

HOW A  
GARDEN  
CHANGED  
MY  
LIFE  
20







Thank you for being inquisitive enough to buy this. What follows is a personal account of what has happened to me over the last three years. I've published it in the hope that it may offer inspiration and even redirection to others.

MAY 1991. My name is Phil, and I'm thirty five years old. Married since 1978 and living with partner, who works in the theatre, and five cats in idyllic countryside 25 miles away from the nearest large town. Views from our tiny but 'interestingly' decorated two-up two-down cottage include fields stretching away from the front and side gardens, the North York Moors five minutes away in one direction and the Yorkshire Dales fifteen minutes in the other.

My present job is in marketing with the University of Leeds. I've just been made redundant.

That was how it all started. This was my second redundancy and the experience last time - two years of severe depression - was not one I wanted to repeat.

Up until this moment I had been on a high. Promotion was in the offing and working single-handedly under high pressure suited me to a tee. We commuted together from the countryside each day and had the best of both worlds. Luck was really shining brightly. Or so it seemed. The day before the news broke we had just secured a deal (and further mortgage) to buy some adjoining land, increasing the size of our garden to an acre.

Overnight though everything was shot through. All my expansion plans at work were highjacked by a senior manager, in exchange for the P45. Our mortgage almost doubled. We became 'asset rich and cash poor' and I was a truly bitter man. Never before one for the truly naff activity of balancing cheque stubs I was now paranoid that even with the best logical outcome this could only lead to the ultimate scenario: "Cathy Come Home".

Reality however is no slave to logic or a calculator. If in a similar situation your first thought is to get out all those old bank statements you've been keeping for years, and desperately look for some hope of a short delay before the ultimate crash, then it's probably already too late. For no apparent reason, confidence at times like this, that there will be some kind of brighter future can and does keep you afloat, as does of course, selling everything of value.

Despite the gloomy prospects I was/am a strong believer in fate. Change can be traumatic and unnerving but it always brings with it something far better. You just have to ride the storm on a day-to-day basis. I had three weeks notice in order to find another job. Not one of the easiest of tasks in a recession, let alone in Leeds, but with my CV, impossible! 'Consistency' isn't a word that springs readily to mind when thinking about my career to date. Okay, I started off well enough by leaving school with one A level, even managed to get into college (it took three attempts to







finish though) and receive that so valuable Certificate to teach Art. But it was all downhill after that. The longest job I've ever held was eighteen months, but I've bags of experience. Including the three years as a temp I've probably worked for over 100 companies.

Nevertheless I did manage to set up two interviews reasonably quickly. Talked myself out of them both on the day, settled down to a spell of creative writing: CV's. Luckily the temp agencies had already had enough of my idiosyncracies so I didn't have to go through the £3 an hour treadmill again. I tried for 'Enterprise Allowance', had done that before about five years previous. Guess what? It was still £40 a week, which worked out now, after NI, even less than the dole! But though I made two valiant and may I say very professional attempts the newly privatised 'Enterprise Agency' didn't feel comfortable with me aboard and declined to support my hastily cobbled together capitalistic credentials.

So this left me with one asset: plenty of time; and not having any means of escaping the rural idyll during the long weekdays my old friend GUILT moved in to keep me company. Thus it wasn't long before I felt my partner might be feeling it was about fair if I made some kind of gesture at usefulness and venture out into the newly acquired 'garden' and tidy it up a bit. Incredible how thirty years of neglect can take hold with weeds, brambles and elder. On top of that suddenly there's the responsibility for 'ownership' of something you've never even noticed before. It eats away with GUILT, inducing sleepless nights and panic attacks with all the worry about 'fencing' and it becoming a local 'eyesore'. And, oh yes, a long drought can do wonders for all that sandy soil, drying it out to a rock-like finish. Great, and not a penny to spend. Oh just to be able to afford to make that ultimate macho gesture with a JCB. I bit the bullet and entered the kingdom of 'Sleeping Beauty' armed only with a garden fork, spade, push mower and a scythe.

Gardening should carry a health warning (don't even think about the hole in the ozone layer). I hadn't really had any previous horticulture experience prior to living in North Yorkshire, as a Londoner and having spent almost all my first twenty five years living in a flat there weren't too many opportunities. Yet in retrospect it now seems woefully clear there were some obvious do's and don'ts to be learnt before I began. How else would I have nearly broken my leg and cut one finger to the bone through two pairs of gloves (sharpening the scythe, wince) in just the first week? What could I do with some power tools!

I'm not at my best in the heat, a feeble excuse I know, but I declared a truce to hostilities for the summer and retired to heal before any more devastating injuries. This gave me ample opportunity to indulge in reading, one of my favourite activities. I'm one of those people who can read a book in a day and be affected by it for weeks, if not forever. Marge Piercy's "Body of Glass" must rate as one of the all-time masterpieces. We don't have a library locally and the mobile





was probably heaving under the weight of Cookson's and Binchey's so one weekend we set off up the hill onto the Moors and about half an hour's drive away is our favourite place in Britain - Botton Village. It's a settlement of farms occupying an entire valley, and part of the 'Camphill Trust', a movement that provides long term accomodation for those who are unable to cope unless in institutional care. It broadly believes people derive dignity and satisfaction through work. And to prove it they have created a self-sufficient system to show it works. They mostly farm the valley and all they grow is produced to Bio-Dynamic standards. This is hard to explain in a sentence but briefly means that as well as being 'organic' what is grown has also a positive potential, an added essence. It does you good. And that is a very narrow definition.

At Botton, apart from the wonderful scenery, incredible tranquility and exquisite german architecture there is a first class Coffee Shop (v.important, and allows smokers, also v.important - why can't I live in Amsterdam) and a bookshop. I told Brian in the bookshop that we had acquired some land and asked him for some books to read as food for thought on a gardening theme. I wish he'd prepared me a bit more.

Bio-Dynamics is rather like Physics. When what you really want to do is to get straight on with the A level kind of stuff, because it'll mean two years of freedom immersed in project work - you know the practical/hands on kind of thing, where you get to make and finish something nobody has ever seen or done before, inventing - but instead you have to first wade through all that O level work, learn all the theory. Then pass it, because otherwise you won't be able to work anything. Unfortunatly I'm one of those low boredom leave the manual unwrapped threshold types. I wasn't going to be able to understand a word of it. So there I was reading the thoughts of this Rudolf Steiner chap, who wrote in the 1920's, in Germany and of course he's a sciencey kind of guy and it's not helping me one little bit with how I can create my own little patch of Botton at home.



To be frank these books were really kind of weird as well at first. What they were offering was set more in the realms of magic and witchcraft to where I had come from, but luckily because there were lot's of case-histories included there was enough human and tangible interest to keep me going. By the end I was hooked. You'll have to read them yourselves to understand what I mean. What Brian had given me was a foundation, a fresh and plausible 'alternative' philosophy not just for gardening but my whole unemployability and future, to work from. A chance to start again on the garden and my life without fear that it would be an impossible task. It had become a new and exciting challenge. Failure had been written out. Just like the perfect job.

Now I could concentrate on the "How to" bit.





Permaculture, another theory of gardening, came in useful at this point. The particular bits I latched onto were: spend 90% of your time observing and thinking about the space - garden - and 10% converting those thoughts into action. Work towards the concept of creating an eco system that works for itself, i.e. is self-sufficient, and does all your work for you; and most importantly of course do no unnecessary digging after creating those working areas, as not only is it incredible boring but lo! it will destroy all you have set up. Marvellous!

Autumn arrived and the soil had loosened up. This is when the true gardening year begins. Through to March when you can work without sweat and nothing is growing, especially the weeds. My enthusiasm level was high and I was ready to get out there and do something serious. Memories of Tom & Barbara in "The Good Life" came to mind and how instead of earning a living working in some boring office I could save us money by growing all our own food. At least with a design background I could make it look interesting. I started with creating some vegetable beds and begun thinking about compost.



Compost making gets you started on recycling. Immediately our waste was down fifty per cent. And there was a whole new world out there of thrown away potential just waiting to be rescued.

Would you believe it, just as I had stopped worrying about being a total waste of life someone offers, yes offers, me some short-term full-time work. I get to design the Christmas show at a theatre in Leeds. Never worked in the theatre before, and yes it's just like living in Disney World. Totally unreal. They spent half what my house was worth producing that six week production. Got me an Equity card.

The reliable and extremely ungreen Volkswagen died at last at 130 000 miles. Started our new regime and by buying a second-hand 2CV. The world suddenly all went into slow motion. 2CV drivers do wave to each other.

Everything, when you have no money but plenty of zeal, can be achieved. But in a roundabout way. Our weekends were now transformed, to be spent tracking down recyclable bargains: plastic barrels for free to save rainwater, scouring skips for old pallets. And once you've been in a skip there's no saving you. Soon there will be no room in the garage for the car, your salvage takes on a greater value.



By the first Spring I had some vegetable plots dug and ordered my organic seeds. Sowing them was a nightmare. Two bedrooms full of trays precariously balanced around the windowsills, or germinating in warm dark corners wrapped in black plastic bin bags. If the timing, watering and attention weren't enough then there was the planting out. Either the frost got everything because I was too previous or the chickens scatted them up. It was a miracle anything survived.





By the second year I had discovered mini cloches in the shape of cut down plastic pop bottles, and the gardeners bible: Maria Thun's "Working With The Stars - A Bio-Dynamic Sowing & Planting Calendar". This takes all the stress out of planting as there are actually, would you believe, specific days in the year for doing specific tasks. Good enough excuse for me.

Working outdoors for a long time, apart from not being very healthy - I did my back in very seriously at one point - does make you aware of how Nature is at work all the time silently, steadily and with little or no fuss. For example I didn't know that the sun moves, relatively, along a different path each day of the year. Let alone clockwise. You tend to just think of sunrise, midday in summer overhead and setting in the West. Well get out there and watch. I still can't fathom out the Moon though. Not enough time out at night I suppose, yet they say weeding is best done at night...



All that 90% watching began to pay off and I began to see some useful relationships. Like earthing up the vegetable plots towards the Spring sun to warm off the frost quickly. Our first cropping season was good, we cooped up the chickens finally and enjoyed a short but heavy glut of fresh organic produce. The chickens weren't too happy about it though.

The second autumn and I concentrated on habitats for 'predators'. Eventually the pests would suss out what we were up to and I needed an army ready for the challenge. I bought 250 trees and bushes as 'whips' (about 3' high so v.cheap) and set about creating a forest border to encourage insects. The following cropping season was less successful, due to pests - the whips will need a few years to have any value - but we did manage more variety and a longer season. I also planted out lots of soft fruit but the night before we planned to harvest our bounty the local bird population had a devised a similar plan.



When the soil was loose enough again I started digging in earnest. In the previous winter I had discovered in a low part that it was rather boggy. Digging down eighteen inches or so and I found the water table. Here was potential for pond life without the expense of liners. So for six months I dug and dug and dug. Five ponds were created, one of which measures two metres deep, twenty-five metres long and up to six metres wide at some points. All by hand. Am I mad, or am I mad? I spent the Spring finding suitable plants from other ponds in the area. Then I had an idea. Well several actually at a similar time. Why can't these elements have a useful function other than for the growing of food? Use the ponds to treat our sewage, for example, so we don't have to pay all the Water bill? Even collect rainwater for drinking? Harness wind into electricity.....?

So I thought I better get some training, go on some courses. I wasn't registered as 'unemployed' anymore, the dole





office had made it far too difficult for me to sign on, so I did what they wanted and 'disappeared' off their register. I thought then I wouldn't be able to afford residential courses without a UB40. Luckily though there's lots of alternative organisations running courses in alternative technology aimed at those on low incomes. So off I went. To N.Wales, Ireland and even Holland, though I don't recommend the all-in-one coach trip, cheap though it may be. What did I learn? To be disillusioned, well at least initially. Even 'alternative' technology is expensive, and the practice is still relatively untried. But it did set my thoughts on self-build. If we could clear our debts and make a healthy profit by selling the house, why, we could move somewhere cheaper and, yes, build a more self-sufficient home without the burden of a mortgage and the added bonus of it being very cheap to run. Sounds like a script for a musical in a barn. It's one thing digging a pond or building a compost heap from pallets, surely building a home requires a wee tadge of previous experience? Enthusiasm surely doesn't count for much? Well so I thought. Having done some serious reading and making a few contacts I learnt of a radical design self-build site in Leeds and hot-footed it down there.

I joined up as a volunteer and spent a wonderful Autumn/Winter/Spring doing all sorts of things I'd never dreamed of. Including the obvious like falling through the floor and getting crushed etc. One day it was so cold from the snow the water froze and we had to melt the snow for our coffee. Ah bliss!



Now I can wield a circular-saw with surgeon-like dexterity. I've even started making my own furniture from salvaged wood. I've learnt that I can teach myself new skills when I need them, and be confident that with the required practice put in on 'found' raw materials I'll be as good as someone I would have previously paid to do the work. Above all we're becoming 'self-sufficient', not just in the physical needs but, for the want of a better description, spiritual ones. It does take a hell of a lot of time and effort, I'm learning to be patient even if I surprise myself how stupid I can be at times - measuring is not one of my better skills - and I do have the luxury of a working partner. But our bank balance over the three years is testament to the success, it has remained stable throughout at the same pre-redundancy level. Meanwhile our quality of life has soared light years.

#### Postscript.

OCTOBER 1994. This year the cropping season has been amazing, apart from the chicken damage - there's far too many now to keep cooped up - but I've sold my faithful PC and bought a 50 foot polytunnel and what that means is all-year-round cropping and it's chicken proof! Also got two colonies of bees from swarms and made some rather esoteric hives for them, so we have honey added to our list of edibles, and I've also planted some fruit trees: pears and apples. Even if we can't move for a bit we'll not starve!



If you're interested in looking at our house with a view to buying, do drop us a line, or if you happen to be passing by





just drop in (I'm in most days but it's up to you to bring the Jaffa Cakes).

*cheers!*

# BOOK LIST.

"Fighting Like The Flowers" - Lawrence D.Hills (Penguin)

"Dig for Revolution" - Graham, 126A North Road, Westcliff-on-Sea, Essex SS0 7AG

"Living Water" - Olof Alexandersson (Gateway Books)

"The Man Who Planted Trees" - Jean Giono (Peter Owen)

"The Farmer, The Plough & The Devil" - Arthur Hollins (Ashgrove Press)

"Secrets of The Soil" - Peter Tompkins & Christopher Bird (Viking)

"Water: The Element of Life" - Wolfram Schwenk BD

"Sensitive Chaos" - Theodor Schweg BD

"Agriculture" - Rudolf Steiner BD

"Grow A Garden & Be Self-Sufficient" - E Pfeiffer & E Riese (Mercury Press)

"Life To The Land - Guide Lines to Bio-Dynamic Husbandry" - Katherine Castelliz (Lanthorn Press) BD

"Bio-Dynamic Gardening" - John Soper BD

"Another Kind of Garden" - Ida & Jean Pain



BD Biodynamic information from: Botton Bookshop, Botton Village, Danby, WHITBY N.Yorks YO21 2NJ

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