



## Growing strong

Ciara Leeming uncovers another of the Northwest's inspirational grass roots success stories.

It began as a tiny permaculture garden but has blossomed into a vibrant environmental education scheme that is on its way to being self-financing. Offshoots Permaculture Project, in the grounds of Burnley's Towneley Hall, has become an environmental haven since it was set up by a band of local enthusiasts in 1997.

Composting, vegetable growing and beekeeping are among the activities that are starting to make money for the project, which is run along the principles of permaculture – using eco-friendly agricultural practices and minimising waste.

The initiative started when a group of green-fingered locals persuaded Burnley Borough Council, Towneley's owner, to lease out a derelict kitchen garden for a peppercorn rent. It took two years to clear the woodland that had encroached onto the walled, one-acre site, and a detailed design was agreed before a spade so

much as touched the ground. Gradually – with the help of small ad-hoc grants – Offshoots began to take shape.

As time went on it became clear that full-time help was needed, so environmental charity Groundwork East Lancashire – now Groundwork Pennine Lancashire – agreed to take over.

Today, Offshoots employs a manager and two compost workers, runs numerous innovative eco-friendly initiatives, holds regular educational courses and works closely with local schools and colleges.

Its buildings are made from natural materials and fitted with wind turbines and solar panels. Bees from the hives pollinate the crops within its polytunnels and produce honey, honeycomb and wax, which are sold for profit. Trees grown organically from seed are sold for use in landscaping projects.

It also supplies a local community centre with organic vegetable boxes at discounted rates, and may soon sign a contract with the local primary care trust to provide vegetables for its “cook and eat” health education classes.

Manager Phil Dewhurst says that while most activities stem from the aim of financial security, all stick to permaculture's guiding ethos. He says: “Composting's a great example. We are targeting commercial companies via direct marketing and so far we have arrangements with organisations including the University of Central Lancashire.

“We pick up their waste in a transit van that's powered from waste vegetable oil, and we turn the waste into compost that goes back onto our garden, completing what I call the virtuous circle. This also earns us vital income.”

Another plan is to find the necessary funding to invest in a planking machine – which would help turn unwanted trees into usable timber and make money back for Offshoots. For Phil this is another example of permaculture in practice.

“The council's doing a lot of woodland management in Burnley's parks, but the removal of this wood is a major problem because there's no market for it. Some can be chipped and used as mulch but the rest has to be stockpiled, and starts to rot.

“Councils can't have bonfires anymore so a lot ends up in landfill, which is a terrible waste. This problem adds a lot to the cost of felling the trees in the first place.

“If Offshoots can access the £5,000 we need to buy this machine we can turn this problem into a solution. We'd turn the waste wood into timber that could then be supplied



cheaply to community groups.

“This is exactly what permaculture's about: working with the resources to hand and doing things in the most efficient way to minimise waste.”

Education is also key. Offshoots is visited by about 5,000 people every year – some attend permaculture courses, while others pop in while visiting nearby attractions. It is hoped that many will go home and apply its lessons to their own environment.

With the proportion of its budget that comes from grants steadily falling, Offshoots could realistically become financially independent over the next few years. Phil says: “We think if we continue to box clever for a couple of years we might be able to become entirely self-sufficient.

“If we managed it we'd be the first member of the Permaculture Association to do so. That would send a strong message that with a lot of effort and dedication, this approach can work.”

### BEST & WORST

#### BEST

“Whatever the project, groups should apply proper design principles before they put a spade in the ground,” says Phil. “Design is a big part of permaculture and Offshoots remains very faithful to the original plans drawn up in 1997.”

#### WORST

Phil says: “Don't assume that just because you think something's a good idea, it will succeed. When we started providing domestic composting we told our funders we would serve 900 households, out of a town of 90,000 people. “But it was hard enough to get 450 homes to sign up, despite it being a free service with regular doorstep collections. We hadn't gauged the real level of desire.”