



Annual report 2023-24

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

Not an easy year to reflect on, but important to nonetheless! Whilst there have been seemingly endless challenges we've faced this year, and more ahead, it is important to celebrate that we are still alive and running as a business! The tide is against organisations like ours so we must keep swimming and we must celebrate that food has been grown and community is still here! So let's weave together a story of the season...



Members collecting their veg shares, June 2024

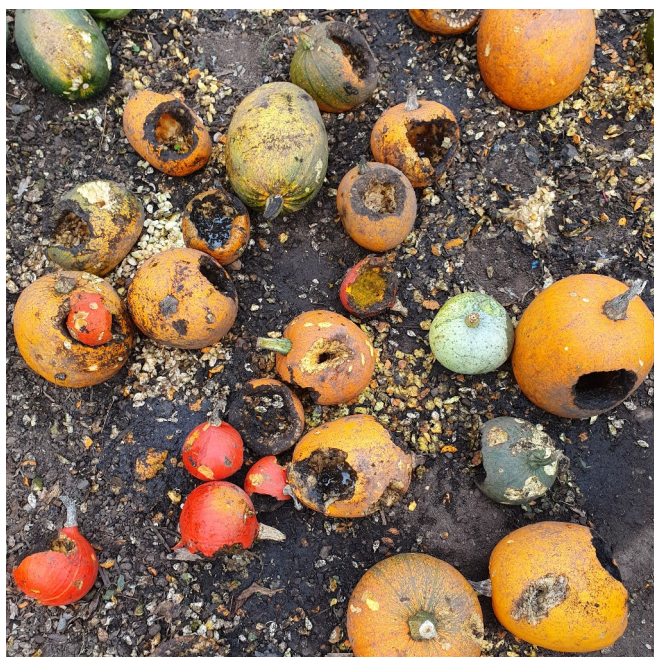
AUTUMN



Smiling faces for a wet and muddy beet harvest, November 2023

Travelling back to Autumn 2023 we entered our main crop harvesting season. It began with potatoes which amounted to just under 4 tonnes. A smaller harvest than usual and a result of an earlier-than-usual onset of blight caused by a very wet and drab summer '23. We brought our celeriacs in a little earlier due to some early frosts

and they fared better with a 700kg harvest compared to the 400kg the year before and beetroots fared similarly.



Overnight devastation, October 2023

The high from what is always an uplifting community morning, bringing in the squash harvest to cure in the tunnels, was followed by a crashing low as rodents demolished some of them literally over night. They took a particular liking to our Jack o' Lanterns so we were unable to share these out for Hallowe'en.



Harvesting apples, October 2023

All was not lost, we still had an excellent crop of our maincrop squash, 'Crown Prince', and a higher than ever apple harvest, yet later down the line we lost a hefty percentage of both these

due to rodent damage and inadequate storage facilities. It's been suggested that this UK wide increase in rats was possibly connected to the late wheat harvest because of wet weather conditions. We were able to get it under control but it came at the cost of some of our storage crops.

We also had a vastly smaller maincrop onion harvest due to conditions described in [last year's report](#). We still continued to have good sized shares throughout the autumn, supplemented by the many other rotation crops we grow in the fields and tunnels but we knew the harvesting gap in late spring/early summer 2024 would be pronounced.

Aside from these crop harvests the rest of the autumn was spent tending plants in the ground and planting up the tunnels ready for winter and early spring, planting the fields with over-wintering onions and garlands and beginning to clear the fields to let them rest a while...

WINTER

Despite some earlier frosts in the autumn, unrelenting rain set in for a warm winter and turned our fields to mush. The UK Met Office data (in April '24) showed that it had been the wettest 12 months in England on record (since they began in 1836). Much of the winter was spent slipping about in mud pulling heavily laden trolleys uphill and many a volunteer morning was spent harvesting carrots in a foot of mud, welly boots prised off our feet by it.

The rain made for a very frustrating time waiting for a decent window to get onto the fields. As winter progressed it became increasingly challenging and apparent it was not 'business as usual' this year. The plight of UK farming made it into mainstream news. Local arable farmers had only managed to plant about a tenth of what they normally do. In many ways we are lucky that as a CSA we farm such a variety of crops at a variety of times proving the relative resilience of this type of farming.

However in February we wrote to you to explain that the culminating issues meant that the harvesting gap would be significantly extended this year and we would be buying in supplementary veg to try and keep our members in what was already a challenging time with costs

rising everywhere and people leaving. It was extremely stressful and we didn't know if we'd actually have the support of our membership 'sharing the risks and rewards of farming' and whether our CSA model would stand up to these challenges. We knew that many other CSAs buy in veg, drop to more infrequent shares or even close for part of the year, but this was unprecedented in Canalside history. Whilst we knew that we do not live in a time when we are producing the only food you eat, it still weighed heavy. We knew first hand the amount of hard work that had gone into the past season not just from us but from many of our volunteers working in the fields each week, so for it to come to very little was devastating.

A huge amount of this autumn and winter was spent in extra meetings, wrestling with these issues, drawing up documents, applying for funding, problem solving and making plans. This was **all extra** as well as recruiting new staff and the rigorous process of Soil Association organic accreditation and alongside our usual day-to-day work. It was certainly not the winter we wanted where we could rest and replenish ready for the spring.

We know that some of you were upset with the decision to pause Saturday volunteer mornings and only run one regular volunteer session a week. We were saddened ourselves, but we hope there is understanding that something needed to give and that we were all working for the bigger picture of keeping this farm running at all. Our hope is for the farm to be flourishing again and space for everyone to be involved in the community as they wish.

And all the while, the field work continued. We filled up our hotbeds with chicken muck from Skye Orchard Eggs and they heated up nicely. As we wassailed our orchard the words of Bob Dylan rose into the air, 'come gather 'round people wherever you roam... for the times they are a changing...'

SPRING

The start of March brought a new member of our growing team. Dan Edwards joined us for the summer season and brought his enthusiasm and kindness. Our hotbeds started brimming with new life and hope and we got into the rhythm of distributing veg every other week. This freed up



Preparing beds in a polytunnel, March 2024

some time to get on with much needed farm tasks and we had a renewed sense of spirit, cleaning poly tunnels inside and out and fixing various nagging tasks.

Buying in veg was a learning process, and of course UK organic wholesalers had been affected by the same growing conditions we had. In some ways it was heartening to feel how good our own crops were, especially in how fresh they are literally harvested from the field to your plate in a day. Our shares felt very abundant during this time and a big spring glut of our own crops was heartening with chard, spinach, spring greens and salads in abundance.

And yet still the rain fell. Our ploughing was significantly delayed and made field work a frustrating waiting game. We did everything we could to plant up our tunnels up with spring and summer crops and tried new additions to our usual rotations by interplanting more inside to counter what we couldn't plant outside.

April brought our first consecutive dry days with sunshine and big winds which finally started to dry the fields out, but still with lots of fluctuations with frosts present all the way into May. There were still many downpours which interrupted the process of mowing and prepping the land for planting and put us well behind 'normal' schedule.

Once we could get onto the fields properly, the action kicked into another gear and the whirlwind began. We had to re-adjust our usual sowing plan

and schedules, and it was a real balancing act in juggling space and resources. Slowly but surely the fields filled up and as summer emerged it felt miraculous to look around the full fields again.



Spreading manure, May 2024

SUMMER

The floods and delays caused some clear casualties – we had barely any strawberries this year due to the patch being flooded, and the main crop onions took a hit yet again as we were not able to plant them in time to harvest in July as they were in the wettest part of the flooded field.

Also affected by this same section were our maincrop carrots. We knew other farms were re-drilling up to 4 times because of so much standing water which also brought more slugs to devour the freshly germinated plants. By the time we could drill them it was very late, and they germinated very poorly and have not survived.

There was a big shift in weather at the summer solstice when earlier in June we had nights as cold as 3 degrees: before long we were sweltering in 30 degree days and facing our usual challenges to irrigate all our fields quickly enough during drought periods with low water pressure. Some well timed downpours saved our crops on several occasions this summer and highlighted again that we must find a way to bring sustainable and off-grid systems to our farm to adapt to the changing weather patterns and preserve the ability to grow our own food.



Harvesting abundant cucumbers, July 2024

It felt heartening to transition into providing all our own veg again in June, though the lack of sunlight and warmth in spring meant a lighter and delayed share all round until it really hit its stride in August. The abundance finally arrived with gluts of tomatoes, courgettes, beans, salad and our largest ever harvests of cucumbers.

Summer set into the task of endless planting and weeding crops. We had planned to host WWOOFers this season but thanks to some government legislation that plan was thwarted. Instead we hosted various local business groups through WCAVA as we explored ways to increase our community benefit.



Tomatoes nearing peak production, late July 2024



Planting lettuces, August 2024

GRATITUDE

As usual we are extremely grateful to all our members who came to volunteer with the growing work this season. Whether you came once or showed up every week, whether your volunteering was seen or unseen, our sincere and heartfelt thanks. In such a challenging season us growers have been endlessly renewed by the enthusiasm of volunteers and special times working together and sitting around the fire sharing community spirit and many mugs of tea and soup cooked generously by Gill de Calvo. We are grateful for the committed support of Nikki Cooper and Craig Barnes for stepping into casual work when needed and to every member who supported us along the way – you make this all worthwhile.

And so we approach the coming Autumn again and changes are, yet again, on the horizon...

...one of which I must mention is that Stephen Hayward is stepping back from the growing team. Born and bred in Leamington, after working in plant nurseries and allotments, Stephen became a produce member in 2016 which developed into regularly volunteering and casual work until taking over as assistant in 2018. When our head grower Dom left in 2020 and no other suitable candidate was found (with Lena on maternity leave), Stephen stepped forward to lead Canalside through this difficult transition. He has given his body and soul to this farm over the past

4 years and worked enormously hard to bring positive change so we thank him so much for his dedication and sacrifice that has carried our team through these years of immense challenge. He will be very missed but it's now time for him to focus on his own well-being and projects with which we support him wholeheartedly!



Stephen Hayward – outgoing grower

As a community we face lots of important decisions as to how we move forward and preserve our farm, including with our growing team, which will take time and we will keep you updated when we have information to give.

For now we keep on chipping away. In amongst the big picture questions, so much of our work is in the minutiae; the daily, weekly and seasonal routines. Of planting, weeding and cropping. Of making then clearing beds. Of covering then removing crop covers, of digging in ground covers then digging them out again, of setting up support for plants to grow against and packing them away. Of cutting back only for it all to grow again. It is unglamorous and monotonous work. Yet a commitment to these mundane rituals that connect together to create the miracle of food. This growing and eating seasonally that keeps us a little more aligned in an increasingly disconnected world.

Thanks for being part of it with us!

Eleanor Brown, on behalf of the growers
August 2024

The Willows Project -----



Participants picking calendula flowers for drying

For those who don't know us: we provide nature-based activities to adults who have special educational needs or are vulnerable or excluded, using a care farm model. We are lucky to be sited at Canalside behind the polytunnels.

After many years of dedicated work on the project, Ness has stepped back from running sessions, but continues as a director. We welcome to the team Magali and Nikki, already well known on the farm, and by most participants. It's great to have them on board.



Watering the flower garden

This year we have run about 100 sessions, on Wednesdays and Fridays, only stopping for Christmas. We have five regular participants.

On Wednesday mornings we join the work morning crew for whatever needs doing on the farm, and Wednesday afternoons and Fridays we do craftwork, cultivation of herbs, flowers, medicines, and dyes.



Working on bird boxes to sell

The beautiful signs going up around the farm have been made under Magali's direction. We have made bird and bat boxes, lip balm, hand cream, body butters, cards, painted stones, seasonal decorations, jam and cordials. Our plants and products are sold at Canalside and beyond to help fund and promote the project. We have been busy also with willow weave fencing, and chicken wire fencing for rabbit proofing.

At the apple pressing day, and on Open Farm Sunday, we fired up the pizza oven and sold fresh-cooked pizzas.

Our wheelchair-accessible raised beds in Ella's Memorial Garden are a riot of colour. Go and take a look – ask our participants for a tour.

We are looking for new participants to expand the Willows Project, and for another staff member to help facilitate sessions. Please talk to one of us on site or email us at: thewillowsproject@gmail.com

Dave, Hayley, Paul, Celia, Mord, Ness and Gill
thewillowsproject@gmail.com August 2024

Socials

The past year has had a full calendar of events, ranging from wassailing the orchard and ceilidh dancing in a marquee, through open days with tours and apple pressing, to a range of volunteer events with social opportunities alongside.

The year since the last report launched with a celebration of the season accompanied by a short AGM. There was a good turnout of members and a veritable feast was enjoyed around the fire after the business part of the event.

October's **Apple Pressing and Open Day** resulted in a buzzing site with two apple presses churning out juice – enough for apple juice and cider that we used at the summer party. A farm tour took place as usual, meaning members and other visitors could see what was happening in the fields and polytunnels and find out more about Canalside. Pizzas from The Willows Project's wood fired pizza oven were a welcome and delicious addition to the day.

Our big seasonal harvest days took place throughout the year, though the wet weather in the spring meant onion planting was so delayed that it just couldn't happen in time for them to have a reasonable growing window, without the planting schedule for other crops suffering.



*One of the smallest potato pickers,
September 2023*

The **potato harvest** back in September 2023 had a good turnout of members of all ages, to bring in

the crop in ideal conditions. The all important potato soup was enjoyed round the fire at lunchtime! Such a contrast to the weather for the **beetroot harvest** in November which was very wet! Nonetheless, willing hands got an average sized crop in speedily and beet soup was devoured next to a roaring fire afterwards.

The apple trees in the orchard were thoroughly **wassailed** this year in January and seem to have responded with good crops in response! Soft fruit pruning went alongside, meaning the growers had support for this important annual task.



Wassailers in the orchard, January 2024

A number of other seasonal volunteer events with socials have taken place throughout the year, giving members a chance to get their hands in the earth, connect with community and for subscribing veg members fulfil their commitment to volunteer for 3-4 work mornings per year.

In June, we held **Open Farm Sunday** as usual, giving interested members of the public as well as Canalside members the chance to join a guided tour of the farm. The Willows' pizza oven again brought a delicious strand to the day.

We've attended a couple of events with our **publicity stall**, to bring in new subscribing veg members. Grateful thanks to all the members who volunteered to drive, put up the gazebo or talk to the public to enable these stalls to take place. They are so valuable in raising our profile.

After much rain in the run-up, the **Summer Party** in July was thankfully dry and a successful evening, though coinciding with a big televised football match and the inclement weather earlier

in the day meant a lower turnout and smaller event than usual. The ceilidh kicked off the evening, and more dancing and fireside singing followed, continuing into the small hours.



Fireside music at the summer party, July 2024

This year, we're once again planning for our **celebration of the season and AGM** to be combined. We're at a turning point in the history

Education project

Throughout the winter, Ali and Jemima revamped the publicity materials for the educational visits to Canalside and Jemima ensured the news of the visits got into every primary school across Leamington and Warwick.



Crafters at work

Jemima also ran crafting sessions to make models of vegetables to replace the very dilapidated papier maché ones which had been in use since 2010! Members sewed and knitted an array of stuffed fabric veggies for use, especially with younger classes during our autumn visits.

Disappointingly, the only enquiry that went anywhere in the summer was from the stalwart

of Canalside. We need as many people as possible attend this year's AGM. We will be looking back on the challenges and celebrating the successes, and also thinking about what lies ahead for Canalside. It will be a time for galvanising our community to engage and bring fresh energy to the organisation: a new Lead Grower and more volunteer support across many different areas. We hope you can join us for that on Saturday 28th September from 12.15pm. Full details are in recent members' emails. If you are friends with any other members, please do encourage them to come too.

This summer, Helen Maiden, who has led social events in the past couple of years, has had to step back from this role. We thank her for her contribution to this aspect of Canalside, along with all the other volunteers who have supported the different events.

Ali Jeffery, September 2023

visitors, Woodloes Year 3 teachers, and sadly the different factors couldn't align to enable the hoped-for visits to happen.



Calculating food miles

September brings 4 upper primary classes – a total of 110 children – coming to the farm from 2 schools in Banbury to learn all about food provenance and seasonality. The teachers are using the visits as the 'hook' for the children's work on the topic 'Trading and Farming Food'. Jemima and Ali collaborated to deliver the sessions.

They started the visits with matching vegetable photos with their names and exploring packaging

to find out how far some fresh fruits and vegetables travel and whether/when they are in season in the UK.

A tour round the farm enabled the children to find out what is in season on our farm in the month of September, and how and where those vegetables grow best.



We found a bean!

The children then assessed photos of plated meals to decide when they could be made seasonally. This provided the basis for using online recipes back in school to plan a menu for a

meal in a specific month using seasonally available produce.



The serious business of veg tasting

The highlight of the visits seemed to be the veg tasting plates, with the pink tongues resulting from beetroot making this earthy root a particular hit!

The teachers fed back their appreciation for the opportunity for the children to get hands-on experience of where vegetables come from, and to connect with nature and understand sustainability issues.

We really appreciate the support from all the members who volunteered to make the visits a success.

Ali Jeffery, September 2024

Membership – April 2023-March 2024

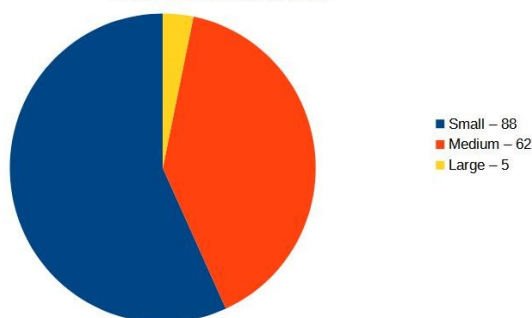
The year up to March 2024 continued to challenge, with the on-going cost-of-living crisis stretching people's income across ever greater costs and meaning many have had to make very tough choices about their spending.

Through the year we had 29 households join Canalside as veg share subscribers. The majority of these joined during summer 2023 following trials taken in the abundant summer months when we always increase the number of shares we are giving out.

In the same period, 5 new social member households joined Canalside to enjoy social events, work mornings and other volunteer sessions.

At the year end, there were 151 households subscribing for veg – a drop from where we'd budgeted to be due to the combined factors of cost-of-living crisis and the challenges with the share, with the trend towards smaller share sizes continuing from the previous year.

Share sizes in March 2024



Finances – April 2023-March 2024

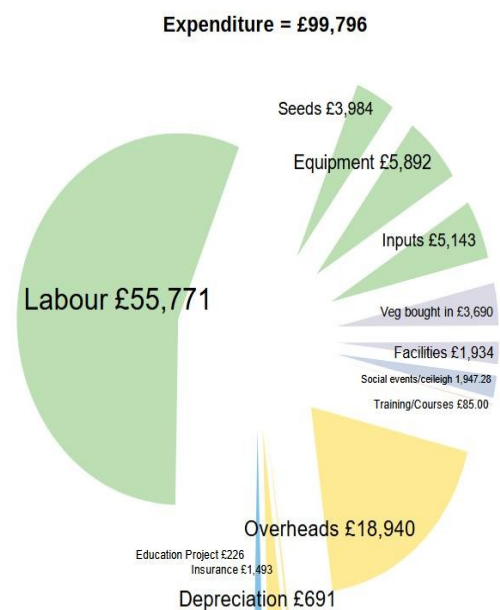
Despite the difficulties encountered towards the end of the season we have been able to maintain our income at a good level. In general we have been supplying in the region of 150 seasonal veg and fruit shares for our community members on a weekly basis although in this year for the first time we needed to supplement this with some bought in produce. We owe a debt of gratitude to both our regular team of three growers, who have the responsibility of planning for, and producing the required fruit and veg, and to our group of regular casual labourers, and, importantly, our team of regular and *ad hoc* volunteers from the community who turn up to our regular work mornings. So thanks to our members for this continual support and input.

Our turnover on shares and memberships, which constitutes 90% of our income, was £106,570 this year, slightly up on last year (although inflation has reduced the benefit somewhat). We also benefited from £3825 in donations so thanks to those donors who largely donated towards our unexpected cost of buying in some items of veg to maintain the share in the leaner winter months. See the pie chart for a breakdown of our income.



Against our income we had expenses of £99,796 of which our main costs were wages for the growing and admin team (around 65% of our spend). We have continued to try to keep abreast with inflation in our wages and our high wage costs reflect our desire to pay a fair wage to our

workers and the fact that producing veg and fruit is a labour intensive activity. Our other costs are related to the inputs needed for growing the veg and fruit (about 16% of costs) including maintaining the equipment needed and a hefty water bill! Our overhead costs are directed to servicing our membership and providing them the activities, facilities and space to enjoy the farm (about 27% of our costs). We balance all these costs by charging our members a competitive rate for our organic veg and fruit shares at the same time as making enough surplus to reinvest in the Society (currently set at 10% of turnover). See the pie chart for a breakdown of our costs.



All in all, in the financial year 23- 24 we posted a higher surplus (£15,165) than the previous season on the back of a modest price rise (in the context of food and input inflation, at times running at 20%). However this comes at a time when we are facing renewed challenges in the wider economic and ecological environment. Although our reserves on paper are in the region of £52,000 this is not a large cushion compared with the investment we anticipate is needed to put the Society on a more sustainable footing.

Gareth Davies, August 2024

Future Challenges

We have achieved much at Canalside in the last 18 or so years – starting a principled community

enterprise from scratch (early members may remember the wheat fields we started with),

becoming a progressive employer in an industry notorious for underpay and overwork, accumulating sufficient surplus to invest in our Society (polytunnels, pole barn, tractor etc.) and even organising ourselves to buy the land we work through a community share offer. So as it stands we have much to be proud of.



Harvesting carrots, February 2024

However, now, more than perhaps at any time since our founding, Canalside is facing some fundamental challenges. These are challenges are partly rooted in a wider societal milieu including the increasingly direct destabilisation of our biosphere (biodiversity loss, climate change, resource depletion and pollution) and the increasing challenge of societal inequalities driven by the unequal distribution of wealth which is playing out in the 'cost of living crisis'. All these things are making farming more challenging and costly – driving our income down and our costs up – which is pushing the current business towards becoming unsustainable financially.

Also, closer to home, we also need to define what we want to achieve as a community. What do we want to see on our farm in 10, 20 or 100 years time? And how do we get there? In many ways we need to seek to revive the spirit with which the farm was founded and to hand this on to future generations to find their inspiration and vision. As a community supported agriculture scheme (CSA) we need to fix community at the heart of what we do not just for the current generation but for future generations too. It is only with community involvement and

commitment that our farm is ultimately financially sustainable.

The question is what can we as the Canalside community do about all this? Well these are all issues that the Steering Group, the community representatives who strategise and steer the work at Canalside, have been discussing for some time now. Our current answer is an investment plan for the farm that addresses three fundamental challenges that we face:

1) Ecological resilience. We aim to take inspiration from the organic and regenerative farming movements to move our farm to a more sustainable footing. For instance, by farming more intensively using no dig or minimum tillage methods, to introduce more perennial elements into the farm ecology (trees, shrubs etc.), to broaden the types of enterprises on the farm (e.g. flowers, honey, fungi etc.) and to leave sufficient space for other organisms who share the space with us. Many of these elements are already in place but many more could be developed.

2) Staff welfare. We aim to employ our staff fairly and go above meeting simply minimum legal standards. We need to provide adequate training and career development for our staff and ensure that they feel valued and empowered to enact the vision we have for our farm. Increasingly we see the need to address the issue of affordable housing for our growers and staff



Ecofest stall and volunteers, August 2024

3) Community benefit. As a community benefit society we aim to include the members and community at the heart of what the farm is and does. What do we want to see happening on the farm? What activities are valuable for the farm community but also the surrounding local community? How can we arrive at democratic consensus about what happens on the farm? How can we be more inclusive? Once again many of the elements are in place but many more could

be developed and enlarged.

Much of this will involve new ways of working and a good deal of trial and error, hopefully to be taken in a pioneering spirit. Much has been done in that we have a vision of where we are going underpinned by a sustainability plan, we have an investment plan (unfunded!) to make the sustainability plan happen and we have a recruitment process ongoing for a grower leader to take us forward to realising a new vision for our farm.

But this is not enough; we would like all our members to feel that coming down to our farm is like being at home and to feel empowered to develop activities and projects that inspire them and hopefully the wider community. So what are we asking for?



Squashes getting established, July 2024

Firstly, we would like to invite you to come down to your farm and simply walk around. Take the time to appreciate it – observe the insects up close, listen to the birds, push your hands into the soil, roam through the new field and imagine what could be here and what your family or friends would like. Do this at different times and in different weathers. It's our space to enjoy and to share. You could even do a bit of work at one of our volunteer events.



Planting sweetcorn in the rain, early July 2024

Secondly we invite you to read and get informed about our plans. What would you like to see that is not included? How can you help and where are you inspired to get involved so that ideas can actually come to fruition? If you feel uninformed, how can we improve our communication? Could you bring a different perspective to our steering group or sub-groups. Or maybe you just want to build or repair something? Or even run your own enterprise?

Thirdly we need finance to invest in the Society- to make the workplace more comfortable, to make space for community events in all weathers, to invest in the equipment and machinery necessary to run a horticultural enterprise. Can you help with this? Could you staff stalls at events to raise our profile? Can you support the staff in other capacities? Do you have experience with fundraising?

We should be proud of what we have achieved and we should celebrate it. But we also need to redevelop and adapt our vision to ensure that the farm is a space which future generations can enjoy and draw sustenance. As a community now is the time to draw on our collective strengths to build this resilient future. Please come and get involved.

Gareth Davies, August 2024

Photo credits: the Canalside staff team and The Willows team

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