



Newsletter January 2013

A Happy New Year to all our readers, and good walking, jogging or cycling along the Loop in the coming year. As you will have gathered from previous Newsletters, the community orchard in Levenshulme has occupied much of our effort over the past year. It led to our being awarded a 'Highly Commended' certificate in the North West Community Empowerment Awards in December (many thanks to Vincent Walsh for our nomination). And it was particularly appropriate that the first event of the New Year should have been a wassailing party held at the orchard site on Sunday 6 January. Cos Harnasz has provided this personal account of the event.

'Dark was descending in Manchester come mid afternoon as it does at this time of year in all northern latitudes. I'd had a lift to Crayfield Ave, off Stockport Road "yes, turn right, now, just after the old Levensulme Station." I walked slowly from where we parked, the NCN fingerpost silhouetted against the dwindling light pointing the entrance. Across the Fallowfield Loop I could make out a few of the early arrivals – well, those who are ever punctual; Dick Venes, my fellow conspirator for the proceedings that would shortly take place – there was his familiar wide brimmed leather hat. A few others setting up a small table.

Well met, half a dozen of us, yes, enough to make the orchard wassail work.

The box I'd prepared was being brought over. My bits and pieces – bottle of cider, music box, lighter...bottle opener...had I remembered everything? No point in worrying now! I opened the lid to take out the stuff, and when I looked up I noticed that the half dozen had doubled. It was also a mild evening. We'd been fortunate again, by having clement weather for this time of year. *Just as when we'd prepared the ground, just as we'd done the planting, and then the official opening – all along the way.*

"Right, shall we make a start, then? It's gone half past four?" Dick said, looking at his watch. I replied, "let's just wait a bit longer". I peered ahead, "it looks like there are more people arriving." I could see in the darkness shapes materialising – converging from all four directions. I was also waiting for someone to come on scene – she was discreetly getting changed after parking the car; from chauffeuse to surprise! Then I saw her coming along the path, clad with an overcoat. I turned around – there were two dozen people now. Keep multiplying. *"Yes. let's go for it"*. I caught Dick's eye, and gave him a nod.

"Good evening, and welcome, everybody. We've come to celebrate the orchard the Friends of the Fallowfield Loop planted with help from local residents last year. We had a grant from the Big Tree Fund and put in apples, pears, plum, damson and greengage". Dick explained how it was done on Sustrans land, and how he'd got the idea from a book one of our members (who has since moved to Shropshire and is involved with a similar project there) sent us, about Community Orchards. "We're going to celebrate with our first ever *Wassail*. It's usually something that takes place in the south of England, in the apple growing areas, but we thought we'd have our own, here."

I could see more people arriving! “Wassail comes from the Anglo-Saxon for ‘be whole’ or ‘be of good health’ and that’s what we’re going to do, wish the best for our orchard.”

It was my turn. I stepped forward and took a breath. I said that we had come together at a special time – dusk. It is at dusk that magic happens – as it does *wherever there are borders*. When the unseen sprites come out from where they hide during the daylight hours. This evening we were going to bless our orchard, in the tradition and times of long ago. I said that we had been fortunate so far - not one of our trees, no sapling had failed, through neglect, nature, or vandalism! (A cheer here.)

A special time, the first time a *wassail* was taking place in Levenshulme, as far as we knew. And we were all part of it. Long ago, as part of that tradition, there may have been a wassail queen, who would start the ceremony...if only...I paused...I called for quiet wishmaking. And then, out of the darkness, the wassail queen arrived in our midst. She wore a long dark blue dress with motif of little flowers - and had about her head a garlanded band. She stopped, and turned. I held a goblet I’d taken from my box. “In olden times we would all drink a toast from this wassail cup, but in these days of norovirus our queen here will pour a libation of cider round the base of this apple tree. I slowly emptied the bottle of premium cider into the cup she held, and then walked silently to the sapling, and poured it onto the ground, as she made her circumambulation.

That done – the festivities! A song from the Timewell family, who had sung at the official opening in May. Their preparation had given us songsheets, and we sang with the light of torches. The children took toast soaked in cider and apple juice out to the trees, and placed it in the slender branches – an offering – and good for the robins. They tied ribbons to the trees. Then another song, from Mike Beaumont – who had come from Rusholme with a small group – a treat of four part harmony. Another song from the Timewells, as we all then followed our queen (the answer to a child’s question ‘why do we have a queen’ – ‘because we can follow a queen’) – as she led us along the paths that wind their way through the orchard, and along the way, we adults made sure that each and every one tree had at least a ribbon tied on.

On our return, Angelique had magicked mulled cider, and, warm apple cake, hot from the stove in her house nearby. Then time for the fireworks and noise. We cheered as the sounds exploded with light in the sky – in the old days men would have fired guns to frighten away the malevolent spirits – and we banged whatever there was at hand, the table, spoons, and some people had even brought pots and pans – in the tradition. By the time, a small bonfire was underway. People brought biscuits and cake to share, and each in their own time left, with good feeling at what had been a surprisingly good event – and turn out. Someone counted fifty people in the end. I tidied up an empty cider bottle – ‘Hobgoblin’ it said. I smiled and put it into my box. See you next year!’

Other news: Many thanks to Metrolink for putting up our Loop design and map in one of their notice boards next to St. Werburgh’s Road station, and doing so free of charge. It has enabled us to return the ward cash grant we had been awarded for the project.

Future events: Monday 21 Jan, Members’ meeting, 7.30 pm, Union Chapel Fallowfield; Sundays 17 February and 17 March, work days at the new community orchard site next to the Sherwood Street entrance in Fallowfield, and at the entrance itself. Details to follow.