

A black and white photograph of a cow grazing in a field. In the background, there is a tall, multi-story apartment building with many windows. The cow is dark-colored with a white face and legs. The text "STEPPING STONES" is overlaid in red, bold, sans-serif capital letters.

"STEPPING STONES"

a community farm project in
Stepney, East London

A
BASSAC
Publication

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“STEPPING STONES”

**a community farm project in
Stepney, East London**

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written by Nigel Winfield of the
Stepping Stones staff.

*BASSAC LAUNCHES the first of its PUBLICATIONS SERIES with **Stepping Stones**, an innovative farm project set up in 1978 with the assistance of **Dame Colet House**, a BASSAC centre in Stepney, London. In this flowing narrative of **Stepping Stones'** history, the author presses a point that "Stepping Stones does not claim to be a 'typical' community farm. It cannot be as there can be no such thing. The character of every farm is the result of local initiative and circumstances."*

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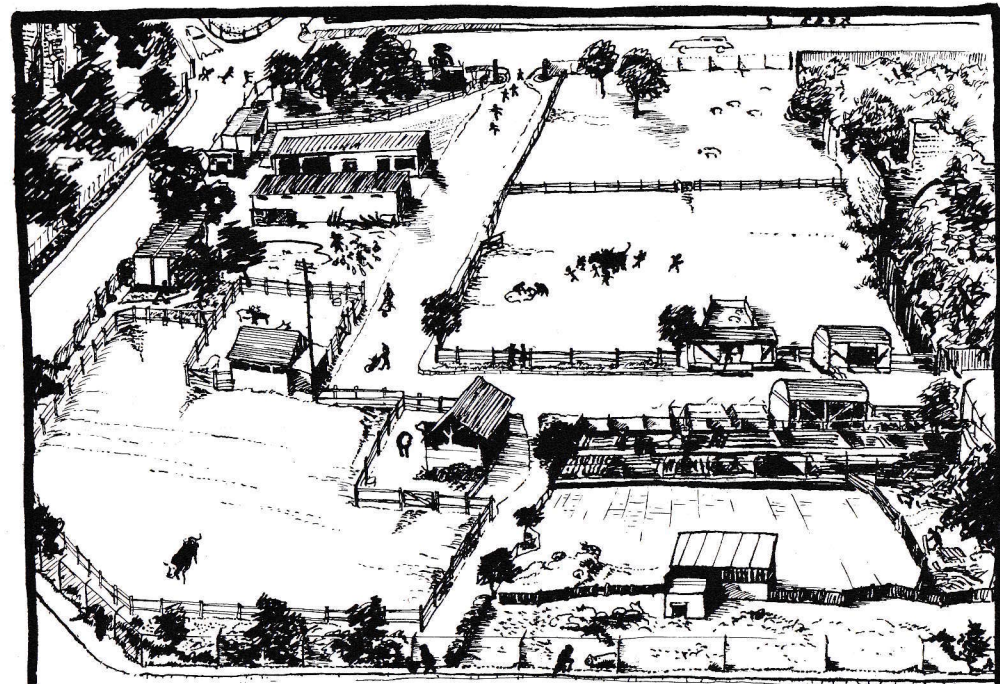
Background

The *East End*, most of which is covered by the London Borough of Tower Hamlets, has been for centuries a point of arrival for newcomers to this country. The changing use of one building in the borough illustrates this. Built as a Huguenot chapel in 1742, it later became a Methodist chapel, then a synagogue, and is currently a mosque.

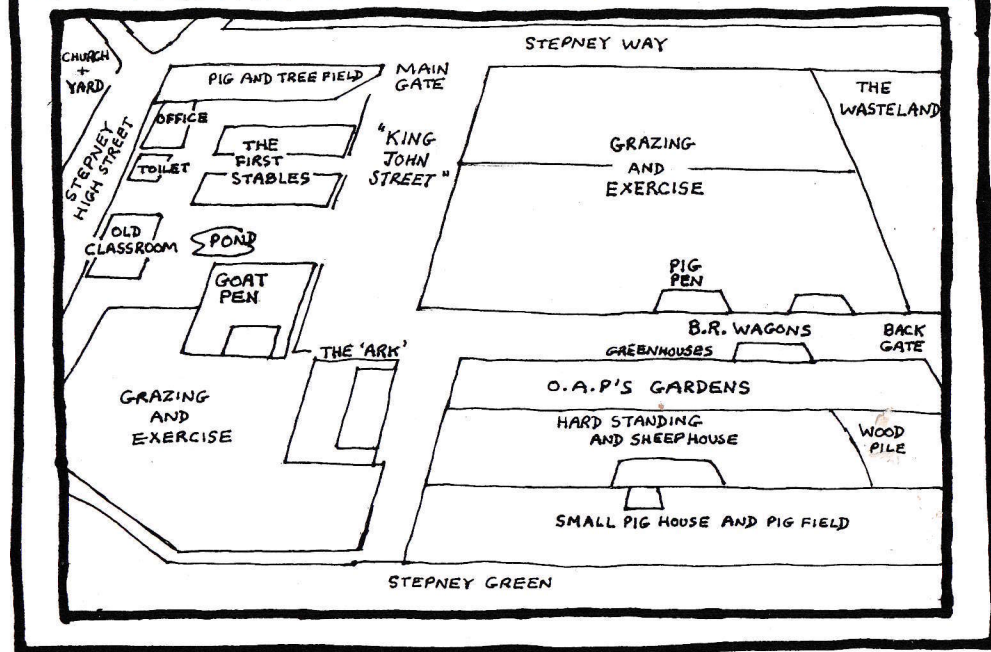
The environmental background of social change has not always been so consistent, and since the 1939-45 war, the East End has seen some dramatic changes – some for better, some for worse.

One effect of redevelopment has been the creation of pockets of derelict land which, apart from being ugly and dangerous, represent wasted opportunities for housing, and for the provision of meaningful open space.

When local people wish to improve housing, they can form co-operatives or tenants' associations. When they want to improve wasteland, they can take it over and run it themselves. This is what happened at *Stepping Stones*.



THE FARM IN JANUARY 1986~WITH IMAGINARY SUMMER WEATHER.



Early Days

The state of the area around King John Street, Stepney, was particularly distressing, due to the contrast with the adjacent Saint Dunstons Church and churchyard, the oldest building and open space in the borough. It may be of interest to note that the proximity of the ancient and probably pre-Christian church site puts this area on a 'ley line', an invisible channel along which beneficent cosmic forces are supposedly concentrated.

Rubbing shoulders with the church is *Dame Colet House*, a community centre that was founded in 1910 as a Settlement by St Paul's Girls School. It has since become the focus of many community-based activities as well as providing an advice service. Without Dame Colet House, there would have been no farm and the King John Street site would probably still be derelict. It would be difficult, even unfair, to attribute the farm idea to any individual, but certainly by early 1978, the community worker at Dame Colet House was working with local people who wanted to see something done with the site. There were already several successful community farms in London so it was not an original idea, but it was a happy choice as the possibilities inspired people from all sections of the community.

1978 to 1979 was a period of forming steering groups and committees, putting out publicity and petitions and negotiating with various authorities. This activity had two aims: to get the farm properly constituted and funded through Urban Aid, and to get actual physical possession of the four-acre site.

In this period Dame Colet House let the farm have an office and were generous with their time, expertise and facilities – all at little or no charge. A large hen house with hens, a premature donation, found a home in the residents' garden and provided a tantalising glimpse of things to come. Even after the farm moved onto its site in September 1979, it was still reliant on Dame Colet House for a long time, as even the most basic services were not immediately available.

Now in 1986, the Farm and Dame Colet House are equal partners in making Stepney a better place to live. And if in winter the 'farmers' tend to spin out any business they may have in the warm community centre, in summer the community centre is glad it helped to set up a farm on its doorstep.



The Site

The story of the first year or so on the site has accumulated a lot of legend. A high-sided lorry was used to remove rubbish and debris and over the years, in the telling, the number of loads removed rose to 150. Recently the man who drove the lorry called in to the farm and emphatically fixed the number at 82. That was still a load of rubbish!

In many ways this first period of building and clearing was a great one for the farm. Certainly in terms of concerted action by a whole community, it was and it is quite right that people should look back with pride and nostalgia at this period of high energy and excitement. This is not to say that the farm is no longer well-rooted in the community and that it is no longer a source of interest – far from it. It is just that the birth of a baby is a wonderful thing, but it only happens once. From then on it is growing up, a different process altogether.

The site was initially licensed from the Greater London Council (GLC) though it has now been transferred to the borough. Tenure of the site is fairly secure as it is incorporated into the Borough Plan and any move to dispose of it would be strongly resisted. The fact that ordinary local people can run or closely identify with such a relatively large public space is, in many ways, more remarkable than the fact that it is a livestock farm in London E1. Animals can be kept in most marginal land, but when that land is a mile from an expanding City of London, and only a few hundred yards from the Docklands development area, then getting it and holding it for the community becomes the main issue.

The site's development falls into three overlapping phases. The first was to clear enough junk away to find ground level. The second was to put up a boundary and internal fencing, animal housing and 'people housing'. Two ex-GLC mobile homes provided instant, if not elegant, 'people housing'. A stable block was built using mostly voluntary labour and donated materials. Internal fencing was built out of materials taken from skips, derelict buildings and, again, donations. The biggest initial expenditure was for the chainlink boundary fence, a compulsory but worthwhile investment as the animals regularly showed their contempt for 'skip fencing' and went over, under or crashing through it depending on age, size and inclination. The external fence at least kept them on the farm.

Here is where a farm differs from other community projects. Any reasonably competent group of people can beg, steal or borrow inanimate materials and use them to a given end, but when animals come on the scene it is, as they say, a whole different ball game. Even the most boisterous visitor to an adventure playground does not weigh 450 kilos and have twelve-inch horns, and it is doubtful if any nursery has a six-month-old whose main interest in life is breaking kerb stones with her snout.

However, the farm's fabric, with its rickety fencing, dubious topsoil and unspeakable lavatory, survived long enough to become eligible for capital grants from the Tower Hamlets Inner Area Programme (THIAP). Since 1983, the money available from this new 'partnership' scheme, run by local and central government, has changed the face of the farm, marking the third and latest phase in its development. THIAP has also provided revenue grants, which meant that the staff could be expanded from two to three full-time workers – still a small number for such a large project – though the capital grants have made their routine work easier. The farm now has purpose-built stock fencing with gates that actually open and shut, ex-railway wagons for storage and animal housing, a toilet block, paths where wheelbarrow ruts had gone before, greenhouses and fencing for the gardeners' plots, good topsoil and animal transport and handling equipment. THIAP still has a few years to run and the Inner London Education Authority (ILEA) has made a firm commitment to supplying a new classroom and office through its allocation in the programme.



By virtue of its achievements in a less favoured time, the farm certainly earned all this. At THIAP public consultations, it was gratifying to hear the spontaneous and unanimous support for the project. However, with such partnership programmes the way they are, one can't help getting the feeling that the farm was just lucky to be in the right place at the right time.

Because of the irregularity of capital funding over the years, and to a lesser extent the distant possibilities of contraction or expansion of the site, long-term planning has been virtually impossible. This 'Planning Blight' has understandably caused confusion and irritation among those concerned with the physical development of the farm. The tried and trusted way to defeat the paralysis that this can cause is to just go ahead with voluntary labour and donated materials, rather than to wait for an external decision that may or may not supply the money or space for a new development.

Life would certainly have been easier if the farm had had all the money it has ever had, in one go on week one. This would have led to a more rationally laid out and better looking farm, but would have excluded much individual and group effort. The farm site has developed like the English landscape, in fits and starts, and though this has occasionally led to some wasted effort, it does reflect the involvement, growth and changing approach of the community to which the farm belongs.

Animals

Whole books have been written about the psychological and ethical relationships between people and animals, and there is not the space here to go into the subject in any depth. Whatever the ethical position, it is a fact that animals are a significant part of our economy and that there is a related pleasure in simply having animals around. A feeling for animals is shared by those who rely on livestock for their living and those opposed to their exploitation in any form. It leads to many contradictions, and sometimes to hypocrisy on a grand scale, but there is a strong force at work here, which can bring out the best and worst in people.



In Stepney, the prospect of keeping farm animals in a way that would be accessible to the community provided the unifying force and inspiration that made the development of the farm so remarkable. It might be technically possible, especially in these lamentable days of intensification, to set up enough livestock units in the inner city to supply the inner city. In fact there were many 'town dairies' in the East End prior to the 1939-45 war, and older people remember seeing cows taking occasional exercise on such open space as was available. But these purely commercial ventures, like any that might follow them, had only an incidental social value. It is the built-in social aims of the community farm that make it special. Apart from the way that it is constituted to encourage and rely on local involvement, the animals, though totally unaware of it, do a great job in breaking down barriers between people. The bottle-rearing of orphan lambs by young people is a commonplace in the country. In the early days of the farm in Stepney, it caused a sensation!

It must be admitted that though the best advice was available, the initial approach to livestock was vague, even naive. It may be true for journalists that "You can't go wrong with children and animals." Outside the world of the media, things can go very wrong indeed, as the very qualities, real or imagined, that made them such 'good copy' can make the community farm an emotional minefield.

From conversations with the then community worker at Dame Colet House, it becomes clear that, though there were originally no plans to raise animals for meat, the implications of having even a few milking goats had not been considered. As every dairy farmer knows, and every milk-drinking vegetarian ought to know, the kid or calf whose birth causes the first flush of milk is a valuable by-product if sold at the right weight. Even if no males are born, a farmer cannot go on rearing replacement milkers indefinitely.



It was a great event when the first kids were born, but one was a billy and the issue had to be faced. Previously, chickens and rabbits have been culled, or in a discreet way, sold for the table. But here was 'Henry', the first of the large animals to be born on the farm – an 'event'. So was his despatch to the slaughterhouse, which marked the end of a period of 'innocence' and a 'coming of age' for the farm.

The alternative would have been to have had a non-productive and static animal population. Apart from the limited educational value and general interest of this, it would have earned the 'farm' the well-deserved contempt of its country cousins rather than the slightly amused respect it now enjoys. The increase in the range of animals and the development of a realistic farming policy was gradual, matching the changing aims and growing confidence of the project. By the spring of 1982, the farm had a full range of traditional farm livestock: rabbits, poultry, goats, sheep, pigs, cattle and horses.

Some thirty horses are privately kept in the Stepney area. Reflecting this familiarity, which has a long and continuous history, the farm acquired its own horses for use by the community at large. It has been shown elsewhere in the borough that it is possible to run an excellent community-orientated riding school given the appropriate staff and facilities. At Stepping Stones, despite dedicated voluntary help, it proved impossible to keep and use horses properly. After one last try, it was regrettably but realistically decided to get out of horses altogether. However, the farm is currently (January 1986) supporting a scheme whereby local horse owners hope to develop wasteland next to the farm as a proper riding school. Maybe in this the farm can do more towards providing riding facilities for the people of Stepney than it ever did when it had its own horses.

The absence of horses and the presence of a slaughter policy are a source of surprise or chagrin to some visitors and users, but for the vast majority, the farm's modest livestock enterprise is a permanent source of approval and interest. A brief description of it will, as well as satisfy the technically-minded or the just-curious, give some idea of the educational and recreational opportunities that it provides. Remember, although the farm has staff, local people are involved at every stage. These opportunities are not easily available to most people in the country or on the urban fringe, so if one is thinking of getting out of town and living "The Good Life", the best place to experience life on a 'mixed smallholding' may well be in the inner city.

The farm has limited grazing, really only enough for six sheep or one milch cow if one is trying for 'self-sufficiency'. In order to make a good number and variety of animals, they are on bought-in feed for much of the year. The negative financial and environmental aspects of this are lessened by the use of waste food – brewers' grain, bread and vegetables – all of which are often available in vast quantities. The build-up of disease and damage to the land is prevented by moving the animals around, vaccines and the use of concrete exercise yards. Our aim is the same as that of 'real' farmers: to keep healthy livestock at a low cost for maximum returns.



Stepney livestock are healthier than the balance of the farm's livestock account. A typical year may involve a direct expenditure on animals – feed purchase and veterinary, of £3000, income from sales of £1000, and an end-of-year stock value of £1000. This means that though some individual operations, like pigs, might pay, the farm is losing £1000 a year on the animals. This deficit must be cleared by donations and fundraising. At the time of writing, the farm has more animals than ever before, but as they are nearly all housed or yarded for the winter, the casual passerby is not aware of this. Every winter this apparent disappearance of the animals leads to concern about the well-being of the farm, which highlights its importance as a local landmark, even for those who rarely come through the gate.

The following chart will give some idea of what animals the farm has and how they fit into it.

Animals on the Farm, January 1986



CATTLE

- 1 Guernsey/Limousin X (crossbred) cow — 'double-suckler': rears her own calf and one other; expecting her third calf; 'ran with' bull in country for first calf; artificial insemination used subsequently.
- 2 6-month-old Hereford X's — suckling cow mentioned above; will be sold in Spring as 'stores', for further fattening by country farmer.
- 1 yearling Simmental X heifer — 'orphan' or surplus calves from dairy herd; bought at market at about a week old, they get milk from a bucket until weaned; the two yearlings will be taken up to slaughter weight and sold at market; no decision yet on the two young ones.
- 1 yearling Sussex X steer
- 1 2-month-old Charolais X steer
- 1 1-month-old Hereford X heifer

SHEEP

- 3 Kent (Romney Marsh) ewes — to lamb in February; lambs to be sold at market
- 3 Suffolk X ewes
- 1 Jacob ewe — idle till next mating season
- 1 Kent ram — a useless mouth with sentimental value; keeps the real ram company and also likes going to school
- 1 castrated ram

Adult sheep are sheared on the premises and the wool used for handspinning and weaving.



PIGS

- 1 'Gloucester Old Spot' — docile, attractive and hardy breeding sow
- 9 piglets from above — pedigree first litter; some to be sold to breeders, some for meat; next litter will be Large White X's by natural service.

GOATS

- 4 Nanny goats, 2 Saanen, and — produce milk for human consumption and calf-rearing; also meat (from kids)
- 2 any-other-variety — reared from adolescence for mating and fees; good looks and rare breed compensate for awful smell.
- 1 Golden Guernsey Billygoat

POULTRY AND RABBITS

for fun and decoration; occasional sale for the table.

A DONKEY — lazy and good-natured, so makes an ideal seat for young children; on extended loan from neighbouring project.

With all the comings and goings implied in the chart, there are times when the farm really is, mainly by contrast, low on animals. This provides people, disappointed at not meeting week-old lambs in September, with a direct experience and understanding of the seasonal and cyclical limitations of livestock production. But this turnover means that a visit to the farm always provides something new or something to look forward to, whether the visitor is there looking for something to do, or just looking.

Under the guidance of farm staff, volunteers of all ages are involved in the routine day to day care of the animals: feeding, watering, milking and mucking out. They also help with the more occasional stock tasks like assisting at births, administering drugs and medicines, shearing, foot trimming, halter training and, one that requires a great deal of patience and determination, teaching a calf to drink milk from a bucket.

Just as important for the animals and just as valuable an experience for the participants are the animal-related activities; i.e. those that involve little direct contact with the animals. These include making sure that a shelter is finished on time, cutting down weeds on the wasteland to supply the appropriate rough and varied diet for the goats, or simply checking the grazing areas for plastic bags or bits of glass. Many people have a rather romanticised idea of what looking after animals is about. This emphasis on preventative measures and long-term management helps them develop an understanding of the real needs of the animals and of their responsibilities towards them.



What do the animals think of all this? One must be careful of attributing human characteristics, needs and desires to animals as this can lead to serious misjudgments and misunderstandings. However, as far as one can tell, Stepney livestock are "happy". They have an appropriate diet, exercise, the companionship of their own kind and the opportunities for normal behaviour that are denied to so many factory-reared animals. They are potentially more subject to stress than picture-book farm animals, but as many were born and bred in Stepney, or brought there at an early age, this is lessened by familiarity.

The Ministry of Agriculture vet who inspects the farm annually is well satisfied, and the farm's general approach to livestock has been approved by "Compassion in World Farming", a less official but more demanding body. The rights and wrongs of keeping animals are a subject of debate, but there can be no debate without information. Even at the simple level of making people see the connection between "pork" and "pig", the farm provides this.





People

Though it has a large non-human population, Stepping Stones, like any other community project, is about people, their needs, wishes and responsibilities. The presence of animals is what makes it so special, but how is it, as in one description, “a four-acre open-air social club run by and for the community”? Though some people persist in the belief that it is (must be!) run by “The Council”, the majority are aware of its independent, charitable status and its consequent vulnerability – an important pre-condition for support.

There is a membership, though people do not have to be members to visit the farm. For a small annual subscription, members are sent a quarterly newsletter, notification of important meetings, events and consultations. They are also eligible to vote for, or stand for, the Management Committee at the Annual General Meeting. This committee is legally responsible for the farm and its overall policy. Meetings, are held monthly and, for most business, are open to all farm members. There are special sub-committees for events and, particularly important since the THIAP capital projects began, site development.

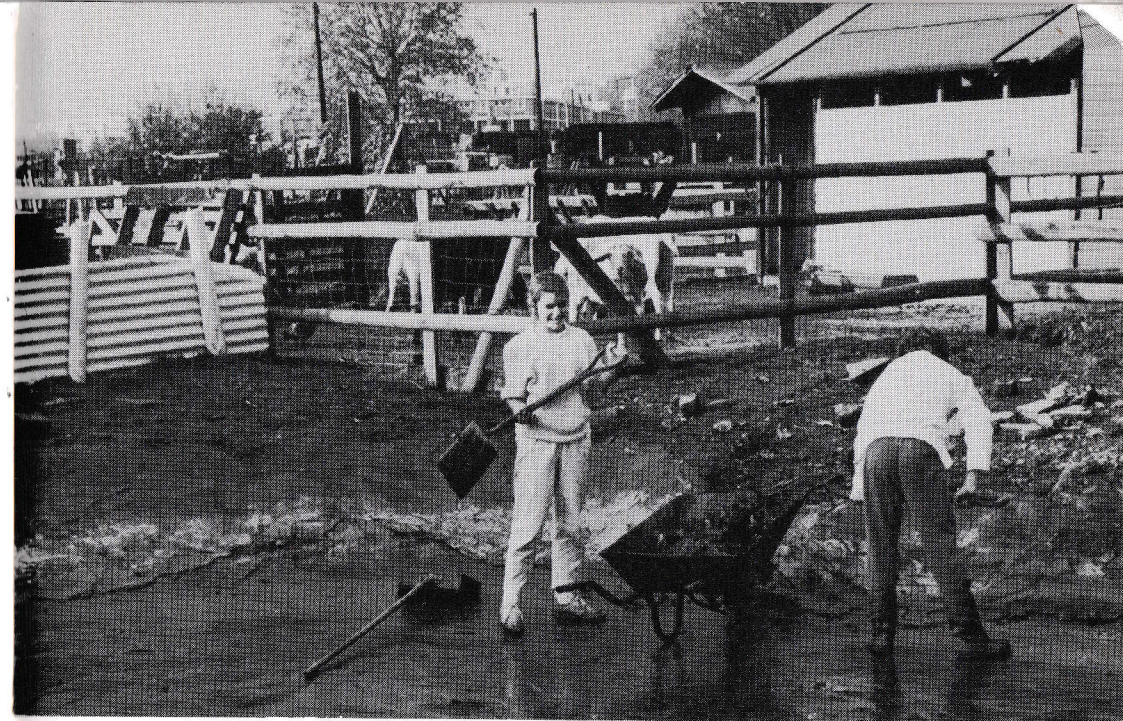
The committee appoints and employs the three full-time workers who are collectively responsible for the day to day running of the farm. Since the committee does not meet daily, it is not always easy to make a clear-cut definition of what is a ‘policy’ decision and what is a ‘day to day’ decision; and definitions have changed over the years. As with any voluntary organisation that employs staff, it is important to avoid the two extremes of wasting meeting time with trivia, and that of reducing the committee to a ‘rubber stamp’ for staff decisions and initiatives.



Information and communication are important if this is not to happen, and the staff present a monthly report which covers animals, people, site and administrative issues, and look for policy decisions within the current definition. Committee members, most of whom were originally quite carefree visitors, and who live near the farm, visit regularly during the month so they need not rely totally on staff reports for information. This means that they are able to discuss business with an authority derived from observation and experience, and that the staff have the opportunity to conduct a 'straw poll' on any emergency issue.

Being a committee member of any organisation is not easy as it involves an approach to issues of policy, employment and fundraising that are apparently far removed from its primary aim. The aims and needs of a community farm may seem straightforward but the management of it is quite complex, not least because of the sheer size of the site. Over the years at Stepping Stones, there has been a high turnover of management members. However, the committee has always had a good mix of people born and bred in Stepney, and of newcomers to the borough, all of different ages, races and social backgrounds.

There is also a large and mixed body of people who do not care for committee work but who are regular visitors to the farm and can be called on for support at anytime. To divide 'supporters' and 'users' into two different groups would be to give the wrong impression of how the farm fits into its community. So having given an idea of who the farm is run in a formal sense, it is now time to look at its users/supporters.



It is widely, though inaccurately, thought that the farm exists only for children. Stepping Stones does however have plenty of young users, with a small, dedicated and competent group of regulars, mainly 'youth', and a vast pool of casuals, mainly 'kids'. This means that though there may be only two to three children on the farm at a time, a day may see twenty or thirty passing through. Sometimes, the site and the staff's ability to find enough meaningful 'jobs' may be swamped by a large number of children turning up all at once. On these occasions, it is useful to have something to demolish or, slightly safer, an inflatable on the premises. As an inflatable is shared with the other two farms in the borough, this can usually be provided; in its absence, a football or a knowledge of non-competitive games can be useful.

Though the farm has many of the characteristics and aims of an adventure playground it is also, to the great satisfaction of local parents, akin to the old fashioned park and playground with its familiar, if sometimes dreaded, 'parky'. That the farm is perceived as a safe place for children is particularly important for Stepney's large Bangladeshi population. Joint projects with Dame Colet House, especially with their Bangladeshi Women's Worker, have encouraged this. Many children boast of familiarity with goats from their days in Bangladesh but are not particularly expert when it comes to milking them! As the farm provides the opportunity to learn such skills and helps their children keep in touch with their recent rural origins and traditions, the farm is popular with Bangladeshi parents.



Large numbers of children come with their school, and often come back after the visit. In 1984-85 the farm had 150 visits representing some 40 schools, mainly primary and local. Because of the more formal nature of secondary schools, involvement with the farm has been limited to "work experience" or similar projects, and the occasional art class. ILEA is increasing its capital investment in the farm. A matching commitment to revenue, in the shape of a schools worker, would be of inestimable value as at current staff levels, it is often difficult to give full attention to visiting groups, and 'outreach' and development work is the stuff of dreams.

Though it does not run on its own Youth Training Scheme, the farm has had five placements from 'agencies', but only when the allowance can be topped up to the approved union rate. The farm shares with many other community groups a distrust for MSC schemes, but there is no denying the value, for both trainee and farm, of our experience so far.

The very young are brought to the farm by their parents or grandparents and at least one regular visitor admits to having never come to the farm before her firstborn arrived. He is growing into a strong lad, so everyone is looking forward to getting some good work out of him when he is big enough to come on his own.

At the other end of the age range, there are eight gardening plots for pensioners, developed on an area which was initially as unpromising as the rest of the site. Through their own hard work and an injection of THIAP funds, the pensioners now have one of the best set up community gardens around, incidentally supplying the farm with a small but maintenance-free display of arable farming. The gardens give the pensioners a special interest in the well-being of the farm and all have given a lot of time to it. Being built round an old road means that, with some adaptations, the whole far is easily accessible for older people and people with disabilities, and special buses can drive right in.

The site is open to view from the roads that pass it and which incidentally, illuminate it at night. This has helped in keeping down vandalism, though physical precautions at any project are inadequate without a measure of respect and identification. The farm can claim some success here even if the only measure is the absence of serious incidents.

One could, given the nature of the project, define a serious incident as a deliberate act that causes or could cause cruelty to animals, so that veterinary treatment or euthanasia is needed. With blood sports practised at all levels of our society, it is not surprising that, once, some rabbits were stolen and used for coursing. Though this does not justify the action, it makes it easier to swallow than two other attacks on rabbits which, it is hoped, were the result of mental disturbance rather than someone's idea of a good night out. Within the definition above, these have been the only serious incidents in the farm's history. During the day, there may be occasional teasing, poking, pulling and chasing, ninety-nine per cent of the time due to excitement and thoughtlessness. A kind or harsh word, as appropriate, usually puts a stop to this for good. There is little evidence that casual intrusions at night are a problem though sometimes the staff come in in the morning to find the cattle queuing up outside the feed store and one of the beautiful new gates gently swinging in the wind.

A farm as "low tech" as Stepping Stones offers few exciting opportunities for damage to property. Fire is a worry especially with so much hay and straw about, and twice stores have been deliberately set alight. No animals could have been hurt by these fires and one likes to think that whoever started the fires had considered this first. The farm has every reason to be proud of its low level of vandalism but the real acknowledgement must go to its sharp-eyed and responsible community. The spontaneous support, financial and physical, that followed 'The Big Fire' turned a disaster into a peculiar kind of triumph.

The farm is open every day of the year, except Mondays, from 9.30 till 1.00 and from 2.00 till 6.00, often much longer in summer. The lunch time closing, an opportunity to conduct off-site business as well as a break for the staff, can be a bit disruptive. But it is often waived if there are enough staff or adult volunteers around, especially if people have really got their teeth into something. With these opening hours, no entrance fee and such a variety of users, it is not surprising that the farm has become an "open air social club".

On the farm, people meet and get to know each other, drawn together by a common interest in the animals and the attractions of a well appointed and supervised open space. There is only one thing that the farm lacks to take this day to day sociability to new heights, and that is the chance, currently open only to the exceptionally favoured or deserving, to have a cup of tea. The 1986 THIAP developments are designed to provide the premises for this and could, in a modest way, lead to job creation and an increase in the farm's income.

Events



Stepping Stones really takes off as a social centre when it has one of its famous 'events'. These have a dual purpose in providing entertainment for the community and money for the farm. The farm has of necessity developed a special talent for the open air event and its festivals are the equal of any held in the borough. Some even maintain that by making the most of a shoestring budget and involving the community, they have surpassed in quality, if not quantity, the major GLC festivals.

Most community festivals rely on borrowed space and the goodwill of park keepers and traffic wardens. At Stepping Stones, the familiar lumber of a festival – P.A., tables and chairs, marquees and stage – can be brought into and set up on a reasonably secure site well before the starting time, thereby cutting out a lot of last-minute panic. Water, electricity and toilets are all laid on. Also the organisers can say: “This is our space, we can do what we want with it and we can put it all back together on Monday, next weekend or next month”.

The farm has three or more major events a year. Some, like horse shows and gymkhanas, goat shows, sheep shearing displays and, that most democratic of events, the Mongrel Dog Show, are directly related to its character as a farm and animal centre. But even these events are mainly the centrepiece for the stalls, sideshows, games and performers. One of the most spectacular events that had little relation to farming was the “Wild West Day” in the summer of 1983. A few modest proposals for props and decorations got right out of hand and in two weeks the huge woodpile and the farm itself were transformed into a Wild West Town worthy of any Hollywood set. On the day itself, people came dressed in the appropriate gear and a local Wild West Club laid on shoot-outs, Indian dancing and authentic face painting. That summer was so dry and hot that it was possible to sweep up the sheep dung in the grazing areas and use one for a barn dance in the evening.

Also that summer, working with other groups in Stepney, especially Dame Colet House, the farm hosted part of the “Stepney Green Festival”. This will long be remembered as “The day we closed the roads”, thereby reclaiming Stepney Green for the pedestrian. Three days later, with much useful equipment still on site, the farm held its first “Under Fives Day”. An encouraging number of under fives arrived, in large groups, at the published starting time when, of course, nothing was ready. They stayed for an hour or so, then went off for lunch and a sleep. This taught the farm a basic, and with hindsight, obvious principle of running an event for a defined age group: consider the group’s specific needs and work closely with someone who knows them.



In the Summer of 1985, two such ‘specialist’ events were held on the farm, a “Pensioners’ Day” and a “Parents and Toddlers Day”. For these the farm was really only just making its space available, and back-up was minimal. The bulk of the organisation fell on the ‘experts’, in the first case the Pensioners’ Action Group from Dame Colet House, and in the second, the borough’s Pre-school Playgroup Association. This approach will be extended to other groups in the future.

Plenty of voluntary help is an absolute necessity for a festival and it is remarkable what commitment and talent can be found locally. The two-day farm festival in 1985 highlighted the value of one group of users that has not so far been mentioned – people on placement from the Probation Office doing Community Service Orders. For this, the farm was fortunate to have one person who runs a disco who pulled strings to get hold of a massive pa system and ‘backline’ at a very reasonable rate. Another was an excellent children’s entertainer and puppeteer. In a coincidence that really gives one faith in the philosophy of the ‘CSO’, a man who had finished his hours at the farm years previously, turned up out of the blue with his whole family, and they worked into the small hours to finish the stage on time.

As well as having its own events, the farm often takes the animals to other people's. These can range from taking one goat to a nursery school fete to taking nearly all the animals to a three-day GLC festival on the South Bank. Though the farm must be careful not to overcommit itself, attendance at these events makes a good day out for the helpers, publicises the farm and, for the bigger festivals, provides an opportunity to work with and get to know people from the other London farms. They can also be a source of revenue, and in the damp summer of 1985 the farm would not have reached its target of £1000 from events without them.

One visitor to the farm, under the extraordinary impression that the farm itself was such a transitory event, asked how many days it was going to go on for. He was told that this 'event' had been going on, and was going to continue going on, for many years.



Looking back, it is amusing and instructive to remember that the first farm 'event' consisted of a group of people, seated by a table in a pile of rubble, telling passers-by that they had really a great idea . . .

Useful Contacts

Though not all farms belong to it, there is a national federation which can provide useful advice and services for community farmers.

Contact: The National Federation of City Farms,
The Old Vicarage
66 Fraser Street
Windmill Hill
Bristol BS3 4LY
tel: (0272) 660663

The federation above covers the whole country, but there is a completely separate London Farms Association, for 'federation' and 'non-federation' farms. This is more of a good neighbours club than an independent advisory body. For information about this, please write with sae or phone (long ring please!) *Stepping Stones*. Better still, come and see us!

Address: Stepping Stones Farm
Stepney Way/Stepney High Street Junction
London E1
tel: (01) 790 8204

The staff: Nigel Winfield, Lynne Cheetham, Tony Watkin.

Other Titles Available:

Number 2: "Roots and Shoots", a training and employment project for your people with special learning difficulties in Lambeth, South London.

For comments, information and more copies of this publication, contact: BASSAC, 13 Stockwell Road, London SW9 9AU, tel. 01-733-7428.

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BASSAC is a network of over 60 local multi-purpose centres throughout the UK working with individuals, groups and local communities towards the promotion of self-help and building up of local systems for mutual assistance. All centres employ a number of paid staff and many volunteers, and are located in substantial premises based mainly in inner city areas.