



ABBOT'S MILL PROJECT

Promoting environmental sustainability and social justice in Canterbury and beyond.

A Discussion Paper in association with Abbot's Mill Project

Jo Kidd

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ABBOT'S MILL PROJECT

A BEACON OF SUSTAINABILITY



www.abbotsmillproject.co.uk



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SUMMARY

The mission of the Abbot's Mill Project is to develop an urban hub of sustainability and social justice, powered solely by non-centralised, renewable energy, principally through re-instating a water wheel into the old mill race on the site of the former Abbot's Mill (the seven-storey mill that once stood on St Radigund's Street in the heart of the historic city of Canterbury in Kent).

The new centre will be designed to be accessible to the whole community. We aim to involve and attract people who would not otherwise be involved in (or perhaps spend too much time thinking about) sustainability and social justice, as well as people who are already keen enthusiasts and want to learn more.

Education will be the focus of the centre. We will organise tours, courses and workshops for the general public, tourists, schools, environmentalists and local groups. Our education programme will be inclusive and accessible for people of all abilities. We will also develop personalised training courses, work placements and apprenticeships (as well as employment and supported employment) for people disadvantaged in the labour market, including people with learning difficulties.

As a social and community enterprise and Community Interest Company it is our aim to work in partnership with local residents and community groups. We want to ensure that local people and business are involved and taking a lead. We will employ people from within the local community (i.e. Canterbury) wherever we can. We also aim to use local (within Kent) contractors and suppliers wherever possible throughout the build and once the project is up and running.

1. INTRODUCTION

A recent example of community education

For the past three years we have been working in partnership with the United Nations Association (UNA) Canterbury branch and Christ Church University to co-organise and deliver an event for UN Mother Earth Day in Canterbury each April.

In 2014, as in previous years, the day took the form of a conference, which was divided into two parts – the ‘think global’ section in the morning and the ‘act local’ section in the afternoon. The Abbot’s Mill Project was responsible for the latter. Our working title for this year’s conference was ‘Planet versus Profit: Is Economic Growth compatible with Sustainable Development?’

For our afternoon contribution to the day, we decided to coordinate a discussion using the World Café format.



If you found the only world in which all your descendants could live and you got to run it all, how would you treat it?

For those of you who would like reminding, more information about World Café can be found here: <http://www.theworldcafe.com/method.html>

In brief, the approach aims to replicate discussions that take place informally in cafes around the world, seeing the world itself as a café where citizens often have informal conversations which have led to social movements and big changes.

In this way we are able to shape our future through conversations that matter and which link and build on each other as people move between groups, cross-pollinate ideas, and discover new insights into the questions or issues that are most important in their life, work, or community.

The approach embeds several 'rules' or 'an etiquette':

- Focus on what matters
- Contribute your thinking
- Speak your mind and heart
- Listen to understand
- Link and connect ideas
- Listen together for insights and deeper questions
- Note key ideas and draw out connections
- Play, doodle, draw – writing on the table cloths is encouraged
- Have fun!

Participants at the day came from a range of backgrounds, but the event principally attracted academics, students, local authority members and officers, staff and trustees from civil society organisations and other local environmental and community activists. Around one hundred people generally attend such events and approximately fifty of those stay for the afternoon session on 'act local'. Usually such events do not attract people from disadvantaged groups, including people with learning difficulties.

We have always sought to ensure that the afternoon section of the day is as inclusive and accessible as possible. So this year we took this one step further. My colleague Ann-Marie Lillis (who is a self-advocate leader,

experienced trainer and also trainee manager of the Pulse Café) and I co-facilitated the World Café session.

We based our session around three open (and positive) questions and a call to action:

1. What encourages us to act locally to improve our natural environment and live more sustainably? How can we build on and increase these motivators?
2. How have things improved in Canterbury since our last Earth Day?
3. Each person or organisation to commit to three key actions and report back on progress next year. The intention here was to build on the action plan started by Canterbury for the Environment (C4E), which is the umbrella/networking body for all organisations/groups with aims around promoting sustainability in the Canterbury District.

Our aim was to facilitate a useful discussion and produce a shared action plan, whilst at the same time clearly demonstrating to people (who are generally not involved in working with people with learning difficulties) that people with learning difficulties can, and do, fulfil leadership roles and should be valued as equal citizens.

Feedback from the session was extremely positive. The majority of people said that they enjoyed the friendly, relaxed atmosphere. Others commented that 'focus group' type meetings are usually something to dread but that they really enjoyed this one. One local authority manager said that the day was brilliant and she really enjoyed hearing opinions from a diverse group of people in a non-threatening, non-confrontational way.

People responded very well to Ann-Marie's co-leading the session and clearly respected her knowledge and experience. Participants quickly made the connection between environmental sustainability and social justice due to the accessible and inclusive way in which the session was run. Ann-Marie's leadership added a huge amount of value to the session through ensuring that barriers were broken down and people were able to feel relaxed to ask questions and give honest views.

The outcomes of the session were very positive – the different type of power dynamic established through co-facilitation enabled and encouraged people to be more inclined towards collaborating, negotiating and developing shared solutions.

Examples of actions include:

- A university sustainability officer offered to research and feedback on low carbon businesses in the district and how they are being promoted.
- A city council officer offered to find out how the city council and the county council are measuring their carbon footprints and whether there are any mechanisms to extend the data collection outside of the authorities' own estates.
- The same city council officer will also look into how local residents could be more engaged/informed about how to reduce their carbon/ecological footprints.
- One county council officer pledged not to use his car for journeys under three miles.
- One local Green Party member pledged to become vegan for at least one day/week.
- The local Greenpeace group will be hosting an annual pop-up sustainability event every year.
- One computer scientist offered his skills for free for environmental projects.
- The Canterbury Society agreed to join Canterbury for the Environment (C4E) in order to take forwards the campaign for a green belt around the city.
- We set up a Facebook page specific to the annual event so that people could update each other on actions.
- A few people agreed to meet to discuss setting up a local affordable, eco-housing co-operative.

Discussions were fluid and the short feedback sessions were organic and much more participatory and rich than is often the case with feedback sessions. People were much less inclined to compete for space to talk and much more inclined to listen deeply together, challenge kindly and build layers of information with which to plan in partnership in response to our open questions. Overall, it was a thoroughly enjoyable experience, and one which the vast majority of participants found beneficial both in terms of the range of ideas and actions generated and in terms of deepening their own practice.

We feel that our experience of co-facilitating a session for a mixed group of people not working in the field of care and support or learning difficulty/disability demonstrated that it is not only possible to mix up the silos of various interest groups and policy areas but it is also extremely useful to

demonstrate that the apparent silos actually contain myriad cross-cutting ties. This type of approach challenges assumptions by turning power relations on their head and can have wider implications and far reaching consequences in terms of breaking down barriers between people with learning difficulties (or any disadvantaged group of people) and other members of society – providing the latter with real life examples of people with learning difficulties having something really important to say about global issues that, after-all, affect us all. In this way people with learning difficulties are regarded as leaders, role models and teachers and can be seen as setting positive examples to others to follow.

“If you found the only world in which all your descendants could live and you got to run it all – how would you treat it?”



2. BACKGROUND

Imagine a world where we all live in harmony with our natural environment, with non-human animals and with each other. Imagine that we all truly appreciate that everything is connected and that all of our actions have repercussions.

This is the vision of the Abbot's Mill Project. My husband, Terry Thompson, and I share this vision and wanted to develop a project through which this could be expressed. But our aim was not to preach to the converted. So we decided to develop an educational project in the middle of Canterbury, rather than in the depths of the Kent countryside.

Non-centralised, renewable, micro-generation

We always had a strong belief that non-centralised renewable energy (as well as much improved energy efficiency and a reduction in consumption) could be, and should be, the solution to our energy crisis.

So having looked at various empty shops and other buildings in the city, we finally decided to focus on a site from which we could generate clean, green energy, not only from the sun but also from the water. River power is a resource that is seriously under-estimated when it comes to energy-generation, especially in the non-mountainous south.

The Environment Agency has identified over 26,000 former mill sites in England, which could yield a minimum of 5% of our gross demand for electricity. This could easily be increased to 15% with the introduction of new carefully planned and more efficient, micro generation sites.

In July 2010, after a couple of years of research and planning, we established the Abbot's Mill Project, as a social enterprise.

The mission of the Abbot's Mill Project is to develop an urban hub of sustainability and social justice, powered solely by non-centralised, renewable energy, principally through re-instating a water wheel into the old mill race on the site of the former Abbot's Mill (the seven-storey mill that once stood on St Radigund's Street). Hence, the name!

The hub will include an education and research centre about sustainable and compassionate living, social justice, renewable energy and the importance of the River Stour in Canterbury's past, present and future, a vegan community café and a woodland/wildlife garden based on permaculture principles.

The centre will provide a platform for cutting-edge environmental science and newly emerging sustainable technologies from across the UK.

The project will focus on providing positive examples, stimulating ideas, promoting education, generating research, raising awareness and sharing skills and knowledge. It will be a peaceful, welcoming and accessible place for all.



3. PROGRESS

We have built up a huge amount of momentum over the past four years. So far, amongst other things, we have:

- Cleared and cleaned up the site and improved it for biodiversity.
- Launched our community education programme and started work on piloting a pre-school education programme and school-aged young people programme.
- Provided placements for 9 research interns and we are now working with Cardiff University to do the flow-modelling for the waterwheel application.

We also have in-kind support from the three main universities in Canterbury, the City Council, Canterbury City Partnership, local schools and businesses and various local community organisations and wildlife and conservation groups. We are currently working on finalising our planning application for the waterwheel following English Heritage and the Environment Agency finally approving our designs. We are very excited about the project and have been overwhelmed by the amount of support and enthusiasm for the idea from others too.

Our project is distinctive because:

1. It is urban. Most projects of a similar nature are in remote, rural settings and certainly not in the centre of a city.
2. It is aimed at positively encouraging and supporting people of all backgrounds to reduce their ecological footprint, by offering advice and information about alternative lifestyles. We believe that this approach is more effective than nagging people or making them feel guilty about their current lifestyles.
3. It focuses on the importance of the river and neatly links the past, present and future so that we can learn in time to benefit future generations.
4. It focuses on the human impact on our environment and respect for, and interaction between all species.



4. NEXT STEPS

The Abbot's Mill Project invites you to:

- Imagine a world where all humans are valued as equal citizens and not just economically productive units.
- Imagine a world where humans accept that non-human animals feel pain, loss, grief and happiness and love, in the same way as human animals.
- Imagine a world where kindness and non-violence are valued more highly than power and force; where consumption and economic growth are not the be-all-and-end-all but where people live sustainably, living within our environmental limits and treating the Earth as if we intend to stay!



If you are interested in what we are doing and/or would like to get involved you can email me at: jo.kidd@abbotsmillproject.co.uk

Or visit our website: www.abbotsmillproject.co.uk

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jo Kidd has been a keen community activist and organiser for over 25 years, campaigning for fairer, more equal, more compassionate and sustainable communities. Her academic background is in social anthropology, political science and inclusive education.

Jo co-founded Skillnet Group Community Interest Company in 2001 and was its founding CEO until May 2013. Skillnet Group is a social enterprise that supports people with and without learning disabilities to work together to make differences and build connections within communities. Jo co-established Canterbury Alliance for Sustainable Transport and has also set up the Canterbury Vegans and Kent Vegan Parenting groups. She has recently been involved in establishing a low impact, affordable housing co-operative called Kent Low Impact Partners.

Jo is working as a freelance consultant, mainly in the areas of social justice, equality and sustainability; including social care and support, learning difficulty/disability and human rights focusing on co-production, personalisation, person-centred approaches and self-advocacy development. Jo sits on the Editorial Board of the Tizard Learning Disability Review and the board of the Centre for Inclusive Futures and is a fellow of The Centre for Welfare Reform.

Jo is currently the Chair of Funding For All and is involved on the boards of several other local civil society organisations. She and her husband own and co-manage an ancient woodland near Canterbury, using traditional coppicing methods. Jo, Terry and their daughter Rosa live in Canterbury (and sometimes in their caravan in the woods!).

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To find out more visit: www.abbotsmillproject.co.uk

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