

Hello

Happy New Year!

We had had such interesting responses from several retreat centres at the end of last year about the benefits of setting up an Ecological Retreat certification scheme that we have decided to go ahead with it – not just certificates but also, hopefully, an information pack, and continuing this newsletter.

We're already in touch with WWF about it – but the most important thing to do first is to ask for your thoughts on what criteria such a certification should, or could, involve. If you get in touch (info@arcworld.org) then we'll make sure that your thoughts are included.

Before we introduce Mill House, which is the featured retreat centre in this issue, with its newly installed reed bed grey water filtration system, I wanted to ask a more general question. Do those of you who say grace or prayers before meals have any that include being mindful of the environmental impact of the food we eat? If so, could you send them to Nicki, and we will pass them on to inspire others.

In the next issue we'll feature Emmaus House, a medium-sized, Catholic-run urban retreat centre in central Bristol – with five beautiful themed gardens, and some inspiring ideas of how to work with local primary schools. And we'll also include Lee Abbey in Devon, which is a large centre with its own environmental officer, hydro-electric scheme (planned) and community outreach.

Please let us know if you are interested in your centre being featured, and we can set up a time for a phone conversation about your plans, ideas, initiatives or areas where you might need help or advice.

The current retreat centre list is on <http://www.arcworld.org/news.asp?pageID=265> although this is set to expand in the New Year.

If you have anything you would like to share/discuss, then please let us know. And also, if you know anyone who would like to join our distribution list please ask them to email Nicki and they'll be added.

With best wishes,
Alliance of Religions and Conservation (ARC)

www.arcworld.org

FEATURED ECO-RETREAT CENTRE – Mill House Retreats in Devon

DOING NOW:

- **Good Energy**
- **Recycling**
- **Composting**
- **Reed Bed Grey Water System Chickens and Pigs ranging freely in the cider apple orchard for own meat and eggs**
- **Growing Own Vegetables**

PLANNING IN THE FUTURE

- **Expansion into outbuildings, probably using ecological materials.**
- **Wanting to look further into fuel and water issues.**

THE CENTRE

The centre is a small, privately run retreat house based around a large 16th century Devon farmhouse, with 12 beds in six individual rooms. There is a large threshing barn and additional lincays (arched barns which housed animals in calving stalls) which are planned to be used for expansion. There is land and a cider-apple orchard: until recently this was a working farm with its own mill and granary, but in the past it housed a community of nuns.

The Centre, which is run by Rev. Jane Taylor, runs retreats and conferences for Christians and others seeking spiritual companionship and solace. It includes creative workshops - concentrating particularly on story and narrative – and talks on subjects including community living, RS Thomas, and the links between making bread and exploring faith. Guests are encouraged to do simple chores: “in our experience wherever two or three are gathered, to chop logs or carrots, the God of community is there.”

Rev. Taylor was previously part of Christian Ecology Link (CEL). She has been at Mill House Retreats since 2004.

1. THE REED BED GREY WATER SYSTEM

Earlier this year Mill House installed – or, perhaps more accurately, grew – a reed bed outflow system. As Rev. Taylor explained, usually outflow/grey water would go into the soil to be treated by organisms within the soil: but Mill House is surrounded by “claggy” clay, which is not porous enough to do this efficiently (and was prone to backing up, which was not ideal when there were guests staying).

In lay-person's terms, the system works by collecting outflow from showers, baths and sinks into a dosing chamber. When full the chamber is flushed along the length of a pipe onto a specially constructed reed bed about 20m by 8m in area (which is big enough for the retreat centre to expand its needs in the future) which cleans the water naturally.

The cost was between £9,000 and £11,000. "It is expensive, but the alternative is to have a full chemical tank, operating with electricity. And you have to look at it as a cost spread over 20 years, or even 12. The reed bed system is natural, and in the end I believe it will be cheaper too."

More technical details (and pictures) are provided in the document attached, which was based on a letter from Dave Harris who lived at the centre for three months in 2007 and was responsible for installing the reed bed.

It was based on a prototype installed at the Kindersley Sheepdrove centre in Berkshire, run by former publisher turned organic farmer Peter Kindersley. The work at Sheepdrove could be an inspiration for any smaller conference centre.

Solid waste still goes into the septic tank.

2. OTHER

Mill House did look at installing wind turbines, but at a cost of between £20,000 and 30,000 it seemed a better option simply to opt for a green energy supplier. They would however be interested to talk to other retreat centres for whom the maths did work out. They would also be happy to share information about the reed bed.

Future plans include running retreats inspired by the subjects of faith and nature/creation – and Mill House would be interested in hearing from people who have held successful retreats around this subject.

"We welcome people of all faiths and none who are interested in rooting faith in a community setting and where companionship at the meal table and at other times is as valued as the space to be quiet and reflect."

Contact Rev. Jane Taylor, 01884 829000 or janetaylor@millhouseretreats.co.uk