Faith Retreat Eco News December 2010

Hello!

First, thank you so much to all who have responded with articles for our December issue. We have been brimming over with all your news and look forward to sharing more of your experiences in the New Year. In this newsletter:

1. The Othona Bradwell Community builds a new eco house

2. Holland House – in harmony with Creation

3. Emmaus House Bristol – retreat days for schoolchildren

4. Methodist International Centre (MIC) turns 60

And next time we’d like to tell you about the retreat centre with bats almost in the belfry and details of an exciting new ARC programme: Faith in Food, which is working with retreat centres and faith-run hotels. Or if there’s anything else you’d like us to write about, then please email us.

If you have any winter eco-tips then please let us know and we’ll pass them on in a pre-Christmas special. But otherwise a very Merry Christmas to everyone and we’ll be back in touch in the New Year!

1. The Othona Bradwell Community builds a new eco house

The Othona Community is a Christian based community founded by Norman Motley, an Anglican Priest who first worked in the parish of Spitalfields in East London and then, at the beginning of the Second World War became an RAF Chaplain in a vast training centre in Blackpool. When the war ended Norman started searching for a suitable site not too far from London. He found it at Bradwell on Sea in Essex and so, in 1946, the Community in a ramshackle collection of tents and ex-army huts was started. In 1965 a second centre was opened at Burton Bradstock on the Dorset coast.
It was established in a marshy field close to the site of a Roman fort which the Romans called ‘Othona’. In AD 665 the Celtic missionary, Bishop Cedd, came from Lindisfarne in Northumberland to bring Christianity to the East Saxons. He used the brick and stone from the fort to build his church, now known as St Peter’s on the Wall.

Today Othona Bradwell is a Christian retreat/holiday centre just a sea wall away from the North Sea. It is particularly popular in the summer when it runs themed weeks, with 50 to 70 people at any one time, some of them staying in big family-sized tents, and others in more permanent accommodation. Each year between 1,200 people stay, split between school groups (200 children), churches, other groups such the YMCA, Youth Action for Peace etc, members of the public and community members.

The main building is a ranch-style single storey structure with large kitchen, communal dining room, lounge, offices and an accommodation wing. A few years ago the Community members were facing a crisis when they had to decommission one accommodation building because of damp. They made an application for a grant from the “Cut Your Carbon Programme” (administered by the East of England Development Fund) for a new 10-bedroom, timber framed building with a turf roof, rammed earth internal walls, straw bale external walls and with the whole of the south side wall glazed floor to ceiling in order to capture and retain the solar heat.

They received £123,000 - half the grant they had originally asked for, and so have now built half the original building, with five bedrooms and a meeting room, showers and disabled loo, with the hope (and planning permission) for another five bedrooms when they raise the next round of funding. “Beauty is in the eye of the beholder, but I do believe it is a beautiful building with rounded walls inside made of rammed earth,” said Othona Trustee, Rupert Bragg.

They worked with ZEDfactory, which, among other notable projects had been responsible for Earthship in Brighton. There are solar panels on the roof and a solid fuel stove in the meeting room for supplementary heat and hot water, which also runs in a loop through the bedrooms, with the effect of being like small radiators.
In addition to the whole community’s enthusiasm, there were two key things that made the dream of an eco building come into reality, Mr Bragg said. “The grant from Cut Your Carbon is what made it happen, plus a legacy of £75,000 which came at exactly the right time. The Community made up the balance of the £300,000 costs through its own fund raising activities.”

A main contractor completed the foundations, timber frame, floor and roof decking. The Community has taken on all the other work using a small army of volunteers to help with the rammed earth and straw bale build as well as the rendering and final decorations. Training days were organised with specialists from both rammed earth and straw bale building showing the staff and volunteers the techniques so they could then carry out the work. The Community ran an open house during the spring and summer this year, with 15 to 35 people at any one time working on the project.

Wherever possible, recycled materials have been used - a notable example of this is the flooring, which is laid with granite slabs recycled from London Underground following the renovation of the Green Park Underground Station. Most of the internal windows, doors, sinks and sanitary units are also from recycled sources.

One of the many wonderful things that came out of it was the process of having training weeks in eco-construction with the volunteers, and knowing they were going to be bringing that knowledge and passion back to their own communities, and in some cases their own countries. “We are a Christian community, and it was very moving spreading our message through the building process,” Mr Bragg said.

The official blessing was at the end of August, although the accommodation will not be completely ready until March when the first bookings are being accepted.

Othona Bradwell has a strong ecological ethos. They have never been on the grid, but last year (using a £30,000 grant) they fitted a wind turbine – particularly efficient on the coast – which together with solar panels provide 70 percent of their electricity, the remainder provided by a LPG powered generator. They have reedbeds for sewage, recycle carefully, and try and source food as locally as possible, from local butchers, farmers and greengrocers (“though we do use supermarkets as well, when we have to”). One of their members provides garden vegetables, and all eggs are free-range.

If any retreat centre is considering creating its own eco building particularly in the areas of natural roof, straw bale or rammed earth walls, then the team at Othona Bradwell is happy to advise. “They can profit from our mistakes, and we can also put them in touch with the people who advised us, who were excellent.” Please contact Gail or Matthew Dell on 01621 776564 or email Bradwell@othona.org.
2. Holland House – in harmony with Creation

Congratulations to Holland House, in Evesham, which has become the first Retreat House to join the Sustainable Restaurant Association (SRA). With the Association’s help, Holland House now has access to a brilliant resource to help them run the hospitality side of the business in a sustainable way - with ideas on where and how to source ingredients, find green energy, create seasonal and local menus.

Reverend Ian Spencer at Holland House wrote to us with the news, adding: “Now we're recycling everything, composting everything (including cooked food in our special ‘green johanna’ hot composting bin). We’ve now installed water butts to harvest rainwater for watering the vegetable garden, and have put ‘hippo’ water saving devices in all the loo cisterns to save water on each flush. Next year we hope to install solar panels to help reduce oil consumption when heating domestic hot water.”

And a few things on Rev Ian’s wish list for the future? “Obtain an electric car to pick up guests from local railway stations; obtain bicycles for guests to use in exploring the countryside and install a grey water harvesting system to flush loos.” For more details on Holland House visit: http://www.hollandhouse.org/ If you’d like to know more about the SRA, please visit: www.thesra.org. They were able to reduce membership charges for Holland House because it is a non-profit organisation.

3. Emmaus House, Bristol

In our last edition, we told you about our wonderful colleague Sr Mary Bellekom, from La Retraite Congregation, and how, as well as working at ARC, she is running a programme for schoolchildren to experience retreat days. Our colleague Pippa Moss, went along to help, and has written the following article.

Emmaus House: Retreat Day, 30/09/10

Emmaus House Retreat and Conference Centre, located in the heart of Bristol, hosted a retreat day for St Pius X Catholic Primary School from Withywood, Bristol, on 30
September. Twenty pupils from the final year of the primary school visited Emmaus House, all between the ages of 10 and 11. It was a fantastic day of exploration, fun and reflection. Although the number of retreat days that Emmaus House hosts varies considerably, it is clear that they are growing in popularity, appealing to different ages, schools and groups.

With the children split into three groups the day started with tours of the beautiful gardens, with the pupils discovering the wildlife, vegetable patches and ponds. Each child was then invited to bring a fresh apple and something meaningful to them inside. The significant items were then displayed on plates and later reflected upon in the meditation room. The apples were taken to the chefs who turned them into apple purée and served them as a freshly made dessert after lunch.

The pupils also made three posters in each of their groups, one of an apple signifying what plants need to survive, one of a tree signifying what we need to survive, and finally one of a hand signifying what we must give to others for them to survive. They then wrote on these key words and phrases surrounding the topic and decorated them with colours, tissue paper, and leaves, twigs and petals from the Emmaus House gardens. The ideas that the children came up with were very touching and showed the amount of thought they had put into it.

To end the day the children took their plates with their important items to the meditation room where they individually presented their item and reflected upon what was important to them. They also prayed and sang with their teachers, Fr Michael and the Sisters of La Retraite.

The children all commented on what a fantastic day they had had, and how lovely the gardens were. They asked to come back to Emmaus House in the summer, to round off their final year of primary school and see how the gardens had changed.

If you would like more details about Emmaus House, please visit: http://www.emmaushouse.org.uk/
4. Methodist International Centre (MIC) turns 60

We’d also like to wish MIC in London a happy 60th anniversary. MIC is the first hotel, conference centre and restaurant to be awarded the Social Enterprise Mark. For more details, read Lucy Siegle’s article in the Observer from 21 November: [http://tinyurl.com/3y6e6ra](http://tinyurl.com/3y6e6ra). Or read our next newsletter about the Faith in Food programme.

With best wishes,

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