

## **An essay on reflecting on the Barrack Community Gardens**

**By Naomi Webb**

My name is Naomi Webb. I was an Oxford Brookes Student, who had a placement with Barrack Community garden in Spring 2022. For me, visiting the garden was meaningful as it allowed me to explore and connect to nature. This is a reflection of my time there and an exploration of why I think the garden is worth visiting. When talking about the garden to others, a key reason people said they visited the garden was feelings of peace and tranquillity. I recognise these feelings, along with the important assistance the garden project provides the local community.

At first, due to my bad sense of direction, I found it hard to find the garden despite its proximity to the city centre. Admittedly, the garden entrance is misleading. It is hidden away behind some houses and is accessed by a side pathway. The first question I had was how long the garden had been there and the second was why the gates were huge iron spectres. The garden is a wonderfully welcoming space, despite the iron gates. I later learned that there was a threat of vandalism hence the gates. It also helped conserve the wildlife spaces.

The interview I had with Ms Jones went against all my expectations. It was warm and welcoming instead of the expected formality. I felt overdressed for the occasion (although from a pragmatic standpoint being formal made sense). The highlight of the interview was stroking Ms. Jones's dog. In the end, I chose the garden over the other options because I was impressed by the warm welcome and the appeal of nature in a radiant setting.

I found the garden's history and transformation from a place of danger to safety fascinating. The garden project began in 2003 and opened in 2006. Originally the garden was a place of desolate garages where drug addicts would meet and more adult activities would be exchanged for money. The area was easily accessible by children and often the trash from dangerous activities would be left behind.

The volunteer I interviewed said that the original idea was not a garden and that came organically over time. Another sobering part of the garden's history was the concrete below. Apparently very toxic tar was brought from some mining

villages and was used to make the concrete as everyone thought it didn't matter. Due to the thought that the strong foundation was needed due to the potential of oil spills from cars. This meant that it was hard for plants to grow in certain areas of the site and that it could not be removed. As such the concrete acts as a barrier from the toxicity found in the dredge of the depth below.

One of the most remarkable things about the garden is how everything is made on site and self-sustaining as possible. The garden is partly an ecosystem for wild animals and birds, partly a place for families and an allotment. On the site Herbs and fruit grow including apples, pears, chensendamsen, mind, lavender, parsley and thyme. Often the herbs are used to make tea which sounds an excellent way to pass a sunny afternoon. Everything is organic from the recycled plastic to the way the toilet functions.

People often remarked that being in the garden gave them a sense of peace and contentment. A garden is a pleasant place that acts as an oasis in a rather plain aesthetic area of town. The garden itself is somewhat hard to find and needs direction and so this gives it a hidden away quality from the busyness of the town. Unlike a lot of places throughout the year, the garden provides some colour, especially compared to the drabness of city concrete, and a bathtub filled with bright flowers had been purposefully set up to set the mood for the garden. I think this is particularly due to lucky chance and how the volunteers carefully maintain the garden

Another reason is the design and sustainability. The garden has corners that are often left alone. This gives a flash of an idea of what could be found in the wild and gives it the appearance of a meadow. The garden uses little electricity and only what can be generated by soil and sunlight. The fruit trees of which there are several consist of apples, and pears. There is much wildlife to be observed in the garden. I enjoyed hearing about the newts and frogs that could be found in the pond. I also enjoyed hearing about the incident where two volunteers heard at the bottom corner of the garden behind the compost heaps, a very loud squeak. I could easily imagine badger cubs romping around and leaving when the garden became more open. It is easier to hear birdsong which in the last decade has gone down and is important to hear in everyday life. The fact that people could experience the glory of nature (even if in a snapshot) also helped with mental health. Studies have found that being in nature can improve a person's mood, reduce feelings of stress and anger, and is a way to connect with the local community. Gardens are often a place of physical activity. I

experienced that when I photographed various plants and flowers. I had to contort my body to find various angles. When I was in the garden I observed and later learned that it was designed with the local community in mind. One way this manifested was choosing with plants to plant.

It can also be seen in the construction of the willow den which was great fun to sit in and take photographs of the leaves, I was told however that they were unsure of keeping it as it attracted wasps. Wasps tend to scare children even though male wasps, unlike the female ones, are harmless as they were the ones that popped up.

Another was the use of decoration and the installation of a sandpit for young families and various benches.

The garden project proved to be a multi-cultural project where young Muslim boys and girls from Afghan backgrounds could express their culture and religion according to their faith. According to the volunteer I spoke with (a white man from outside their community) they had built an oven for celebrations like Eid. The oxford buddhist group also meets there. The garden hosts local events with young people who can grow and plant vegetables in the soil for cooking and learn important life skills there.

My favourite part of the garden was observing the pond life. The pond is a water source to the garden. It is filled with life including insects, tadpoles and newts. I was also fascinated by the shapes that the rotting wood was in. All in all, I enjoyed my time in the garden and would recommend others visit it.