

Past Masters

Kim Smith visits a groundbreaking community-run initiative that is making ancient building skills relevant for the 21st Century

The need to reduce our carbon footprint and sustainability may seem like contemporary concepts, but nothing could be further from the truth.

Once upon a time people knew how to build with materials readily available from local landscapes without robbing them of their ability to regenerate.

In Suffolk and Norfolk, clay was free and 100 per cent reusable, and wood was harvested from coppiced trees, allowing Mother Nature to do her vital reproduction work.

The Orchard Barn Environmental Education Centre, a unique community-run initiative based in rural Ringshall, near Stowmarket, takes pride in teaching people those old methods. Its traditional approach to construction is undeniably slower, but has minimum impact on the environment and is also much cheaper than modern equivalents. Since 2007 it has established a

thriving community of volunteers, all enjoying a "green gym" workout as they learn to create something beautiful using power-free equipment. More than a quarter live within a 10-mile radius; 41 per cent of the rest are from other parts of Suffolk; another 23 per cent are from East Anglia as a whole, and the final seven per cent are from other parts of the UK.

Orchard Barn managing director Sarah Partridge says for a lot of volunteers, it's a few hours a week they really look forward to. "At the end of the day, they can stand back and think, 'I had a hand in that'," she adds. "It provides a great sense of satisfaction

and is great for both physical and mental health."

Despite being a DIY disaster zone, Sarah kindly risked utilising my cack hands on a project to create roofing shingles and battens from sweet

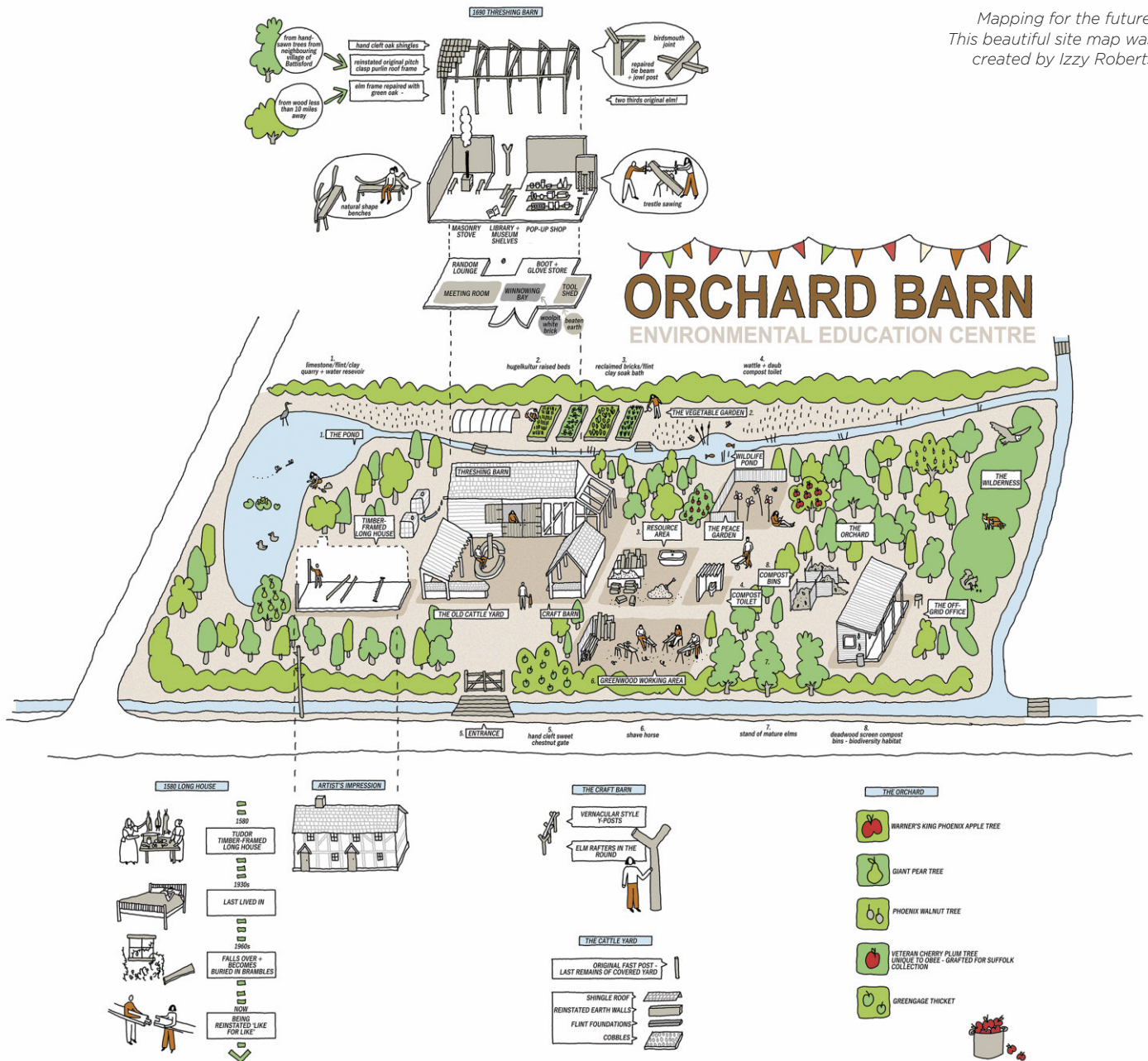


From the ground up: The rescued Long House is a work in progress



Work and play: The volunteers have fun while they produce roofing shingles

Mapping for the future:
This beautiful site map was
created by Izzy Roberts



Kim'll fix it: Our writer surprises herself by managing to produce something useful

chestnut. They are intended for a new all-weather education space based in a rescued 1580 Suffolk Long House that until recently had been languishing in a bramble patch as a derelict wreck. It will enable the centre to run more courses that will connect people of diverse backgrounds, ages and abilities not only to the past and to nature, but to each other.

The durable sweet chestnut has been sourced from an Ipswich woodland which was last coppiced before World War Two. It has since become overgrown so the new harvest is not only helping it to re-establish, but will provide sustainable materials for years to come.

I quickly learn that waste is a dirty word at Orchard Barn as the discarded bark provides material for composting and garden-path mulch, and the wood shavings are

used for kindling, both in fires and for cooking and boiling a non-electric kettle.

Volunteer supervisor Hiran Tailor patiently demonstrates the various stages in creating a roof shingle, from cleaving logs with a froe and mallet to shaping them with a side axe before finishing them with a drawknife and plane. Jobs are rotated between the team throughout the day, reducing the chance of repetitive strain injury and giving everybody the opportunity to develop a variety of skills. Fairly soon, I become confident and surprise myself by not inflicting any self harm.

The experience is not only enjoyable but therapeutic, as evidenced by the arrival of another newbie. Alex Kudryavtsev tells me he decided to come along as respite from the stresses of sorting out his mother's affairs after her recent passing.

Apart from creating building materials, other contributions are



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welcome. They include everything from gardening to site maintenance, tool repairs and the preparation of structures for future projects.

“For some, it is doing something meaningful and interesting in their retirement, while others see it as a space to hone skills before applying them on a their own build,” Sarah explains. “The physicality of the work is great for keeping fit and increasing strength, and all of it is in a wonderful open-air setting.”

The eco ethos even extends to lunch. A team member known only as JP proudly shows me his bowl of soup. “It’s made from courgettes and celery grown in our garden and has been cooked on a wood-fired stove fuelled by the shavings from the production of our shingles,” he boasts.

None of this good work would be possible without funding, though, and a lot of that comes from the fee-paying courses in Traditional Building Skills attended by builders, architects, surveyors and other professionals. They lead to Institute of Historic Building Conservation Continuing Professional Development certificates. Homeowners also enrol in order to tackle renovations or to acquire the knowledge to supervise others.



Up on the roof: At the time of writing, a third of the Long House roof had been completed



Going to the wall: Hiran Tailor showcases the light straw-clay insulation

“Recently we’ve had several architects who want to understand timber frames from the inside out, as they’re taking on heritage building projects,” reveals Sarah. “Getting hands-on with old timbers with a hand saw helps them realise that while 400-year-old timber may look a bit ropey, it is usually possible to repair and re-use, rather than replace.”

West Suffolk College carpentry and joinery students come along as well, for practical Tree to Timber training. This is paid for by Bury St Edmunds Town Trust. And during 2023, five summer schools were organised for architecture students from the Bartlett Faculty of University College London.

“They helped us with our very big light straw-clay insulation project on the

Long House walls [the light refers to the weight of the straw-clay when mixed for use as infill] and said what they learned will go into their designs across the world,” enthuses Sarah. “The insulation complies with modern building regulations, which we’re very proud of, and the students sent some lovely testimonials.”

Other financial help has been provided by Babergh/Mid-Suffolk District Council and from crowd-funding, which recently raised an impressive £8,500 to pay for quadruple glazing and a staircase in the Long House.

Orchard Barn is always looking for more volunteers. If you’d like to become involved in this very worthwhile, award-winning enterprise, contact Sarah on 077660 54042 or email her on sarah.orchardbarn@gmail.com. Further information can be found on the centre’s website at www.orchardbarn.org.uk, its Instagram and Facebook pages and YouTube films.

Eat your heart out, Bob the Builder!