

The A team story

1/04/2010 TO 1/10/2023

BRIAN TULL AND MIKE LUCAS



This is the story of the Infrastructure (“A”) Team. This team takes care of the tools, storage, and communal spaces at Highbridge Community Farm. Without them, our Farm would be a very different place.

We’ve gone from this bare field ...



...to this established community farm.



Getting started



We arrived at the farm in April 2010 with a large coil of blue string and an ex-Scouts tent in not very good condition. (It had a rip in the roof.)

Members brought their own gardening tools and got to work clearing and levelling the ground that Henry had ploughed. The field had previously been used by cows so it was fenced on three sides. The 4th was the tree line.

The metal frame for what is now Polytunnel 1 had been erected but then left so we inherited it. A poly cover appeared, not sure where from, and under the direction of Sue and Steven and helped by many others, Polytunnel 1 was completed. One of the members had business contacts to a horticulture supply business and obtained the aluminium benching free of charge.



At first, watering was done by going to the pond and filling up watering cans! Mike and Les obtained a battery garden pump to pump water to a horse trough located at the pond's edge. This was improved with a metal IBC replacing the trough. (The IBC is now used to store liquid feed.) Second-hand sheds started to appear and an informal group of members with building/DIY experience and tools repaired and erected these as well as working on their plots.

The informal group mainly consisted of Mike and Les Lucas, Tony Murells and Brian Tull. The group met on Monday and Wednesday mornings.

A fence was installed along the tree line by Andrew Ross, Brian and Henry on his tractor. It was a hot day and millions of Mayflies decided to hatch and fly around and on us.

Second-hand cultivators and mowers were donated. Some of these needed mechanical attention from Tony. Mike arranged the purchase of a mowing tractor and a garage was built to house them, using fence panels and timber donated by Henry. Mike installed a solar panel to charge the mowing tractor's battery.

Mike designed the first five compost bins and, with the help of others, built them with wooden pallets obtained from various sources. A second set of compost bins - the "in bins" - were built as the amount of material increased.



(Look at those bins now...)



Mike installed several water butts to drown the pernicious weeds.

To improve irrigation, Mike and Les fitted the pump by the pond and the system of pipes to allow the IBCs to be filled using the fire hoses and garden hoses. Tony maintained the pump and the IBC valves for many years. A series of standpipes were placed along the central road so garden hoses could be used when the pump was running.

Henry gave us a small marquee in which to display our veg and make the tea and coffee. Shelving and kitchen equipment was donated by B&Q from their headquarters upgrade.



Growing on

As the number and amount of veg that we were growing increased, it was clear we needed a bigger space.

Henry supplied a Portacabin to use as a tea hut. The hut had a problem with the roof; "it only had half of one"! Mike and Les fitted a new one then fitted two gas water heaters. Later, cupboards, worktops and drawers were installed by Will and Brian. Mike and Les ran the underground mains water pipe from the tea hut to the meter box by the crane park.



At tea break, members gathered along the fence line.



Now we have a large communal area.

Henry agreed to us erecting a large shed to store our large crop of potatoes. To avoid the need for planning permission, it had to be sectional so that it was classed as temporary. The size was agreed and the footings dug out in the late Autumn. Members who could be spared from their plots concreted the base. The shed sections arrived in the pouring rain and were unloaded by a large number of very wet members.





Leaving some history behind

Members were told when we were going to erect the shed and, if they wanted to write their names and dates etc around the edge of the concrete base, it would then be covered by the damp proof course and then the frame of the shed. The next week, everybody wrote messages, names and dates which will only be read in years to come when the Big Green Shed is dismantled.

On all the sheds, play hut and cages built after this time, Brian has written the start/finish date and who was involved with the work. These messages are hidden under wooden floors, behind panelling and door frames.

Becoming a permanent team

The building and maintenance were mainly still carried out by Mike, Les and Brian with others helping repair holes in fences etc. as required but as more crops were grown, more tools needed to be stored and more tea and cake was being consumed, we needed a more permanent maintenance team.

Mike started installing solar panels, lights, power points and pumps plus tea hut duties full time, Les left the farm and moved out of the area, Brian carried on repairing sheds, building and repairing gates and building the netting storage shed.

At around this time, the marquee was returned to Henry and the first part of the produce sales area was given a roof. The materials were purchased from a friend of Jim's.



In the early years, seedlings were hardened off on tables in the seating area. It was decided to build a cage as a hardening off/ drying area.



Because of the amount of work this involved, Brian passed the team leadership of plot 19/20 to Deb and went on maintenance full time. It was during the erection of the frame of this cage that Will Meyerink wandered by and asked if Brian needed a hand. He's been here ever since!

Will and Brian erected the composting toilet. Mike installed lighting connected to the solar panels that provide power to the tea hut, to the Big Green Shed and to the toilet.

As the membership grew to 130, we needed more space to display our produce so the produce sales area roof was extended by Will, Allan, Terry and Brian.

Henry agreed that we could install a mains water supply to the Polytunnels by cutting a "T" piece into the tea hut supply. Mike and Paul then installed a water meter in a box in Polytunnel 3, Mike and Bryn dug trenches to Polytunnel 1 and 2 then fitted taps with hose pipe connections.

The team increased with Alan Ironside joining to maintain the machinery and cut the grass. Alan Dibden, Trevor and Ian joined for a few months helping with extending the machine shed and maintaining the wheelbarrows. Terry joined when we erected the potato storage shed and enlarged and fitted new posts and netting on the raspberry cage. This took seven months.



Continuing the works

The Fruit Team had built a large soft fruit cage in the adjoining area to the main field and needed a shed to store and weigh fruit. A shed was obtained which needed work to make it fit for purpose. After a month's work, it was assembled, then shortly after it was struck by lightning and burnt to the ground. Eastleigh Lions supplied a new shed which was fitted out with some kitchen base units, work tops and purpose-made apple storage shelving.

A gate was installed in the field perimeter fence to provide easy access between the field and the fruit area.



Due to deer jumping the existing fence, the height was raised by Paul, Toby, Bryn and others who could be spared from their plots.

During the Covid restrictions in 2020 Will and a small team dismantled a row of wooden compost bins and replaced them with concrete block walls. It was during this time that our title was changed from Maintenance team to the "A" team?

The enlarged raspberry cage was finished in early 2023 and the team was enlarged by Bryn joining full time. The next job was to fit a stable door and an openable ventilation window in Polytunnel 4 before moving on to the larger job of fitting new doors to the other three Polytunnels - six doors and six filler panels in total. All the doors have openable ventilation windows. This work has taken seven months.



In a move to reduce the use of the petrol pump, a group got together to design a solar-powered irrigation system. Mike designed an IBC with a filtration system and, with the help of Henry and his big digger, dug a hole in the pond which Mike (dressed in waders) refined to allow the IBC to be lowered into place. A battery box was fitted, solar panels erected, water meters housed and a pump installed. Henry and his small digger dug trenches along the central road and out to the Fruit Team area. Mike installed a "Well Pump" and connected this to the existing stand pipe system so that the hose pipes can be used in place of the petrol pump. Bryn installed ball cocks in all the IBCs. The Fruit Team installed an irrigation system assisted by a solar panel and battery.

During all these jobs, other small jobs have been completed including painting fruit, veg and insects on the benches. This was carried out by Eileen who joined with Gill to paint the play hut. Gill also painted the picture on the glass window.



Other jobs include refitting door handles, hinges, paint sheds, repair seats, build tables and bag storage shelving etc.

Always a list of jobs to do

Jobs in the pipeline include:

1. Rebuilding the compost "in bins" with concrete posts and blocks.
2. Repair/rebuild the 2 seat metal frame benches.
3. Repair the "log cabin" tool shed.
4. Connect Polyunnel 4 to the existing water system from Polyunnel 1.
5. Double-stack IBCs if and when Henry can source them.
6. Investigate the possibility of automatic irrigation systems from the upper IBCs.
7. Replace the vent at the end of Polyunnel 4 with a door to provide increased ventilation.

The list goes on and on.

Thank you

The above are a fraction of the infrastructure work that has been carried out by the named and many unnamed members since 2010 who have put in extra work in addition to their crop growing duties; a big thank you goes out to all.

HIGHBRIDGE is where we are.

COMMUNITY is what we are.

FARM is what we do.

Brian and Mike. 1/10/2023

(Photos: Brian Tull and Steve Grundy)