

Mab Lane Community Woodland





Mab Lane Community Woodland is a 25-hectare site at the centre of West Derby in Liverpool. Mainly residential, with a strong community at its heart, the area faces substantial challenges.

One of the most deprived areas in the country¹ (suffering high levels of worklessness, and anti-social behaviour), West Derby also has a poor health record (rates of coronary heart disease are at amongst the highest

in the UK²) and suffers from localised environmental problems like flooding and poor air quality.

This area of green space had become increasingly derelict over the last two decades. Although some management and improvement work (mainly carried out by Liverpool City Council and the neighbouring authority Knowsley) kept parts of the site usable, regular flooding and a lack of proper facilities meant it was uninviting to many. As a consequence, it attracted anti-social behaviour, which in turn made the site

feel intimidating; fewer and fewer people chose to spend time there.

But the space was an integral part of the West Derby landscape. Visible from all roads into the area and on several public transport routes, the site was having a significant (and negative) impact on West Derby's image. Beyond this, the local community needed the space to serve them better. Places like the recently redeveloped Mab Lane Youth Centre (transformed with Groundwork Merseyside) and the three local schools, as well as local residents and businesses all wanted an area that they could use confidently and feel pride in.

Local civic organisations like The Mersey Forest and the local housing association Riverside, alongside partners in the local community, began to make plans to transform Mab Lane green space into a community woodland that would be cherished. A small number of inspiring individuals, residents associations and local conservation groups then began the important process of motivating the community at large. Talking to neighbours and friends, they inspired

“Mab Lane Community Woodland...is a tremendous statement of intent and of confidence by local residents and their partner agencies. Now...the place has become a dynamic venue for leisure, community use and engagement.”

Tom McGuire, Director, The Riverside Group

people to think again about this derelict area at the heart of their neighbourhood. These were also the first people that project partners spoke to with ideas for change on the site; their knowledge and community insight steering all future engagement and development.

Transforming the derelict site into a new, thriving community woodland wouldn't solve all of West Derby's problems. But the project was an important part of a bigger drive towards change; instilling pride and re-establishing a sense of community spirit.

As one local resident explained, people think that only bad news comes out of West Derby; creating this new community woodland would show everyone that something good could happen there too.

[1] One of the Lower Layer Super Output Areas (LSOA) next to Mab Lane is in the top 1% most deprived LSOAs in England. Three others are within the top 5% most deprived.

[2] Two of the Middle Layer Super Output Areas (MSOA) next to Mab Lane are in the top 5% in the North West in terms of hospitalised incidence of coronary heart disease.

Local-led design and creation

Mab Lane community woodland has been planned and shaped by and with local people.

The project started two years ago when, with the help of the Mersey Forest, residents, local business people, the local authority and regional agencies came together for a planning day. Together, they discussed the issues that the site faced, and most importantly what they saw as its future potential. It was no coincidence that this was taking place in 2008. Liverpool's year as Capital of Culture had kick started projects across the city, and West Derby was no exception. Local partners had already considered Mab Lane as the location to plant 20,000 trees – one for each person who attended the Capital of Culture launch event in January of that year. But it was the aspirations of local people that really formed the backbone of plans for the new woodland; more trees, but also artwork, spaces for sport, allotments and orchards too, a site that would genuinely change the lives of the people living close by.

The planning and design stages of the project were steered by as many local people as possible. A number of local community activists helped to spread the message, as they encouraged people from across West Derby to attend planning sessions and make their voices heard. Community workers from Riverside Housing Group actively shared information about the new community

woodland and used their networks to encourage involvement. Community meetings, the use of a community-focused blog (www.mablane.com, set up and managed by the Mersey Forest) and projects with local schools and community groups ensured as many ideas as possible were captured, and integrated into the project. Mab Lane became much more than just a 'community approved' project. It became an expression of a whole community, united.

Work on-site began in late 2008. The physical works were managed by Liverpool City Council, but the community remained close to every development. Open design sessions, tree planting and sculpture design events, celebration days and tours were held throughout the physical development phase, keeping people informed, and in overall control of the changes at Mab Lane.

The three local schools in particular were constantly engaged, as the community recognised how important young people were to the success of the new woodland. Children from these schools designed all the major pieces of artwork for the site, they turned out to help with the planting, and when the site launched they designed their own banners to put their personal stamp on the space.



“By working closely with the other partners we got great joined up results for both the community and our project...It looks great and demonstrating that we were working together really improved our standing with local opinion formers and residents.”
Carly Ratcliffe, project manager, United Utilities

“Mab Lane's success will be built on its ability to look beyond the physical landscape and connect with the people and places that can flourish from a vibrant and healthy green resource. By uniting the communities and businesses surrounding the site, it not only breathes new life into the immediate neighbourhood, it provides a woodland in the city for everyone to enjoy and respect. It will be a wonderful legacy for future generations.”
Timothy Moore, Liverpool City Council Councillor



Mab Lane Community Woodland today

The woodland was officially opened in summer 2010.

The very first people to enjoy the new site were all those from around the local area who played such an integral role in its creation. At the official opening in June 2010 it was a group of over 50 local people that 'did the honours'; releasing hundreds of biodegradable balloons with wildflower seeds attached from the site, to celebrate their efforts and spread the good news from West Derby right across Liverpool and beyond.

Mab Lane has seen dramatic changes. Pathways, new tree planting, wildflower areas, a community orchard and sculptures all entice people onto Mab Lane.

Extensive engineering has also ensured that the site no longer floods. When, in August 2010, West Derby experienced major storms the woodland remained unaffected; a huge victory for everyone involved in the project.

The future of Mab Lane

People are now using Mab Lane in ways that five years ago would have been unimaginable.

Whether it's the local primary and secondary schools who are already

using the site for sports and outdoor lessons, interest groups and residents associations or the many people who live close to the site, Mab Lane is now open and welcoming, all year round.

Mab Lane community woodland is also helping the local economy by making the area more visually pleasing, and renovating a neglected space at the heart of the community. House prices are rising, businesses are being encouraged to move to and stay in the area and West Derby is becoming a more desirable place to live and work.

Open for just few months, Mab Lane is already well used and feedback from the community is positive. The blog is teeming with films capturing local people's views on the work carried out, as well as news from the site as projects continue to breathe life into the area.

There are still plenty of opportunities for Mab Lane to develop further, and the site has recently been awarded funding from Natural England (through its Access to Nature programme) and the Big Lottery Fund's Changing Spaces programme to enable civil society organisations like the Mersey Forest to continue finding ways for local people to realise their aspirations for the site.

Liverpool City Council will maintain the site in partnership with the local community, learning from other woodland community groups who undertake this stewardship role adjacent to the site. The initial improvements are just the start. Local people are continuing to enhance and modify the

various habitats on-site as they mature, and the Access to Nature funding in particular will help to support this over the next three years, enabling community task days and training sessions to give local people the confidence, new skills and expertise they need to play a more involved role in the site's future.

"This has had a great impact on our community and has been years in the making. For quite a number of years the site has not been able to be used, except for anti-social behaviour, due to drainage problems. Since the pathways have been done it is nice to see families and lots of dog walkers using the site. In the future we hope local schools will use the site."

Lin Doyle, local community worker and volunteer

"I was impressed with efforts to involve the immediate community and less immediate neighbours...the benefits from the 'Mabby' are for all to see. It used to be used by hardened dog walkers, but has now been opened up and looks appealing to all."

Ken Lightfoot, local resident

Key facts

The Mab Lane community woodland partnership:

- Princess Old Cantril Tenants' & Residents' Association
- Mab Lane Youth Centre
- Littlewoods of Stockbridge Association
- Parklands Area 7,8,9 Management Committees
- Mab Lane Junior Mixed and Infant School
- St Alberts RC Primary School
- St Brigids Primary School
- Liverpool City Council
- Liverpool Capital of Culture
- The Northwest Regional Development Agency
- The Forestry Commission
- Riverside Housing Group
- United Utilities
- The Mersey Forest

£688,000 has been invested into the new woodland.

Funders include:

- The Northwest Regional Development Agency (through the Newlands programme)
- The Forestry Commission (through their English Woodland Grant Scheme)
- Natural England (through the Access to Nature programme)
- The Big Lottery Fund (through the Changing Spaces programme)

Mab Lane, the partner organisations

A broad partnership of organisations have worked side by side with the local community to transform Mab Lane.

Liverpool City Council (LCC), are the site owners and have led the design and development of the site. Far from working in isolation, Liverpool City Council have reached out to the private sector as well as working with their public sector partners, to ensure that work on the site is as 'joined up' as possible. A great example is the work with United Utilities, who are active across part of the site. By working together to make on-site improvements and alleviate the flooding risk, both organisations were able to reduce public disruption and deliver the project as efficiently as possible. Similarly, the partnership with Riverside Housing Group, who take great strides to engage their residents, has meant that a wide range of people from across the area have been informed and engaged about the project, through an organisation that they already know and trust.

The Mersey Forest has provided a consistent presence on-site – undertaking community engagement activity to ensure that local people from all walks of life are served by the new community woodland at Mab Lane.

The Northwest Regional Development Agency and **The Forestry Commission** both supported the creation of Mab Lane community woodland through **Newlands**, a land regeneration programme transforming brownfield sites into economically and socially viable woodlands.

The Forestry Commission has also supported this project through the **English Woodland Grant Scheme**; grants were awarded to the new community woodland to assist with its creation.

For more information about the Mab Lane community woodland project, please contact:

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For news updates and event listings from the community woodland visit

www.mablane.com

For more information about Newlands visit

www.newlandsproject.co.uk

