

Discovering the life of Edgar



Delighted volunteers have pieced together a colourful picture of the now celebrated North Littleton market gardener whose story has so enchanted our readers.

Eight local people spent a total of 104 hours between lockdowns cleaning and cataloguing every item left behind in the Cleeve Prior hovel by bachelor Edgar Wheeler, who was identified thanks to our first article on the Worcestershire Archive & Archaeology Service's Market Gardening Heritage Project.

"We're really grateful for their help. They are a wonderful group whose work has helped to bring Edgar to life," says archaeologist and Community Project Officer Nina O'Hare.

Edgar's astonishing historic time capsule of a hovel was a real find at the start of the project to produce a permanent record of the enormous importance of market gardening to the Vale and its people.

WAAS-trained volunteers have surveyed the remaining hovels - less than 200 left from the 1,500 originally built to house tools and all - and recorded local memories, including 17 oral and written histories.

Three hovels are being restored as mini visitor centres, with information panels, as a permanent reminder of their place in history. They include two in Littleton, with the help of Vale Landscape Heritage Trust supporters.

But the real find was Edgar's Cleeve Prior wonder, discovered when

members of the village's Heritage Trust, another partner of the project along with the parish council and Worcestershire Farmsteads Project, cleared the brambles and revealed a treasure trove.

The teeny hut was crammed with fragments of the life of the chap who seemingly locked up one evening in the early 1990s and never returned, leaving behind all sorts, including his reading glasses on a book unfinished.

"It really is a unique time capsule," says Nina, whose team was blown away by our readers' response when we asked you to help identify the mystery man known only as Mr ER Wheeler. An astonishing number of people got in touch.



Edgar Wheeler's hovel at Cleeve Prior

We knew, from Edgar's abandoned belongings, that he was a Birmingham City FC fan, worked on the railway at Littleton and grew artichokes, asparagus, fruit, onions, beans, sprouts, peas, asparagus, wallflowers and more.

Nina and her Cleeve Prior team of eight have hugely enjoyed discovering more about the man who has left such an amazing legacy.

They have painstakingly recorded 124 items, ranging from tools and a wristwatch that was nailed to wall to his shaving brush and a couple more



Archaeologist and Community Project Officer Nina O'Hare.

mysteries, including another pair of glasses apparently belonging to a William Norledge.

"Some of the documents interested me the most: the football programmes, particularly of the Christmas matches, and the Time magazine from 1951," reveals Chris Seward, an Evesham lady who joined the Edgar hovel research team because she's interested in local history.

Fellow volunteer Bärbel Wolstencroft, a retired language teacher from Hampton, is a member of Evesham & District U3A, which supported the project.

"Sorting through Mr Wheeler's possessions was like watching a slowly developing film on the life and work of a market gardener," says Bärbel, who also worked on the survey of the hovels.

"I can see Mr Wheeler waiting for the weather to improve, filling in his football coupons, reading a book, perhaps having a shave, then deciding to dare it, donning his



Pea picking in Cleeve Prior - a whole family affair. Photo © Sara English.

heavy waterproofs and wellies and walking up the ground to see what needs doing."

For Nina it was Edgar's handwritten notes that really struck a chord.

"They're such a personal thing and there are notes on all sorts, like markings out for greenhouses and bee keeping. It feels like you have an insight into how his mind worked.

"In the latter years, sadly, he started to record things that were going

missing. In the 1930s-1950s, we're told you could leave produce by the side of the road to be collected and nothing ever disappeared. That gradually changes."

The wider research has unearthed a side story. "We've been able to find out a bit more about the Italian and German prisoners of war who worked in the area during WWII," adds Nina.

Her next project will involve residents in six medieval Worcestershire villages, including Badsey, digging metre squares in their gardens to unearth clues of what was there before.

But first she and her team are putting the final touches to the market gardening treasure that will celebrate Edgar and his ilk for all time.

"They deserve to be celebrated. Times change but it doesn't have to mean that you have to forget what's gone before and it's amazing how everything links up.

"When I was researching ancient agricultural history for one of the

information panels, I discovered that a hoard of Roman coins found in north Littleton was discovered by someone growing asparagus. It's funny what comes to the surface."

PROJECT KEEPS ON GROWING

The Market Gardening Heritage (MGH) project has grown into a creative collaboration with Pershore's Plum Festival, due to the pandemic.

The project was originally due to end last autumn, but plans for a public exhibition had to be shelved because of Covid restrictions.

Now the work is scheduled to be showcased as part of the Festival in August, alongside the winning entries for a Market Gardening Heritage art competition, organised by Pershore trainee teacher Eleanor Price.

"It's great news for the project," says MGH lead Nina O'Hare.

"The lockdowns meant we had to move another open day and a thank



Stopping for lunch - Fladbury, 1922.
Photo © Michael Izod.



Washing bundles of asparagus in Bretforton, 1932. Photo © Ivy Pullin.

you event for all our volunteers too. We can do some things online, but we thought it would be a shame if the project ended in that way.”

Nina has put together a School Resource Pack, which has been launched online with the Plum Festival art competition.

“This collaboration with MGH is perfect because it celebrates our horticultural heritage, offers schools a unique opportunity to create cross-curricular links with a focus on that heritage and showcases locally the project’s finds, before they are archived at the Hive,” explains Plum Festival Chair Angela Taylor.

The Festival team is also planning to produce a series of downloadable heritage walks... and a special creation that Angela and Eleanor are hoping our readers might assist with.

They are looking for help to construct a popup hovel, which could



Strawberry picking in Fladbury, 1920s. Photo © Michael Izod.



Lunchtime at the hovel in Crophorne, 1961. Photo © Robin Haines.

be taken into schools when restrictions are eased. Email them at art@persshoreplumfesitval.org.uk if you’d like to take part.

Eleanor, who wrote about the development of Number 8 Community Arts Centre for her Masters in Theatre Studies, was eager to introduce some new art and drama components to the crowd-drawing Festival in her hometown.

“It’s turning into a very valuable experience,” smiles the former pupil of Bowbrook and PHHS.

“I met Angela while I was researching my Masters and she had recently connected with Nina, whose project is fascinating.

“There is so much in the schools’ pack to inspire, including the oral histories and some of the letters written by schoolchildren in 1933 about market gardening. I can’t wait to see what the entrants come up with.”

The Market Gardening Heritage art competition is open to children aged from four and there is a separate adult category. The deadline for entries is Wednesday June 2nd 2021. For more details go to www.persshoreplumfestival.org.uk/art-competition.

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