



## Annual report 2020-21

Reporting on the activities and community benefit of Canalside Community Food

### Canalside vision and mission statement

Canalside Community Food is a community supported agriculture (CSA) scheme. Canalside believes that communities should begin to take control of their own food production and to take responsibility for producing it in an environmentally beneficial way. We do this by providing our community with local, seasonal and organic food through our formally constituted Community Benefit Society (CBS – a type of community co-op) which is run by members for members. We hope that our members feel fully able to engage with the CBS to grow the food and enjoy the on-farm activities we organise and invite all our members to get involved. We also actively engage with other groups and communities who would like to produce food in a similar way.

### The View From the Field

#### Staffing changes all round

It's been a big year of change for Canalside as head grower Dom Van Marsh left for pastures new in mid-December 2020, and our second most experienced grower Lena Sucker went on maternity leave a couple of months later. Dom spent his final months here creating hand-over documents and planning the next season alongside assistant growers Lena Sucker and Stephen Hayward.

From the Autumn onwards, Eleanor Brown, previously a casual worker, joined the team more fully to ensure the harvest continued in the midst of all the change and then to cover Lena's maternity leave. A new head grower was sought but no one suitable applied who had any more experience than the existing assistant growers. In January we decided to approach the year in a different way - we liked the idea of a more collaborative approach, that would involve training and time invested in the staff team and

would allow several people to share responsibility for the farm rather than it resting on the shoulders of one lead grower. In doing this we hoped to create a more sustainable staff team. In retrospect this was an over-enthusiastic vision to achieve in just one season! The daily workload to provide three harvests a week is enough to consume the time in the week, with everyone involved being new to their role on top of that.



*The grower team starting off 2021 at Canalside  
L-R Eleanor, Lena, Stephen*

As Lena left, we welcomed Josh Smith and Helga Weirather to join Eleanor and Stephen for the summer season (April-October). Josh has worked mostly to support the harvest days, whilst Helga was replacing our usual ad-hoc summer casual workers. Existing volunteer workshares stepped up: Magali Fowler to run the Saturday work

mornings and Nikki Cooper to provide a lot of extra casual labour and staff cover. Many thanks to the whole staff team for their hard work this season.

## Challenging weather to start the season

After a very productive start to the year, re-organising and tidying up the farm and beginning staff training, a cold wet winter turned into a cold but dry spring. This was the complete opposite to last year which was a record-breaking warm and sunny time. Instead, this year we had the coldest spring in the best part of a century with continuous night frosts and little to no rain which created a particularly tricky situation for the growers. Our irrigation systems rely on using timers which need to be run through the evening – something you can't do when there are freezing conditions overnight as the water has to be switched off to protect the system.



*Irrigating to be able to cultivate in April*

This, alongside the cold weather, gave a slow start to the season and propagation was a real issue. May brought some much-needed sunshine and showers, but it felt like both we and the crops were a month behind which had a knock-on effect in various ways: poor germination, later planting dates and propagation space issues all culminating in a stressful push to meet our final deadline of getting most plants in the ground by the end of July to give them enough time to grow before winter. For much of the rest of spring and into summer the weather oscillated between downpours and droughts which has kept us busy with irrigation. All of this has stretched the team to capacity and made managing the farm a challenge, especially as we learned on the job. With so many changes one would have hoped for a gentler season weather-wise but such is the life of a grower and this year was certainly an initiation.

## Community spirit soaring

However, all is not doom and gloom! With these

challenges we've also felt community spirit soar.



*Wednesday work morning volunteers in action*

Work mornings have continued to be a highlight of the week and an integral part of the farm, crucial to getting larger jobs done. Several volunteer workshares and members have also stepped up, wanting to learn more about the farm, contributing as casual labourers or helping out wherever needed. The Friends of the Orchard group was also revived this year, where volunteers have tended the orchard, relieving some of the extra pressure from the staff team.



*First seed sowing of the year*

Whether you are a regular volunteer that came every week or if you came for the first time to an extra volunteer session or helped with many of the unseen tasks at Canalside, it has been deeply appreciated. We are also indebted to many



members who have supported, encouraged and inspired us in so many ways.

### What about the produce?



*Grid of summer abundance*

And let us not forget the vegetables! Our focus has been on maintaining the share and following the plan that Dom set in place as much as was possible in spite of what felt like a very delayed season. We thought that planting some crops later than usual would mean they would produce later into the season but in fact they seemed to produce similar quantities and ended at a 'normal' time.



*Bringing in the abundant onion harvest for curing ready for storage through the winter*

We've had successful onion and garlic crops that

will be stored for winter, and the potatoes have been good so far. Because of the late season our early potatoes in the field produced about twice as much as a normal year. Fingers crossed the main crops are bountiful too.

We've had some crop failures, as is usual - Hamburg parsley, turnips and some herbs went by the wayside, and some adaptations and simplifications were made - but all in all we are proud to have continued to provide a varied and abundant share week in week out. We remember looking at the bare fields in February and now we look across our full fields of crops that we've been harvesting for you and will continue to harvest throughout the autumn and winter, hopefully without too significant an impact from the challenges earlier in the year.



*High summer French bean harvest*

### Continuing the transition

We knew it would be a hard year but essentially we've done what we set out to do and seen the farm through this season, learning many lessons on the way. As Autumn approaches we'll be reviewing the year and making plans for how we move forward once Lena re-joins us this Winter. We are still in a transitional place as a team, needing time to work out what are the most sustainable ways forward, and will keep members posted as the picture becomes clear.

Eleanor Brown and Stephen Hayward, growers  
August 2021



## Education project -----

This has been an exceptional year for the education project as national lockdowns for several months at a time (with significant restrictions and limitations at other times) have

meant no schools have been in touch to arrange educational visits to the farm.

Ali Jeffery, August 2021

## The Willows Project -----

Another year has passed and all is going well for us at the Willows Project. We have a great team of 8 workers with wide ranging skills and attributes. For anyone who doesn't know, we are located on the edge of the social area, to the left of the pole barn, just past the caravans and through the gap in the willow hedge. Feel free to have a look round anytime when we are not running sessions.

**"I like the Willows. I like doing all the weeding and cutting back the hedges.**

**Wednesday Farm Experience Day participant**



*Seed sowing to help the Canalside growers*

After particularly challenging times last year we welcomed back our regular participants, from the Wednesday Farm Experience Days and Enterprise Fridays, both for adults with learning difficulties, for limited outdoor sessions as soon as government restrictions allowed. This was closely followed by resuming the full sessions. Parents, carers and participants were all very appreciative of our prompt return.

**"I like coming to the Willows, doing willow hearts, gardening and walking."**

**Enterprise Friday participant**



*A walk along the Grand Union canal*

We continue to sell our enterprise products in the veg collection space, in Gaia and CORE, as well as plants outside the pole barn and have been contributing to Magali's popular cut flowers this year.

**"It's been amazing and greatly changed the way I feel [...] and made me more responsible and less isolated... I wish I could always come to the Willows Project."**

**Grow To Grow participant**



*The Grow to Grow group, reflecting on the day*

We were able to deliver another 'Grow to Grow' project, funded by the National Lottery, for local vulnerable adults over 10 weeks from late March to early June this year, attracting people from Radford, Cubbington, Leamington, Warwick,

Kenilworth and Coventry.

**"It lifted me up and made me smile again. It encouraged me to talk to other people."**

### **Grow To Grow participant**

Between us we provided full days of nature-based activities, hearty lunches and transport, empowering and engaging them in a safe and supported environment.



*Bird box making success during Grow to Grow*

home educate their children have been using our space once a week to run their own activities. This has been a great success and we are pleased to have been able to accommodate them. We look forward to their return in September.

We will soon be taking down our polytunnel, at the request of National Grid because it is situated over a mains gas line which was installed in the 1960's.

The substation is in the corner by polytunnel no 5 and the pipe route is marked by large red and white posts as seen in Mill Field.



*Reflection and art in the quiet of Tallis Wood*

**"Calmer with strong emotions, more accepting of myself and my bi-polar."**

### **Grow To Grow participant**

During term times a few Canalside members who



*Making herb gardens during Grow to Grow*

Thank you to Canalside for access to the wider farm, to the Ingalls for the visits to Tallis wood and their amazing pond full of wildlife, and to Canalside members for your continued support.

The Willows Team, August 2021

Ness, Dave, Hayley, Celia, Ali, Paul, Mord, and Deb our new Friday volunteer

[thewillowsproject@gmail.com](mailto:thewillowsproject@gmail.com)

## **Socials**

With the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic, social events at Canalside have been more limited than usual. However, we have found some times and ways to gather, celebrate and eat together.

A key part of the social calendar over the past year has been Sumithra and Simon's fantastic pop-up takeaway/restaurant (depending on the restrictions in place) 'Chacma', which has been operating out of the field kitchen on Saturdays once or twice a month. There is always a delicious, South Indian, culinary offer and this is particularly popular with those ready to eat at the

end of the work morning. However, there have also been members who have made a visit to Chacma part of a family bike ride or a vegetarian's culinary highlight to the weekend!

Other highlights of the social calendar included:

- **the Potato Harvest in September** took place at a time of fewer restrictions and saw many members come to the farm to bring in a bumper crop – they brought in a 4.5 tonnes on the day: a fantastic achievement but the yield was so good,



that was only half the total!



*The potato harvest in progress*

- **the Beetroot Harvest in November** was a productive day, with nearly 1 metric tonne of beets put in the sand clamp. It was also an opportunity for an official goodbye to Dom and Nanda round the fire afterwards.



*Beet clamping for storage through the winter*



*Family onion planting*

- **Onion Planting in April** saw a sea of

volunteers hard at work spread out over the black plastic we plant through (to keep the weeds down and help reduce evaporation of water from the soil). Those who came enjoyed a tour of the fields with the growers after the work ended.



*Raffle prize - a lovely bunch of Magali's Flowers*

- **Ecofest in September** – our first publicity event since late 2019! With our long waiting list continuing, our main focus was on telling the public about the concept of CSA (Community Supported Agriculture) as a successful, local-scale model of farming. We held a successful raffle that raised £70 to go towards the new land purchase.

This year, due to uncertainty about how restrictions would ease in the summer, we were unable to plan a summer party. Instead we're holding a harvest festival, which will include a short AGM (which our rules require us to hold by the end of September), to allow us to celebrate the successes and hard work of the season. It will be on Saturday 25<sup>th</sup> September from 5pm, and we hope you can join us at the farm for it. Full details are in recent members' emails.

Ali Jeffery, August 2021

## Membership – April 2020-March 2021

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Our produce continues to be in high demand, with a waiting list that stood at around 50

households or more for most of the year, and at times nearer 60 households. This shows that in

spite of the challenges that households faced during 2020-21 as a result of the pandemic, there is still much demand for local, organic produce, and maybe even a heightened demand for it.

## 13 months

average wait for a trial share

As always, we were unable to take on new members in the early part of the year as we had high member numbers and could only take on new members as existing members moved out of the scheme. In July, when vegetable production approached its peak, we increased the number of produce members as we do annually now, and offered a trial to 12 households from the top of the waiting list who had been waiting as long as 15 months to have produce from us!

All those committed people who took a trial share between late July and September went on to subscribe for a regular share of the harvest on-going, apart from one household. The second half of the year was as quiet as the first few months for new subscribers – we always allow the number of subscribing share members to fall back naturally to the level we aim to be at for most of the year.

During the year, five new volunteer workshares filled vacancies created by existing regular volunteers moving on to other things. They were mainly drawn from the waiting list, offering an alternative way for those waiting for produce to get involved. These volunteers joined another 7

## 20

new subscribing households

who all make a weekly commitment to a work morning to help with all the seasonal tasks on the farm.

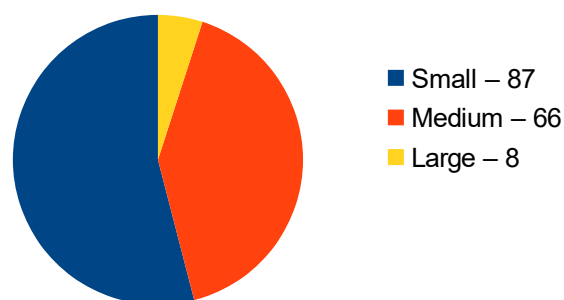
We ended the year with 156 produce share subscriptions feeding the members of approximately 180 households.

Our members include an amazing 9 households who joined the scheme before the first produce was ready for distribution, and a further 5 households who joined within the first year. It's incredible that 14 years from the first produce coming off the field, nearly 10% of those first members are still with us.

9 founder veg members still receiving produce

During the year, 25 subscribing households moved on from Canalside for a wide range of reasons, the most common being a house move to another area.

Share sizes in March 2021



The year was a busy one for new social members, with 20 new households joining to engage with work mornings and social events.

Ali Jeffery, August 2021

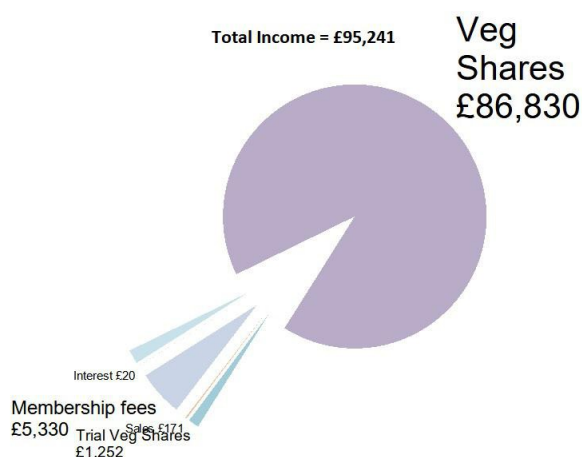
## Finances – April 2020-March 2021

We continued to regularly provide over 160 weekly vegetable and fruit shares to community members over the financial period. The steering committee has judged that this number of shares balances our need to run a sustainable business (with fair wages and prices) against our need to also make a surplus to re-invest in the business and the community we feel that the land and social space can provide for. All surpluses at the year end are transferred to reserves which are utilised to cover unexpected contingencies, for investment into horticultural production and to

develop the Society as a community asset.

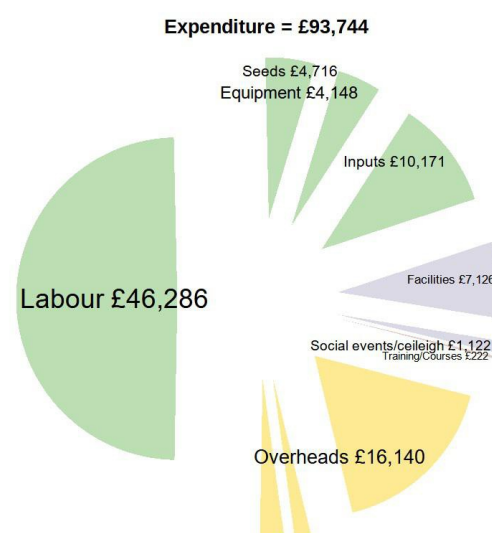
On a turnover of £88,253 and donations of £5,330 together we made a surplus of £1,500 (from our management accounts which are subject to adjustment by our accountants). In addition to this we carried over donations made for purchasing new land to the tune of £8,215 (so thanks to those who have donated). This will be spent when the sale goes through in the next month or so. We also paid 2% interest on our shares (as additional value in shares rather than

cash payments) in this year to the tune of £2,132 of which £804 was donated to the Willows and will be used to improve their facilities (an accessible compost toilet was constructed in this year). At the moment our total community shareholding is £107,297 and we are making provision to be able to start buying back shares should members want this in the present financial year.



We have also initiated a plan to purchase an extra two acres of land adjacent to our current holding which will cost us £25,000 for which we have committed £10,000 from our reserves and are looking to raise the balance from donations and sponsorship from our members. Apart from the anticipated increased areas of vegetable and fruit production, we are consulting with our community on how to utilise the land for community and environmental benefit. We are also looking at an investment plan which will improve the resilience of our vegetable growing and the growing team into the future which will include better water management on site and improved plant raising facilities.

Most of our income (see income pie chart) comes from vegetable and fruit shares. This regular monthly income ensures the sustainability of the farm and makes it possible to properly plan our expenditure, paying our growers a fair wage to produce and distribute the veg and fruit. Importantly it means we can invest money back into the business and keep the machinery, polytunnels and social space in good order (green slices on expenditure pie chart). It also allows us to administer the business and offer a full programme of volunteer workdays, events and other activities which we hope will return to normal as we emerge from the pandemic as well as allowing us to provide support to the Willows care farm based on the site (purple and yellow slices on pie chart)



For those interested in our legal co-operative accounts and returns they are presented at the AGM and are also available on our website. They are ultimately filed with the FCA.

Gareth Davies, September 2021

**Photo credits:** the Canalside staff team, Magali Fowler, the Willows team

For more photos of Canalside's activities go to <https://www.flickr.com/photos/126538300@N02/albums>