



INNER-CITY SCHOOL WINS

Hampton Court Gold

Michael Wale reports on an **inner-city London school** which has taken a **Gold Medal** for its stand at the prestigious **Hampton Court Flower Show**

A London inner-city school's growing area on the edge of the once notorious White City Estate was a surprise Gold Medal winner at the recent Hampton Court Flower Show. The surprise was due perhaps more to the fact that no one in the horticultural industry had ever heard of the Phoenix School from Shepherd's Bush in West London, yet they managed to win the Market Garden section with an entry

inspired by market gardens and garden nurseries of London in the 1800s. In West London, especially around what has now become the Olympia Exhibition Centre, there was once a large market garden area that used to feed the City of London.

The school's growing area stretches across three-quarters of an acre, and is one road across from the sprawling White City Estate that provides many of the school's pupils and volunteer helpers. The site was

reclaimed from a rubble-strewn builder's compound as part of the Phoenix School's extension project, and the creation of a new public swimming pool. The growing area was the brainchild of the then headmaster, Sir William Atkinson, who had come to London as a boy from his native Jamaica. Back home he had worked on the family's 12-acre holding, often having to go to and from market with goods on the back of a donkey before he set off for school. It was, therefore, only natural that when he gave the go-ahead for the creation of the growing area, he should demand that it be called 'The Farm'!

Sir William said that the real motivation for converting the derelict land into a growing area was the simple fact that he wanted to, "Give my young people the



Above and inset: Raised beds and one of the greenhouses at the Phoenix School growing area.



The school's Chief Grower, Cath Knight.

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sense of possibility from those boxes they come from. They live in little boxes, and I also wanted to teach them that there was more to food than a Tesco bag.”

As The Farm developed it became much more than just a growing area where pupils learned to prepare the soil, sow seeds, harvest the results and then take them back into school to cook; it also became a part of the school’s general educational programme. In the centre of the site is a circular ‘learning’ area with seating and a Wi-Fi connection. Lessons such as science, geography and history are regularly conducted there using the school’s horticultural environment, together with its pens of chickens and rabbits as aids to further explain the particular subject being taught.

Cath Knight is the Chief Grower, and her position is funded by Hammersmith Community Gardens. It is her role to guide the pupils through the various seasons of the fruit, veg and livestock

calendar. She told me that the right to enter the Hampton Court Flower Show had been a competition in itself, and the whole idea of taking part had required a massive degree of planning, overseen by Vanessa Hodder, and involving the five students studying BTEC Horticulture Class Level 3.

Ms Knight was responsible for the mammoth task of ensuring that all the veg and other plants were ready to be moved to the showground on time. In addition, research into the history of the market garden movement, and what was actually grown in the capital in the 1800s, had been yet another demand on the valuable study time of the five students involved. They had discovered that lettuces, in particular, were very popular. Despite the popularity of several different types of lettuce, a decision was taken to keep the presentation of vegetables growing at the Show simple. Ms Knight said: “What we looked at was not too much variety. Beside the veg, we incorporated fruit bushes, red and blackcurrants, and gooseberries.”

Before the stand could go ahead, the prospective entry had to be put before RHS officials; and the headmaster, well aware of the need to make the most of this opportunity as a means of learning for the pupils, made it clear that a presentation from the pupils would constitute a part of

their course work, too.

The vegetables chosen for the Show were those typically grown on The Farm, such as cabbages and carrots. Ms Knight decided that everything should be grown in crates so that it could be easily transported when the time came to take it to the Hampton Court site, and it would be better protected from slugs and snails, too. The decision, however, required far more attention be given to regular watering of the produce. She recalls: “We did a lot of successional sowing. The sowing was used as part of *all* the kids’ experience, not only the five whose project it was. Luckily, the weather wasn’t too hot. A lot of the Year 7 pupils did much of the seed sowing as part of their lessons, and in the spring term, probably about 100 kids from three classes worked on pricking out, potting on and watering.”

The five students whose project it was, brought in friends to help, and during holiday periods volunteers from the White City Estate also lent a much-needed hand. The volunteers had been encouraged and involved from the very start of The Farm back in 2007, so that the growing area would not only involve the children at the



Part of the 'Phoenix Market' stand at Hampton Court.

Phoenix, but also the entire community around the school, from which it drew its pupils.

Once their entry had been accepted, Hammersmith Community Gardens, led by Cathy Maund, found five sponsors to help fund all the expenses involved in taking part in the Show. The sponsors included a regular supporter, the Salt Yard Restaurant Group, which has four restaurants in Central London. They support the Phoenix Flame Charity, and add a £1 voluntary addition to the bill at their four restaurants; the Phoenix Flame Charity helps to fund the volunteers and any other needs of The Farm.

Salt Yard Chef and Director, Ben Tish, said: "We just felt that what was happening on the Phoenix Farm area combined with our involvement in the food industry was a perfect partnership. Once a fortnight each of our restaurants receives two boxes of fresh veg, fruit, eggs and honey from The Farm, for which we pay the charity. We use it to put 'specials' on our menus. Each summer we also organise a barbecue to fund the Phoenix Flame Charity on The Farm site, where I and another of our top chefs do the cooking." They also come during term time to give cookery demonstrations and career advice to students.

Ms Knight says she will always remember the judging day at the Hampton Court Flower Show. "On Press Day we

thought we might get a Bronze or Silver. The judges came round and we had to leave the area for a bit." When the judges returned, members of the team were informed that the school had actually been awarded the Gold Medal. As Ms Knight admits: "We were pretty blown away. Our stand did look pretty good. It was a really great experience. I'd love to do it again, maybe in two years' time."

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Meanwhile, it's back to her day job. "I just love growing and working with the volunteers and the children", she says, adding: "The volunteers are special because they are all local people, some long-term unemployed, some with health issues, others just with time on their hands, and there are those who have worked in business and hated it, who are now taking time out to look for a change in their careers. It's a lifeline for a lot of people. I encourage them not only to grow things,

but to take things home and cook for themselves, which the children are also encouraged to do."

Although long-term success can ultimately only be gauged by its effect on both the pupils and the community, I'm certain that if he were still there, the now retired Sir William Atkinson would be very proud of how his idea of The Farm has gone from strength to strength, and the school's well-deserved success in winning a Gold Medal at a venue as prestigious as Hampton Court confirms it.



Michael Wale

Brought up on a farm in Sussex, Michael was a journalist, scriptwriter and TV performer for many years. He fought a battle to save allotments in West London and wrote a book about it all, *View from a Shed*. He still helps the allotments he fought to save, and now writes about agriculture and horticulture.