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## Sustainability at Mucknell Abbey

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<http://www.mucknellabbey.org.uk/soul-food/sustainability/>

### Introduction

Our move from Burford Priory to Mucknell Abbey enables us to seek to live more simply, more sustainably, more lightly on the earth. We want to become more aware of the web of relationships, and how our common life is lived as part of a wider ecology. We want to live our lives in celebration of God's creation, in deep gratitude and humility, with generosity and hospitality.

Of course, this is a work in progress! We arrived at Mucknell in November 2010. Much is aspirational, and there will be much more we could do, and probably much we haven't even considered. Our current aim is to settle into Mucknell, live on the land and understand the place, and do our best with the other things.

### Our Vision and Motivation

*The earth is the Lord's and all that fills it, the compass of the world and all who dwell therein. Psalm 24:1  
For you, Lord, have made me glad by your acts, and I sing aloud at the works of your hands. Psalm 92:4  
May the glory of the Lord endure for ever; may the Lord rejoice in his works. Psalm 104:33*

God delights in creation. At Mucknell Abbey, we want to show in our lives some echo of that delight. So we want to affirm the greatness of the created material order, and that we exist in relationship to God, to each other, and to the rest of creation. Why should Christians care about the earth? Primarily because God cares.

On 25 March 2011, Archbishop Rowan Williams visited Mucknell to preside and preach at the eucharist for The Annunciation, to dedicate the Oratory to the Blessed Virgin Mary and St Benedict, and to bless the Abbey as a place of welcome and hospitality. The following words are an excerpt from his homily at the Eucharist:

"This new home for a community has been designed and constructed with deep attention to the kind of world we're in; the kind of world where it won't do to ignore considerations about ecological balance, sustainability and the health of the whole environment. And surely that's part of the same listening: listening for the creative Word in things, in the stuff of the world; listening our way into the depths of what is around us, so that the Word comes alive in what we do with the things that are around us, the stuff we live with and live on.

...

"So, *ausculta*, listen, as The Rule [of Benedict] says. But also speak, be who you are, be who you say you are in this place. Let this place be what it is, and let all of that together be God's Word to this wider environment."

But it is also a question of justice. Human activity, mostly in developed countries, has caused great harm to our planet home, affecting the atmosphere, land and ocean. We have caused great hardship for our neighbours in developing countries, and damaged many ecosystems, often beyond repair.

It is also in our own self-interest. Because we are only one thread in an inter-dependent web, we are endangering our own future. We have caused the extinction of many species, and may cause the extinction of our own.

## **Prayer and Worship**

Everything we do at Mucknell Abbey is underpinned by the daily and seasonal round of the Eucharist, Divine Office, *lectio divina* and personal contemplative prayer. The Benedictine charism also emphasises manual labour. For us, prayer is work, and work is prayer.

In the Eucharist, we celebrate God's presence with us and give thanks. Through God's goodness, we have the bread and wine to offer 'which earth has given and human hands have made', and these become to us the body and blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. Through giving thanks each day, we learn to experience everything as gift.

The Christian year is based on the cycle of Jesus' birth, death and resurrection, which mirrors the natural cycle. In Jesus' incarnation, God embraces the material world. We celebrate Christmas just as the sun starts to return and the days get longer, symbolising the coming of the light into the world. At Easter we use the rich symbolism of new birth, singing of Christ coming again as 'grass that springeth green'. There are also a number of special days during the year. In spring, we celebrate Rogation, the blessing of the sowing, and in the autumn we celebrate Harvest. Environment Sunday falls on the Sunday before the start of Lent. The Season of Creation is a recent introduction, running during September to the feast of St Francis on 4 October.

The Divine Office is based on the book of Psalms, many of which express the psalmists' delight in the creative works of God. The Office also contains many other biblical texts which celebrate creation, such as the Song of the Three. Through a regular pattern of recitation, these texts become incorporated within us.

In *lectio divina* we chew over biblical texts to extract God's word for us today. From the creation stories in Genesis, to the description of the new heaven and the new earth in Revelation, the bible is full of natural symbolism. For example, Jesus' parables of the Kingdom of God are rooted in a deep appreciation of the natural world and the agrarian community in Judea. Our understanding of lectio has recently been expanded to include reading the 'big book of creation'; seeking to know the Creator through contemplating the creation.

In contemplative prayer, we use our senses, intuition, mind, heart and body to seek and wait on God. Through developing our relationship with God, we grow more into ourselves as human beings, and draw closer to each other, and to the rest of creation.

## **Land and Ecology**

Mucknell Abbey has 40 acres situated in the Vale of Evesham. The land is open, the skies are big, and the weather demands to be noticed! The Malvern Hills can be seen to the west, Bredon Hill to the south, and Worcester is nearby to the northwest. The site is located in a triangle of major road

and rail links, which gives us the opportunity to seek to be a still place at the centre of a busy world.

The Malvern Hills Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty is to the west, the Cotswolds AONB to the south, there are several Local Nature Reserves in Worcester and Sites of Special Scientific Interest nearby, but the land itself has no special ecological significance. The surrounding land-use is mostly mixed farming. Mucknell itself was a working farm and potato chipping business until 2004. Recent aerial photos show the farm buildings set in bare earth, and grassy scrub. It looks like a desert, and the land was described in the wildlife survey undertaken as part of the planning process as having very low biodiversity. We have had almost a blank sheet of paper to start from as we try to develop more diverse plant life and improve animal habitat.

There is a brook which defines the north boundary, and a stream, a tributary of the Avon, 10m beyond the south boundary. There is also a pond to the south east of the monastery buildings, and a borehole to the east. There are some trees along the north and east boundaries, but otherwise there was just one tree on the entire site. One of the first tasks, while the new monastery was being built, was to plant more than 5,000 trees on the north side, including oak, hazel, and ash. This is part of a scheme to re-establish the Forest of Feckenham. Another 3,000 trees, including a hazel/sweet chestnut coppice, have been planted to the south; and an orchard including some rare local varieties of apples and pears.

## **Buildings**

The core principle of the development of the derelict buildings of Mucknell Farm into Mucknell Abbey was that it was to be sustainable - environmentally, economically, ecologically and socially.

## **Building Materials**

Where practicable, the existing buildings were retained for re-use. Materials from the demolished farmhouse were recycled and re-used in construction. Natural materials with low embodied energy were used in the Oratory, such as timber and lime render. Breeze blocks and paving slabs were made from recycled raw materials. Where possible, materials were sourced locally.

## **Energy**

Heat loss has been minimised through significant improvements to insulation in the existing buildings and well insulating the Oratory and new accommodation block. Under-floor heating has been installed to deliver heat to where it is needed. The lighting and appliances are low-energy models.

We aim to have a simple and frugal lifestyle to minimise our energy requirements. We also try to manage and control our energy usage and systems as efficiently as possible.

We meet most of our energy demand through the use of renewable energy technologies and renewable fuel sources. These include: solar water heating; solar electricity from photovoltaic panels; a wood chip boiler, with the chip coming from local sources and eventually from our own woodland, hence minimising carbon emissions from transport; a wood-burning stove in the refectory. We purchase the grid electricity we need from a green supplier.

## **Water**

The building design incorporates a rainwater harvesting system, which feeds a 5,000 litre underground tank. The water is used in toilets and showers. The taps, toilets and showers in the building are water-efficient.

Rainwater is also harvesting into water butts in the kitchen garden. There is a bore hole next to the garden in the orchard, which we will restore as a further supply.

We aim to minimise water demand and water loss in the kitchen garden. The beds in the greenhouse are watered using an efficient irrigation drip system, and we mulch using grass cuttings, compost, horse manure.

## **Waste**

Foul water is disposed of using an on-site biological treatment system and reed beds in a series of three swales. A sustainable urban drainage system handles the ground water around the abbey buildings.

We minimise waste as much as possible through re-use or recycling. We compost all raw organic waste, and are considering means of composting cooked foods, bread, dairy and the like.

## **Day-to-day**

Our intention is to live as sustainably as we can, with our day-to-day needs provided on the site as much as possible.

## **Food**

We follow the LOAF principles in purchasing food - Local, Organic, Animal-friendly, Fairtrade.

We bake our own bread, and try to use as much fresh produce and as little processed food as possible. We have created a large walled organic kitchen garden and have planted an orchard to provide food for the community and our guests. We hope to use some of the techniques of forest gardening and if possible to develop a demonstration forest garden plot and a nursery supplying forest garden plants.

Above all, we aim to be grateful for all God's provision, and all the food set before us, mindful of those who have much less.

## **Other supplies**

We use environmentally sensitive cleaning products, and e.g. office supplies from sustainable sources. We try to buy from local suppliers and traders and use local services. As well as building our relationships with the local community, this helps to build the local economy along the principles of the Transition Movement.

## **Transport**

We have access to two cars. We try to cycle and use public transport where we can, and to minimise the number of journeys by car. We are also encouraging the development of a new interchange railway station proposed at the end of Mucknell Farm Lane, which will improve public transport links to the monastery.

## **Working Together**

It is important, in a world that is rapidly becoming more and more fragmented, to recognise our interdependency and to form links and bonds.

## **Local Communities**

The community is part of the Church of England, and whole-heartedly endorse the Shrinking the Footprint campaign and the Environmental Strategy of the Diocese of Worcester. We would be interested in making contact with any local churches or faith communities that have green groups or want to save energy or generate their own from renewable sources.

We would like to develop links with local organic growers, and anyone interested in growing food, permaculture, biodiversity, and all aspects of sustainability. At present we are more in the position of needing advice than being able to provide it, but would be more than happy to share our experiences and participate in the local community building sustainability in Worcestershire. We will be holding regular work party weeks for anyone who would like to help on the site.

## **Guests and Visitors**

We have a small guest wing and invite individuals wishing to make a quiet private retreat to join us in worshipping God in this beautiful setting.

We ask our guests to be aware of their energy and water usage. For example, to turn off lights when they are not needed, to think about the temperature in the room, and so on. Guests will of course be sharing our meals, and we invite them to join us in our worship, and hope that they take the opportunity to reflect on God's providential care.

There is ample car parking by the Abbey, but we would like to ask any visitors where possible to travel to Mucknell Abbey by public transport.

## **Factsheets**

An overview and more detail on the sustainable technologies and actions at Mucknell Abbey. Available at <http://www.mucknellabbey.org.uk/soul-food/sustainability/factsheets.html>

1. Sustainability Overview (pdf, 153kb)
2. Biomass Boiler (pdf, 245kb)
3. Solar Photovoltaics (pdf, 244kb)
4. Solar Water Heating (pdf, 231kb)
5. Organic Orchard (pdf, 589kb)
6. Kitchen Garden (pdf, 247kb)
7. Estate Management (pdf, 608kb)
8. Sustainable Building (pdf, 124kb)
9. Waste Water (pdf, 239kb)
10. Water Supply (pdf, 118kb)