

Community Trees Handbook

Case Study 3: “Wyke Beck Valley Pride” in Leeds – *in which many groups come together to create a shared sense of place along a little stream through the city*

John Kilner has good field observation skills, honed during his time out and about in the urban environment of Leeds. So he was able to identify at once the small burnt patch on the playing field as the remains of a wheelie bin – you can tell by the pool of coloured plastic and the metal axle.

This is Halton Moor, a very deprived area on the east side of Leeds, which falls in the valley of the Wyke Beck. This little stream is barely noticed as it threads its way from Roundhay Park down to the Aire Valley (see map), yet it now has a string of projects along it, places where people and nature can meet.

The **Wyke Beck Valley Pride** is a “three year partnership project to give local communities better access, more information and opportunities for involvement in the life of the Valley as well as improved environmental quality for people and wildlife”. John is the full-time Co-ordinator.



This project is well funded and benefits from a strict geographical focus along the course of this unassuming stream.

“The £500,000 project is funded by Natural England through Access to Nature, as part of the Big Lottery Fund’s Changing Spaces programme, Leeds City Council and Green Leeds and is being run as a partnership between members of the community, the Wyke Beck Valley Community Forum, Leeds City Council, BTCV Leeds, Groundwork Leeds, Leeds Voice, and Leeds Ahead.”

John is keen to “get people to value and appreciate what is there”. Rather than bus children off to local beauty spots or nature reserves, he wants to reveal and improve the natural world on their doorstep. “People need to have an understanding of what is there and what is of value before they start caring”.

Certainly the playing fields of **Halton Moor** show the classic signs of municipal care in a hostile, even corrosive, urban environment. Park furniture is vandalised, another large burnt patch marks where a car was torched, the beck here is strewn with rubbish.

So John is trying to change perceptions of this environment from an anonymous and featureless cityscape into a living dynamic landscape offering opportunities for learning, working and playing. There are signs of bittern and bearded tit down in the Aire Valley and even otter and water vole here at Halton Moor.

John has recently been working with trees, thinning out some existing clumps of birch to allow the best feature trees to grow on. He has also had local children out planting dozens of new trees as part of their Duke of Edinburgh Award activities. This is planting by stealth - no shelters to attract attention, just some knee-high trees in a quiet corner left to fend for themselves. They also cleared up litter, laid a dead hedge and sowed some wild flowers. Trees will not solve the problems of this neighbourhood, but they are an essential part of any solution.



Half a mile up the beck is **Primrose Valley**, marked out from the urban sprawl by a distinctive gateway, designed by local children and made by local metalworkers. More gateways are planned as thresholds into this special valley.



This is new land – a skim of soil over an old landfill site. Again John has been busy with trees, this time planted by Leeds University Business School students as part of their Corporate Social Responsibility programme.

The park furniture here is, literally, bomb-proof. There is a stone sofa commemorating Jimi Heselden, Leeds millionaire, philanthropist and inventor of stone gabions, made by his company Hesco Bastion, of Camp Bastion fame.

Busy York Road is bounded by huge birch logs. Behind these lies the prairie of **Killingbeck Fields**. Primary school children have been planting trees along this edge, with help from some corporate volunteers. Fostering links between groups is all part of the local ecology.



Further on up the valley at the top end of the fields is a rare remnant of a former landscape – strip lynchets of neutral unimproved grassland, mown for hay and grazed by horses.

Here the beck is home to white-clawed crayfish and kingfishers too.



Up at **Arthur's Rein** the residents have long desired an orchard. The Wyke Beck project was a good opportunity to realise this idea. Standard fruit trees were planted by volunteers facilitated by the British Trust for Conservation Volunteers. They were to be followed by a group of women with English as a second language planting shrubs and bulbs. A further arts project will then piggyback on this work, firmly rooting it in the immediate community.



The beck can be followed up through **Wykebeck Woods** to Waterloo Lake in Roundhay Park. Sustrans have recently installed a surfaced path through the woods to complete a north-south cycleway across east Leeds which is already very popular. These woods are another remnant of ancient landscape where trees can grow old and the stream can meander as it wills.



Along this modest stream, some gems of wild life are being conserved and new places for wild life created. Popular involvement suggests people are noticing more of what is there, valuing it and caring from it.

Acknowledgement: Wykebeck Valley map from website

Websites

Wyke Beck Valley Pride

<http://wykebeckvalleypride.org.uk/>

