

## **Eco Retreat Newsletter - May 2013**

### **Hello!**

- (Re)-Introduction to this newsletter
- news from the retreats – Minsteracres, Sheldon, Dyffryn Farm
- a question of meat?

### **(Re)-Introduction to the Eco-Retreat Newsletter**

Earlier in the year when the snow was falling thick and fast over much of the country I sent out an e-mail to some 200 addresses associated with retreat centres around the UK. The mailing list was the one we had built up here at ARC (The Alliance of Religions and Conservation) in order to circulate an occasional digital Eco-Retreat newsletter: you might remember it.

The idea – prompted by discussions with several people managing retreat centres round the country – was to provide a place where retreat centres could share what they were doing, and hopefully inspire each other, and be inspired.

The first newsletter went out in November 2008, followed by five more, each one sharing fascinating and inspiring stories of positive actions big and small all contributing to the care of the environment.

Then, in the autumn of 2010, staff changes combined with pressures of work led to what was hoped to be only a short break ... and now, 18 months later we are finally in a position to revitalise things, hence my earlier communication.

Happily you're a forgiving lot who've welcomed us back into your in-boxes and, even more happily, many of you haven't been resting on your eco-laurels, either. We're already hearing about interesting green developments that have happened since our last bulletin ...

### **News from the retreats**

You couldn't accuse the people at County Durham's sizeable **Minsteracres Retreat Centre** of being half-hearted about going green. For five years they have been working on ways to reduce their consumption of oil and LPG using strategies like turning down the heating thermostat and isolating parts of the building not in use. Impressively that reduced fuel consumption by almost 50% - a great

step in addressing their carbon footprint though, shockingly, rising prices over the period mean that their fuel bills have stayed the same.

Bearing in mind the continuous tree-felling needed to maintain the Minsteracres estate one obvious solution would be to convert to eco-friendly ‘biomass’ boilers using home-grown wood chips to fire them, operations manager Geoff Bockett tells us.

The obvious challenge was the £200,000 bill of making the conversion but by combining the expected annual savings in fuel bills of around £20,000 to £30,000 with financial support from the DECC’s Renewable Heat Incentive (RHI) they’ve found a way to do it. Work is under way on the installation and it is hoped the system will be operational by June. Geoff reckons this will reduce annual CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from 143 to 18 tonnes making this bold investment “the single most important thing we can do to demonstrate our commitment to renewable energy and reduce our impact on the environment.”

Caring for the environment is one of Minsteracres three core charitable objectives and the boiler conversion is just part of an ambitious action plan. Their environmental achievements are getting wider recognition, too, most notably by The Conservation Trust (TCV) who designated the retreat as one of 60 Big Green Weekend centres across Europe last Autumn. The event, a first for the North East region, was a great success and TCV have already decided to repeat it in 2013.

*More about Minsteracres: [www.minsteracres.org](http://www.minsteracres.org)*

*Info about DECC Renewable Heat Incentive scheme:*

*[www.gov.uk/government/policies/increasing-the-use-of-low-carbon-technologies/supporting-pages/renewable-heat-incentive-rhi](http://www.gov.uk/government/policies/increasing-the-use-of-low-carbon-technologies/supporting-pages/renewable-heat-incentive-rhi)*

Down in Devon’s Teign valley they’ve been tackling their energy consumption at the Society of Mary and Martha retreat **Sheldon**, a collection of converted farm buildings in some 40 acres of grassy grounds. As well as a 4kw Photovoltaic array on the roof they have installed two solar hot water systems feeding an energy store that serves underfloor heating and domestic hot water.

Sarah Horsman, a member of the Sheldon community, says that they are generally pleased with the impact of this work, not least because the solar panels are already paying their way by bringing in around £1800 of Feed-In Tariff in their first year. Future developments at

Sheldon will include a new accommodation building that will incorporate a ground source heat pump and a green roof.

*More about Sheldon: [www.sheldon.uk.com](http://www.sheldon.uk.com)*

*Info on the Feed-In Tariff system: [www.fitariffs.co.uk](http://www.fitariffs.co.uk)*

Mid-Wales was particularly hard hit by the March snows but Richard Tyler who, with partner Gaynor, runs **Dyffryn Farm** in the Cambrian Mountains still reported being ‘very cosy’ after a fresh four-inch snowfall. The centre combines retreats with self-catering cottage accommodation and had recently benefited from a major insulation operation. “With the help of a local architect we drew up an insulation plan for the farmhouse,” Richard told us. “It involved a large amount of roof insulation and “wrapping” a major part of the building, cladding the insulation with wood featherboarding to preserve and enhance the appearance of the building.”

Like Minsteracres (above) Dyffryn Farm has a ready supply of wood from coppicing trees on a twenty-year cycle so woodburning stoves have been installed as the main source of heating while solar water systems provide the house and cottages with hot water. Future plans involve extending their existing PV panel capacity to reflect their consumption needs – though the current array already gives them a neutral cost for electricity.

One surprise green bonus came when the Tylers went to install a Velux window in the roof and were pleased to discover that the company now makes windows that incorporate solar water heating panels. Using these solved two problems at once and cut down on the amount of slate needed for the roofing, too.

*Dyffryn Farm: [www.dyffrynfarm.co.uk](http://www.dyffrynfarm.co.uk)*

*Velux windows: [www.velux.co.uk](http://www.velux.co.uk)*

## **The question of meat**

*Has your retreat got a policy on serving meat? We'd like to know about your experiences*

We all know that the subject of eating meat is fraught with ethical issues, not least because of some of the horrendous practices associated with the intensive farming of livestock. One thing is unarguable, however, and that is that meat is expensive – both in terms of catering budgets and also in terms of the environmental cost.

The UN Food and Agriculture Organisation estimates that global meat production accounts for nearly 20% of the world's greenhouse gas emissions, while US livestock consumes five times as much grain as the country's human population – enough to feed 800 million people.

When you factor in the ravages of deforestation to provide cattle ranching, the health impact of excessive meat consumption and other negative environmental impacts it's clear that meat consumption comes at a very high price. For this reason many retreats are leading the way in reducing the amount of meat used in their menus, including offering regular meat-free meals.

If you have considered this issue at your retreat centre we would be very interested to hear about your ideas and any benefits or problems that have arisen as a result. Do contact us at the address below.

## **And finally ...**

Well – there you have it! The first of what will be a regular round-up of eco-news from the UK's thriving retreat centre scene. It was certainly great for us at ARC to hear from you all – and especial thanks to Geoff at Minsteracres, Sarah at Sheldon and Richard on Dyffryn Farm for their encouraging stories. Hopefully they might inspire lots of you to share your experiences, whether big or small, positive or negative.

Do please contact us with any thoughts you might have about making the best use of the network and we'll do our best to incorporate them in future issues. Send any comments, queries, stories or other thoughts to us at:

**[tony.benjamin@arcworld.org](mailto:tony.benjamin@arcworld.org)** or **[victoriaf@arcworld.org](mailto:victoriaf@arcworld.org)**

We look forward to hearing from you!

**Tony & Vicky**