

The Lions' Gate Permaculture Garden



Callum Egan explains how his academic community transformed The Lions' Gate at Napier University, Edinburgh, into a series of permaculture gardens to create a healthier, nature-focused form of educational workplace

It's early August in 2023 and I'm sitting on a bench at a rustic table on the staging area of The Lions' Gate Garden at Edinburgh Napier University. I've just returned from two weeks annual leave and the garden is looking wild. Behind me the chill-out area of the library looks out onto the garden. Therein we have a bookshelf stocked with texts to inspire the university's green revolution. Ahead, to my left is The Lions' Gate itself – an arched entrance way, flanked atop by two ferocious stone lions, dating from the 16th century when John Napier (the inventor of logarithms) resided in the tower that sits amidst the brutalism of this 1960s-built campus. This zone of the garden is a courtyard; it's the same shape as the Bauhaus. The gate provides an interface to the public and makes it easier to receive frequent heavy deliveries.

It's an overcast day. There's a gentle south-westerly breeze. Cars hiss by on the road the other side of the high wall opposite. The plants look a little tired after the ravages of record-breaking temperatures in June, and the rains of July. There are pigeon feathers scattered all around. In front of me is a green social area, where we can accommodate 50-60 guests at events and which provides a lush view for library goers. The grass needs a trim, but it's left to its own devices around the edges and the legs of chunky benches. A mature rowan tree is heavy with fruit, as are the local apple cultivars – one has snapped with the weight! When I entered the garden half an hour ago, litter had blown in from the council bin situated on the pavement outside – there's always a little litter to pick up. Further to my left the gold gravel path winds past a bath that volunteers and I have turned into a pond with water forget-me-nots and lilies inside and surrounded by iris, bedstraw, thistle, cinquefoil and a host of other pond edge plants. In my holiday absence the coltsfoot is staking a claim. Moving down the path, tarragon, mint, feverfew, nettle, lavender, strawberries, alliums, St John's Wort and a myriad of other edibles and medicinals line the edges

– they all need a little TLC. A quince sprawls beside the steps down from the gate. Tonne bags of golden gravel command the space in front of the three-bin composter which lines the wall beneath the boughs of our 120-year-old climax sycamore tree. At the base of the tree, fashioned around its trunk are two mighty oak benches expertly crafted by Neil Fyffe. Beyond the sycamore, indigenous grasses, ferns, honeysuckle, clematis, peas, kale and wildflowers engulf the hazel-rodded geodesic dome we built as both a place to bide, and to experiment with digital experiences in a green covered space. Throughout the garden there are power and data feeds to electrically enable the spaces, and two water taps 20 metres apart.

To my right, arising from upcycled oak timber legs, a six-foot-high memorial storytelling chair has been swamped by an enormous buddleia. The chair is dedicated to Professor David Benyon who helped set The Lions' Gate up but sadly passed in late 2018. We like to invite environmentally concerned raconteurs to share their thoughts from here: Graham Bell and Tim Ingold have both held court.

Tunnel of Abundance

Following the path, around to the right is the mini food forest we planted after using it in baskets, to demonstrate an augmented reality food forest garden at Scotland's Garden Festival in 2017. All the plants came from Graham and Nancy Bell's Garden Cottage. The medlar is doing particularly well, as are the lovage, meadowsweet, golden rod, apples and walnut. In years to come it will form a tunnel of abundance, leading to the green-roofed shed with water-harvesting system, and our nearly complete outdoor classroom.

This approximately 300 square foot space, is an intimate haven midst the urban expanse, designed to soothe, educate and surprise.



All photos, unless otherwise stated, © Callum Egan

I've taken myself round to the kitchen part of the garden, on the other side of the library, situated beneath a seven-story concrete tower of classrooms and offices, hemmed in, on all sides. I'm sat at a bench and table in the allotment area. In front of me a brick library building with one thin window and a desk and seat positioned sympathetically inside. To my right an imposing Stalinist fire escape, crying out for an imaginative intervention; to my left the back door of the kitchens, maybe 20 food metres away. Here we've erected a polytunnel. This morning I could barely get in as runaway nasturtiums had claimed the doorway. Inside we have power and data feeds and are growing spinach, tomatoes, celery, rocket, radishes, sunflowers and potatoes. We have a dwarf peach tree that always seems to fruit. We store a pizza oven and tea urn in here and with students are developing a sensor system to control and monitor the growing conditions.

Surrounding me are 15 raised timber beds. This season, overflowing with five varieties of potato. We're also growing beetroot, carrots, coriander, raspberries, onions, garlic, and a multitude of herbs. There is a tyre stack of rhubarb and another one with a huge flowering sage. A one metre square bed is dedicated to exploring the layers of a food forest in miniature. Some of the other beds have fruit trees in their

Academic Community

Looking back to the beginnings of this permaculture-inspired techno gardens (lab)itat, I see I was lucky to have sympathetic gate-keepers in the School of Computing, Engineering and Built Environment who supported its aims academically (what might regenerative computing look like?); and in Properties and Facilities who provided funding to get it off the ground – the Director of Estates at the time had been involved in a hospital greening project and knew the benefits that green urban spaces have on health and wellbeing.

A great many people have contributed to this unrelenting vision of a healthier, nature-focused form of educational workplace. Hundreds of student projects have wrestled with what happens to design when you put permaculture in the centre of your thinking. Colleagues have volunteered their time to maintain the spaces and help at events, and volunteers from the local community and beyond have provided much needed support throughout: most recently a Ukrainian refugee, housed on a ship docked at the Port of Leith, and a colleague's nine visiting horticultural students from Tamil Nadu. Such are the unexpected things that happen here.

The Permaculture Association has been there from the get-go. I met with Andy Goldring on a wet November evening in



Photo © Andrew Waterhouse



centre with various climbers. To my right, there's a tool shed with water-harvesting, and ahead, under the library wall we've re-wilded a previously miserable strip of land, with indigenous seed packs and trees from the Woodland Trust. There are also two composters made from pallets, a water tap and a small creek-shaped pond.

What's been delightful this past year is that the derelict spaces we took over five years ago are now showing signs of considerable biodiversity. Insects abound, birds swoop by, butterflies frolic. A few months ago, a blue-tailed damselfly attached itself to a student's smock; edible and medicinal plants left to seed have self-propagated and pop-up in pavement cracks and annual beds.

Last week the garden was awarded a 'thriving' certificate by Keep Scotland Beautiful.

Deacon Brodies pub on Edinburgh's Hight Street in late 2015 and from there the well has sprung. Graham Bell was the thread that ran through the whole thing. I did my PDC with him after 20 years of applying the wisdoms gleaned from his *Permaculture Garden* book purchased in the mid-1990s on the advice of an old friend who'd learned of permaculture from a stall at Glastonbury Festival. I've always felt that Graham's view stretched back through time to the heart of this Isle's many practical, poetic dissenters, to struggle, romance, ingenuity and wonder.

In research terms the Computing within Limits community have been invaluable comrades and a source of strength when the going gets tough.

Trying to bring people from all walks of life together, we've run public engagement events. In 2021 Hasten Slowly



ABOVE Kitchen allotment



LEFT TO RIGHT

Climate Fringe Open Day Event

Student volunteer Leeloo Moreau after filling the green roof

Planting an orchard at Craiglockhart Campus

and last year an Open Day as part of Climate Fringe and My Big Green Community – both well attended and received, involving talks, campus grown food and drink, live music, DJs, student exhibits, holistic therapy, garden tours and just hanging out together on the same raft.

I'm running a workshop at CILIP Scotland's Green Libraries Gathering, and in collaboration with the Permaculture Education Working Group, we're developing permaculture as a higher education subject. Last September I was at the Educator's Gathering to garner ideas for a permaculture module. In wintertime the university's Interaction Design Group are seeking to create digital installations to brighten the garden spaces over the dark months. Somehow I hope to find time to do my Permaculture Design Diploma.

More on community gardens:

'The Mandala Community Forest Garden' (PM118)

'The Unstoppable Transition Town!' (PM117)



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