

A re-energised Walled Garden project at Priestlands School

The Walled Garden Project at Priestlands School, set up with the aid of an award from the Heritage Lottery Fund is designed to help children engage with the outdoors, giving them the opportunity to grow their own produce and care for the pigs, goats and rescued chickens.

I met with Alex Jamieson, who has completely re-energised the Walled Garden project. She described the involvement of pupils in the Walled Garden. The garden is open to all during Friday lunchtimes and there are small teams of early morning and lunchtime volunteers throughout the week. A small whiteboard lists jobs to be done. Two groups of pupils have regular timetabled slots in the garden and for some it provides a nurturing environment, a great incentive for school participation and respite from the pressures of the school day. Miss Jamieson says, "The garden has helped build confidence and a sense of responsibility for all those involved and has helped all our students engage more positively with academic subjects".



Two rather shy pygmy goats, Juniper and Nutmeg donated by Warborne Farm, wisely remained indoors during my visit on a wet Friday but were sufficiently curious to peer out to assess any potential action or new source of food.

Likewise, the six normally boisterous pigs, were fast asleep. They looked fat but sleek and healthy! The ex-battery hens looked superb and are regularly producing eggs that are collected by a small early morning group of students and are sold to staff. Some remained in their roomy coop during my visit while others scratched and pecked their way around the orchard. Their behaviours are now completely normalised a year after being rescued.

The vegetable garden is not directly managed by Miss Jamieson. "Animals are my thing" she says, and stresses the importance of a division of labour here. A paid part time member of staff clearly pays off as the vegetable garden is highly productive with main crop and early potatoes, several varieties of broad and runner beans; and onions, garlic, courgettes, and pumpkins all doing well. Attractive plants such as the herbs and some crimson flowered Heritage variety broad beans are already encouraging pollinators. With a clear understanding of biodiversity, wildflowers such as borage and comfrey are thoughtful additions to the vegetable garden and currently attract a range of both honeybees and bumblebees. Produce is already sold to staff and as summer progresses this will keep a small team of students increasingly busy.



The poly-tunnel provides welcome respite from the rain. Miss Jamieson explains that it's not only me that appreciates it. This tunnel is also useful for pupils on wet or cold days. It houses peppers, corn, tomatoes and other plants waiting to be planted out. Strawberry plants are heavy with flower and are beginning to set fruit.



There are more raised beds waiting to be filled and planted but as Miss Jamieson explains, it's important to keep things manageable! This is a huge task and taking on too much would not be a recipe for success. Lessons to support the Maths and English curriculum are already held in the Walled Garden and the garden comes into its own during the school's Activities Week. Miss Jamieson pointed out with some excitement that the long planned outdoor classroom is nearing completion. It will provide opportunities for young people to learn outside the classroom as well as a great meeting place for the school's very busy Eco group. Already Miss Jamieson is proud of her latest addition, a set of steps that formerly provided the entrance to one of the temporary classrooms, stands at the edge of the lawned area. She hopes that this will, at least, constitute a great setting for the Romeo and Juliet balcony scene!



So is the Walled Garden project now complete? Not yet, but the school is very definitely getting there and with Miss Jamieson's considerable energy and enthusiasm, it seems that this will be sooner rather than later.