

The nursery site within Serpentine Walks is shown on an Ordnance Survey map published in 1897. Extensive heated greenhouses supported cultivation of ornamental plants for Buxton's many parks. During the second world war the site may have been used for production horticulture in the 'dig for victory' campaign to grow food for the local community. Since then, plants for display were grown until February 1993 when the plant nursery closed. A newspaper cutting from the time reported: "Serpentine Nursery - used to produce up to 65,000 bedding-out plants a year for use in High Peak - could be set to close. High Peak Borough Council said the closure - if rubber-stamped - would save around £12,000 per year. Council leader George Bingham said: 'This is a sad day. Over the years the nursery has produced thousands of beautiful plants which we have all been able to enjoy.'"

The nursery space was padlocked shut and left to grow wild. The brick built Victorian glass houses were already derelict, the stone built workshops and offices were abandoned to the same fate. The site slept under a growing canopy of brambles, ivy, ground elder and self-sown sycamore and ash for seventeen years.

In September 2010 a group, four people, called Sustainable Guerrillas of Buxton offered a proposal to the Council for the site. They suggested the creation of a community project supported by volunteers to sustainably produce food locally and later develop an education centre. They were aware that the Council planned to market Serpentine House and sell off the former nursery site for housing subject to planning permission.

Early in November 2010 members of the group grew tired waiting for a response from the Council to their proposal. Patience was not one of their virtues. They took matters into their own hands and began clearing part of the site. The Parks' team supervisor, visited. The partisans report having had a nice chat with the supervisor who pointed out that they were on council property and revealed that the work being done - clearance of a small portion of the grounds and creation of a compost pile - had been noticed. This was all enough to cause the Council to repair the fences to prevent any such misdemeanours reoccurring. A week on and the guerrilla partisan pixies returned, telling the supervisor that they intended to continue working the site and why this was the case. He said he would have to inform the Council and went and did so.

The word went underground from that point, no more Facebook postings. In December 2010 council officers were instructed to cease any communication with Transition Buxton, as Transition had been deemed to be trespassing on the Serpentine site. A letter was sent to Tony Ashton, the Leader of the Council and Leader of the ruling Conservative group, explaining that it wasn't Transition Buxton who had jumped the gun. They remained eager to work through the proper channels.

Local elections in May 2011 brought a fresh crop of councillors in High Peak. A small swing was insufficient to shift full control but a minority Labour administration was formed under a new leader, Caitlin Bisknell.

By this time, the Serpentine Walks site was an eyesore and a target for vandalism. The boarded up windows of Serpentine House looked out blankly into the historic park. Behind the old park-keeper's lodge, the old nursery was overgrown, its buildings decaying. There were rumours of rough sleepers finding shelter there and fears of fires. High Peak Borough Council decided to apply for planning permission as a double win: secure additional cash from asset disposal whilst disposing of an asset that was proving a liability.

The application was published in May 2012. Plans were to be determined by the Council's Development Control Committee on 11 June 2012 for three new 4-bed properties and conversion of Serpentine House into two apartments. Local people raised issues around increased vehicular traffic on a park pathway, creating a safety hazard for walkers and changing the character of the Walks. Ribbons were wound around a tree earmarked for felling by the Burlington Road entrance. In early June 2012 Buxton Civic Association said: "The park belongs to the people of Buxton. It is within a conservation area of great historic importance as Serpentine Walks were the first part of the Pavilion Gardens to be laid out around 1840, so the development of this site for residential purposes is quite out of keeping with the purpose of the park for nearly 200 years. A development of this kind would be detrimental and would compromise the tranquillity of the park which is actually

a Grade II\* listed historic park including the pathways. The tranquillity of the area would be lost forever which is quite contrary to the new national planning policy framework.”

The planning application was not taken to Development Control Committee in June. A month later a consultation response was received from English Heritage, opening with a bitter complaint about poor process and closing with an astringent recommendation against approval. English Heritage, now also Historic England, does not have power of veto on development. However, for a town and Borough priding itself on care for history and heritage, over-riding a recommendation could be near criminal corporate carelessness, both for despoiling a beautiful social space and for fostering ill-will from a potential fund-giver. The planning application was withdrawn.

At the end of August 2012 Transition Buxton wrote to Councillor Caitlin Bisknell about the site asking to talk to her about development of the space and for permission for a visit in preparation for developing a detailed proposal. The first official visit was arranged for October 2012. Transition Buxton Directors spent autumn and winter months drawing up plans which were submitted in February 2013. A round of meetings began in May 2013 culminating in a draft licence for land clearance in June 2014 followed by a signed-off licence issued in September 2014.

Weekly Wednesday volunteer days began in November 2014. A special Public Service students' Day on 9 December, brought twenty-eight students plus their two tutors, who largely cleared the felled trees within a couple of hours. By the end of November 2014, Wednesday Volunteer Days had attracted a total of 62 volunteers with total of 184 Volunteer Hours.

On 21 January 2015, access to the greenhouse was granted and work began clearing and repairing it. The soil though was irreparable. One hundred years and more of practical horticulture by sometimes impatient gardeners brought a cocktail of pesticide residues. Labels below shelves in the stone workshops didn't specify products or chemicals - just warned of poisons. Volunteers set to work covering the ground with aggregate, black membrane and wood chip as a protective layer and foundation for a fresh start.

In amongst the activity in the nursery, Serpentine House was sold to Porter and Daughter who began the long task of rescuing it from dereliction, re-establishing it as a gracious villa set in tranquil parkland. It was to take two years.

Alongside the physical labour in the space tucked away behind the imposing front of Serpentine House, the mental labour of agreeing governance of a fledgling group emerging from Transition Buxton took its own good time, and toll. Transition Buxton was an established Community Interest Company. It was agreed to establish another CIC specifically for Serpentine Community Farm. The founding Directors were those of Transition Buxton and its Food Group.

A Steering Group was established with representatives from across Buxton: the University of Derby, Buxton and Leek College, Council Officers, the Town Team, Transition Buxton and Farm Directors. Discussions opened around the Community Interest Company's suitability to take on a lease.

Without a lease we were limited in grant applications but we made the most of available opportunities. Derbyshire County Council's community chest bought a polytunnel. So did the University of Derby. Buxton Civic Association gave cash with no conditions - use this as you need. The Bingham Trust paid for materials for a composting toilet and for fruit presses. The RHS supported launch of a herb growing project with catering students at Buxton and Leek College. The Postcode Lottery Trust provided funds for tools and tool stores, then a further generous grant to support training workshops. Derbyshire Freemasons helped buy garden furniture and display boards. The Buxton Rotary Club contributed to purchase of soil. Tarmac chipped in for that too. We benefited twice from Waitrose's green button scheme. High Peak Scaffold gave boards unsuitable for scaffolding but perfect for raised beds. Waterswallows recycling provided free soil improver. High Peak Borough Council donated high quality leaf mould, taken from the parks rather than roadsides.

The frame of a polytunnel left by the parks department was reassembled and covered. Remnants of the second polytunnel were too bent for re-use so a new polytunnel was bought and erected.

Raised beds were constructed for both growing spaces. The stone stores continued to fall into disrepair.

In 2017, HPBC gave us advance notice to quit as they proposed to apply for planning permission for residential development of the site, as a 'windfall' opportunity to raise funds. After a year long campaign to save the space, the application was withdrawn and an extended licence to continue to develop the site granted. Full details of a momentous year in the life of the project are in our book - War and Peas, available online in hard copy from local book stores and from the Community Garden.

In October 2019, six months after another change in council control to a Labour administration, Heads of Terms for a 25 year lease were agreed. The old depot area was vacated by parks staff, the old tractor garage was demolished. The lease was to cover the whole space, plant nursery and depot. The lease remains subject to negotiation as our respective solicitors advise on the detail. We anticipate final agreement of the lease by April 2021.

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