly learning, without the pressure of formal assessment or uniformly lined exercise books, and often without even realising that they are learning. What began as one project to create a space for explorative, non-linear and heuristic learning in one school has since led me down my own path of education, exploration and growth.

To take Sarah Spencer's fitting analogy from the inspirational *Think Like a Tree*, when the project began at RHSC in 2015, I was a lone birch sapling. Through forging strong connections, just like the roots of a tree connecting with other surrounding trees, the sapling has come to thrive in open and fertile land. Five years on, RHSC's multi award-winning allotment project has propagated a community of passionate volunteers who collectively enriched and inspired, and ultimately became the 'accidental pilot project' to an end that spreads much further. All of our zeal, determination, experience and goodwill has been poured, cast, moulded and sculpted into a registered charity formed and led by our committed team of knowledgeable and enthusiastic volunteers. Launching in September 2019, we now work in secondary

schools and colleges throughout Norfolk, establishing school allotments with the young people they will benefit; creating outdoor spaces for refuge and reflection, teaching practical skills and encouraging connection with the natural world, building a sense of community through shared responsibility, and promoting sustainable living and environmental awareness. By working to deliver this educational balance, the lone birch has matured into a successful and ever-expanding woodland, rich in diversity, co-operation, resilience and sustainability, that we have called The Papillon Project

The Papillon Project: Why 'Butterfly'?

On top of being essential pollinators and a sign of a healthy and balanced ecosystem, butterflies represent our three core values at The Papillon Project:

Transformation – Just like the metamorphosis of the humble caterpillar into a noble butterfly, we transform areas of school grounds, often obsolete and unloved, into integral spaces within the school, and wider, community.

Escapism – Inspired by Henri Charrière's autobiography *Papillon*, arguably one of the greatest stories of a quest for freedom ever told, we see a school allotment as a space for mindfulness, reflection and restoration.

Inspiration – We firmly believe that little acts can have big impacts. Our allotments, which we design and create with young people, their teachers and local volunteers, also serve to inspire,

in ripples and waves, all those involved. Our extended allotment support network is named The Butterfly Effect.

I see a school allotment as a learning facility just as important as a drama studio, science lab, or sports hall. As founder of The Papillon Project, it is my ambition to prove that natural, outdoor spaces for non-linear learning are as vital in secondary schools and sixth form colleges as becoming literate and numerate. This balance must be struck, and it must be lasting; with heavy emphasis on sustainability, my response to this need was to develop 'permaplots': school allotments that are 'permanent places of inspirational learning'.

Re-balancing Education

Nature, when humans don't interfere, is perfectly balanced; it knows what do, and has had millions of years to perfect it. Human beings need balance in their lives, more so now than ever before, not just for their own sustainability, but for a better, more environmentally friendly world. I believe that if schools committed to prioritising heuristic, outdoor learning to the extent that they do linear, then children would be happier, and far more productive and successful. It is ever more critical that children and young people experience a more balanced schooling, and one that allows golden opportunities for our future generations to realise sustainable living, to reconnect with Nature, and to be inspired to do so through awareness and understanding. There

are far too many straight lines in our education system; we must create spaces in school where direction is not strictly linear. A school allotment is an active learning process: that a raised bed or a line of sowed seeds might be on the wonk should be welcomed, encouraged and celebrated! After all, in Nature there are no straight lines.

I invited two former students of mine, Lilly and George, who have both dedicated a great amount of time and energy to the charity, to express how having an allotment at school has enriched their learning experience ...



sustainability and greater environmental awareness

by Lilly Dollman

I started volunteering at RHSC's allotment project three years ago and had the privilege of running the project during my third year. I took away many things from the experience; working with a variety of people, that communication and organisation are key, but also the importance of young people being environmentally aware. The Papillon Project caters for all young environmentalists – growing food sustainably, allowing young people to work outdoors and get 'stuck in', and teaching them about environmental science (topics such as companion planting). All of these areas allow young people to get a taster of working for the protection of the environment, which is arguably the most important topic of our generation. If young people are not taught about the environment as part of their education, then I think it is

fair to say that exposure through other forms such as social media will not provide the in-depth, comprehensive information about the environment that we are in desperate need of.

The project is so much more than a few children planting food; it is about the next generation picking up skills and knowledge that they will inevitably need to use. In a world that is completely dictated by labels and brands, we show that using second-hand products and choosing more sustainable ways of living is the way forward. Sure, we don't expect every child to go home and beg their parents to find them an old toilet to grow sunflowers in, but we hope that we inspire them to look at the world differently, and that the word 'waste' slowly disappears from their vocabulary.

Lilly (far left) and fellow students mulching the raised beds





George (far left) helping young students with daily jobs



Art at Reephall Allotment, the first of many school gardens

improving mental health

by George Bates

Fear is not a feeling usually discussed in such an optimistic publication. But since the rise of COVID-19 in the UK, this raw emotion has tried to infect our mindsets over the course of this tumultuous year. As we now linger in the shadow of the virus with the 'New Normal', the importance of developing resilience and improving mental health is now absolutely vital for everyone, not least for those students who returned to education in September. The educational pressures facing students is no secret, and is deeply concerning; however, working with The Papillon Project throughout the pandemic, the improvement to students' mental health in creating productive, wildlife-friendly allotments has been astounding. Students who were once shy and silent have flourished, actively engaging as a team through thoughtful environmental discussion along with the teaching and practising of permaculture techniques. Smiles were infectious and a passion for growth and self-development was instilled amongst all staff and students as they developed their plots. This significance was made apparent during the lockdown, as staff regularly used these allotments as outdoor classrooms to teach vulnerable students and the children of key workers. Students valued the green space, relaxing, socialising and being close to Nature. If COVID-19 has taught us anything, it is the undeniably beneficial relationship between permaculture and mindfulness; if we are to give students the best chance of an academic, mindful and sustainable education, then every educational institution should have an allotment.

Lilly Dolman is a former student and lead of the multi-award winning 'Allotment Project' at Reephall High School & College (2019-20), a Norwich & Norfolk Eco-Hero Award Finalist, a former Trustee of The Papillon Project and is currently 'Education and Outreach Officer' for the Hawk and Owl Trust at Sculthorpe Moor Community Nature Reserve in Norfolk. Lilly is looking forward to studying Sustainability and Environmental Management at the University of Leeds in September 2021.

George Bates is the Lead Researcher and Librarian of The Papillon Project and is now starting his BSc Wildlife Conservation with a Year in Professional Practice; a four-year course at Kent University, Canterbury.

Matt Willer is the School Projects Lead and Founder of The Papillon Project, as well as winner of the RHS's School Gardening Champion of the Year (2018) and Norwich & Norfolk Eco Hero (2019).

The Papillon Project is an educational charity (number: 1189383) and works with over twenty secondary school in Norfolk in the East of England. www.thepapillonproject.com

In August 2021, Matt is walking 46 miles (74km) barefooted to raise awareness about the need to educate young people about how growing food locally will definitely help to reduce our carbon footprint (and so we must tread carefully). He is hoping to raise £10,000 for the charity to continue their work in schools and colleges. www.justgiving.com/fundraising/papillonprojectcharitywalk