

## **Doncaster Green Gym Case Study**

Volunteering to take part in practical environmental conservation has proved a life-changing experience for members of the Doncaster Green Gym.

Referred by social and health care organisations throughout the Borough, many have learning difficulties, mental health problems or restricted mobility.

Time and again, the chance to interact with new people, acquire practical skills and get tangible results has helped Green Gym members to tackle issues such as depression, isolation and low self-esteem.

Around 2000 people have joined the Gym since it was set up in 2004, Through activities such as woodland management, bird and bat box making, dead hedging and canal digging, they help to maintain and improve Community Woodlands created from old colliery workings across South Yorkshire

Green Gym members' confidence and ability to undertake tasks have increased dramatically over time, with three individuals nominated for BTCV's Better Lives awards in 2008. Some have now moved onto other projects within the community, even taking leadership roles – something that was unimaginable when they first started.

### **Read the full story...**

When his brother tragically died at a relatively young age, Fred Jones\* had no choice but to go into a supported living environment.

With a moderate learning disability and introvert personality, the 49-year old had depended heavily on his brother and rarely left the house except to attend a Day Centre near his home in Doncaster. After moving into supported living, Fred remained in his shell for a long time, but his brother's death had caused a profound change in his way of thinking. He told staff that this premature loss had opened his eyes: he was determined to live a long and active life. This resolve led him, like hundreds of others in the Borough, to join the Doncaster Green Gym.

### **Changing lives, helping the community**

On Tuesdays and Wednesdays, whatever the weather, Fred turns out with the Green Gym as part of a group of up to 20 people.

Catering for a wide range of abilities, fitness and health, Doncaster Green Gym started in 2004 as a partnership between BTCV, Doncaster PCT, the Forestry Commission and the Land Restoration Trust, with initial funds from Health Action Zones and the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund. BTCV provided the partner organisations with training, support and expertise to enable them to establish the Green Gym. Volunteers come to the Green Gym through referral systems set up by various Social Education Centres, residential homes, many hospital wards and other organisations throughout Doncaster. It is also registered with Doncaster's GP referral system, "Exercise for Health".

Most of the Gym's activities take place on Community Woodlands. These are redeveloped colliery workings such as Bentley, Dinnington and Kiveton, which are now owned by the

Land Restoration Trust and managed by the Forestry Commission. They provide public access to an abundance of trees, grass, wetland and wildlife, in places making it hard to imagine that some of the pits closed down as recently as the 1990s.

### **Good for people and wildlife**

Containing large areas of new trees with a smattering of mature woodland, the Community Woodlands still need a lot of tending to keep them as beautiful green places that are good for both people and wildlife. Green Gym members help by carrying out a variety of environmental conservation activities at a pace suited to their particular skills and abilities, after a gentle 'warm up' at the beginning of each session.

These activities include woodland management, bird and bat box making, dead hedging and canal digging. On one task, Fred and others helped to rescue an allotment site smothered in 9ft brambles, turning it once again into a place where fresh vegetables can be grown.

### **Building self-esteem: Tom's story**

The impact on people like Fred has been remarkable. Tom Fullerton\*, who goes to the same Social Education Day Centre as Fred also found the Gym helpful after a personal crisis. 24 year-old Tom became very depressed and withdrawn following the breakdown of his relationship with his girlfriend. He stopped attending the Day Centre and, despite encouragement, found it difficult to start again. When he finally succeeded, his return coincided with the start of the Green Gym sessions in 2004.

Joining the Green Gym did a lot for Tom's self-esteem and confidence. He now attends the Day Centre on a regular basis and is currently looking for work in the environmental conservation field, having developed appropriate skills through the Green Gym. He looks forward to attending Gym sessions, and is much more 'happy go lucky', focused and settled than before.

### **Better Lives**

Both Tom and Fred have been able to go out more and build a new circle of friends. Always willing and eager to learn new skills and techniques, they have each earned a Bronze award for attending over 25 sessions. In addition, both were nominated for BTCV's "Better Life Award" in 2008 in recognition of the way they have changed their own lives through practical environmental conservation.

Fred and Tom's stories exemplify the huge difference to be seen in the Social Education Day Centre group. Overall, their confidence and ability to undertake tasks has increased dramatically.

Some volunteers have now moved onto different projects within the community, including taking on leadership roles – a remarkable achievement which could not have been imagined when they first started with the Doncaster Green Gym.

*\*Names have been changed.*