

Permaculture in Chester  
A Spring Weekend in Llanfyllin

We arrived on the Friday evening; finding Llanfyllin was straightforward, and the workhouse turned out to be conveniently located on the right before we got to the town proper. Unsure of the way in, we split up; I tried walking in front of the building, spotted Steve in the kitchen, and he came chasing us from a back door in the first courtyard. We dumped our stuff and settled in to his dahl curry, followed by drinks. As well as Steve there was Alison; with Cyn, Simon and myself that made 5. (Chris would be a day visitor Sat and Sun, Kate from Sunday lunchtime). Steve hadn't warned us of the whole chillies used in the curry, and Ali's mouth went aflame; forewarned, Simon left his on the plate. Fed, we had an evening tour of the workhouse – seeing the master's house, central and at 3 storeys overlooking the 4 courtyards; the muddy track, part of the flood plain (dolydd) of the Cain (the workhouse was built in the dampest, coldest, place as a deterrent, Steve told us; how many other buildings are built in this sort of position?); the Peace Garden – the sunniest, where one accommodation block had been taken down, presumably before the property got listed; and the outbuildings, probably the most dynamic area as they hadn't some of the disadvantages of the main block. We returned to the kitchen, and with wine, rumtopf and sloe gin, some of us got sozzled, while interesting talk continued. But Alison had to put Steve's duvet cover on, it was confusing him. The girls got one of the smaller dorms.

On Saturday, I started with a shower. I was grateful for the warm water, because the toilet floor is uninsulated cold, the room itself unheated and the door open – it's also used by the workers in the north outbuildings. It wouldn't surprise me if I was the only one to shower; I think everyone else waited until they got home. I wasn't in for a repeat on Sunday! We got a daytime look at the workhouse, including Steve's willow plantings and hedge thickenings (included a holm oak sapling, which foxed us; so like holly, but the leaf underside is different). He told us of the music festivals that attracted so many more people than they planned, and that, coinciding with wet weather, proved such muddy chaos. They also compacted the soil for a good time. The hedges are a natural place for campers to pitch by. The workhouse has played a big part in the growing up of many of the locals, maybe not for reasons their parents might approve of! We also saw the forest garden being started, between the Peace Garden and the road. There were two mature apple trees, a medlar and other young trees and shrubs.

Next stop was the flood plain planting behind the local Spar, planted on a slightly raised area (the rest was muddier). Along with the trees and a butterfly artwork, there was a main structure of a circle of living willow branches pressed between stakes placed 8-12" between inner and outer. This had a gap at each end, the east for an entrance, the west entering a willow dome, beautifully designed in two colours of willow. Lining the ground was mypex fabric (which I suspect was allowing some light through), and through which we were to plant a selection of perennial herbs, including Babington Leeks, both inside and outside the circle. The other job was to shift a load of composted wood bark to cover the mypex. (There are non-plastic, organic ways to mulch – layers of cardboard, followed by compost or leaf mould, then damp paper topped with grass cuttings is probably the most thorough. Cut big weeds down to the ground first.) I found the easiest way to plant the herbs was to cut a cross in the mypex, then (rather than use the children's trowel, which bent easily on the half-live grass underneath) use a large pointed stick – there were some lengths of hazel, at least 6' long, of a handy diameter. Pushed into the soil, they made a sucking noise on withdrawal. Thanks to Simon for the Braeburns. We returned to this garden on Sunday morning, shifted more bark and planted more herbs – and three grafted apple trees that Ant had brought. Around three sides of the willow sculpture (all except the road side) is a forest garden, including pears and 70 heritage apple varieties (at least one rootstock noted as MM106), planted by [Tom the Appleman](#), a Shropshireman. The pears might have been on pear stock.

We returned to base for lunch, then had an excursion to Llanrhaeadr-ym-Mochnant, where the Dragons coop is based. It sells a selection of products from small scale makers and growers – pea sticks, poles, kindling and charcoal from a hazel grower, dolls, ornaments, beeswax candles, willow basketry. It's sad that tourists tend to visit the falls, but don't stop in the village. Steve told us he was living in a flat opposite and saw the property for sale and unloved, reckoned he could do something with it, but needed to finance the purchase. So he formed a housing coop, wrote a business plan and obtained a loan to purchase it – the shop and adjoining house. Currently, rents plus shop profits are not enough to allow expansion, he

hopes that will come. Upstairs from the back of the shop is also shop, but also Sector 39 office. We sat here for a while discussing Sector 39. (There are two properties in the terrace behind the shop that are up for sale, if anyone's interested. They're one bedroom, one offers over £65k and other in region of £90k. <http://www.rightmove.co.uk/property-for-sale/Llanrhaeadr-Ym-Mochnant.html>) We then had a short walk around the town, past the new community centre available to hire at a reasonable rate, it was built back end on to the hill, at a point very close to a temporary flood stream, renowned for flooding nearby homes. An unusual arrangement for it entering a pipe under the road had us puzzling.

Returning to Llanfyllin we stopped at the Llanfyllin Spar to stock up for the evening. The centre of the town was once quite busy, with cars double-parking, but Spar has drained the custom away towards the west of the town. So Steve prefers not to use it. It does do 'fill your own container' on specialist oils.

We had an evening meal, again involving chillies, but chopped; cooked by different chefs. It was followed by a screening of 'Demain', the French film visiting a range of people and institutions across the US, France and UK who were doing the right thing and enjoying it. Then talks about strange happenings in our past, Steve telling how he first came across permaculture in southern Africa, when he landed a job minding a smallholding while the owner was away.

On Sunday we visited [Treflach Farm](#) (also [facebook](#)). Ian Steele's dad had struggled making a living from the small dairy farm, so the young Ian tried his luck in engineering, with a big American petrochem constructor. His dad contracted cancer, so he came back to help, his company giving him leave. He learnt of permaculture from Steve Jones, and set about introducing it to the farm. It resulted in diversification, such that now the small farm doesn't struggle to maintain one household, but has 14 people working there. As well as a small number of pigs (5), beef cattle (around a dozen), he also grazes Shropshire Wildlife Trust's Hebridean sheep when they're not on duty on reserves. He soon realised there was little scope for butchering the odd pig or cow (nearest abattoir 10 miles-ish) and going from glut to famine, so now they butcher and freeze much of it for including in pies, made on site, and sold in their farm shop with other ethical products. They supply widely, including London, so have a distribution service that other local like-minded producers also use, and return with things they need (they get through a lot of card, churned up by the pigs). The pigs also consume unsaleable fruit and veg, they're registered to feed them this, and avoid kitchen waste. A fourth diversion is taking in volunteers for workparties or singles on longer stay, training and horticultural therapy, including for 14-16 year olds, and school/community group visits.

