



Thornage Hall

By Sarah Juggins

As an enterprise, Thornage Hall is an exceptional venture in more ways than one. As a biodynamic farm, with beautifully-reared cattle and the healthiest vegetable beds I have ever seen, it is an innovator and leader in the local area; as a supported living provider for people with learning difficulties it offers serenity, dignity and meaning to its residents and day users.



“Every day that I come to work I can feel my head clearing,” says Ali Hall, the engaging director of operations at Thornage Hall. “What I hope we offer here is a place where people can feel supported to achieve their potential.”

As a care home for adults with learning difficulties, Thornage Hall first opened its doors 26 years ago, but it is also a building steeped in history. It was built around 1482, originally as a rural retreat for the Bishop of Norwich, but was given to Henry VIII’s physician William Butt when the then king dissolved the monasteries.

Fast forward to the 20th century and the Hall, with the 70 acres and old barn that accompany it, was gifted to the Camphill Community. Since 1989 a team of volunteers, staff and residents have worked to build, restore and renovate to the point that they are at today – a sustainable and environmentally-friendly community comprising five houses, an array of specialist workshops, farm buildings and a thriving farm and garden.

There are currently 22 residents at Thornage Hall; the youngest is 23 and the oldest is in his mid-60s. There are

also up to 20 day-users who come to Thornage Hall to take part in the many workshops that are available. These include IT, art, weaving, cookery, baking, woodwork and willow work, which are all taught in classrooms; as well as farming and gardening work, which involves working in the cattle shed, the green house and on the various garden beds, herb gardens and orchards.

“The most important message that we want to get across,” says Hall, “is that everything that is done here has meaning. This is not some time-filler: everyone is playing their part in the community in a meaningful way.”

And she is absolutely right. The farm produce feeds the residents; is sold on Robert Folland’s greengrocer’s stall on Norwich market; and appears on the Michelin-starred menu of Galton Blackiston at Morston Hall. Any surplus goes to the award-winning deli and farm shop Back to the Garden at Leatheringsett.

Within the workshop-based activities, everything is assessed so the service users can chart their own progress. The assessments are either skill-related – can the user make a bird-box or follow a computer programme? – or they are general skills such as



communication, getting to the right place on time, understanding and abiding by the rules of the workshop.

The art and craft work is also sold – handmade bird-boxes and willow products are on the shelves of Back to the Garden and, on sale at the annual Thornage Hall Fair, is alpaca wool knitwear from the farm’s alpaca herd, along with hundreds of other pieces of art and craft.

And the end product is of the highest quality. Lucy Birnie is garden manager at Thornage, one of up to 30 paid staff. “I can’t quite get across how much it means to us that we are growing and rearing food that ends up in a Michelin-starred restaurant,” she says. “While that shouldn’t be the thing we are known for, it does go a long way towards giving us credibility in the eyes of the wider public.”

It is clear what she means. Hall makes the same point: “We are not selling things for some ‘pity’ vote. Everything we make here is good quality and deserves to be on sale.” It is a point that Hall and Birnie stress regularly and passionately, because, despite some amazing advances, both women know that there is still a lot of prejudice surrounding people with learning difficulties. “Some people are still nervous and wary and, while that has changed enormously in the past few years, we are not so far removed from a time when

people with learning difficulties were hidden away,” adds Hall.

The concept behind Camphill Communities, of which there are 23 in the United Kingdom, is that every individual can play an equal and meaningful part in their community. As Hall explains, reconciling being a care provider and everyone within the community playing an equal role can cause conflict with that philosophy. “When there are staff providing care and being paid for it, then it is difficult to fully comply with the notion of equality, but we do the best we can in the circumstances. Certainly everyone here can learn something from each other, it is anything but a one-way relationship.”

Camphill Communities also stress the importance of biodynamic farming, which seeks to provide food for the community and to care for the environment. Thornage produces approximately 50-60 per cent of all the





says, the village and the wider community are engaging more with the Hall. Events are held at the Hall, which both residents and villagers attend, and some of the residents are finding work or volunteer opportunities within the local community.

"We have a resident who has always been mad keen on working on the railways," says Hall. "He is now working as a volunteer on the North Norfolk railway. Another resident does a few shifts at Back to the Garden."

As I followed Hall from workshop to workshop I met one of the liveliest communities of people that I have encountered in a while. From the small team in the cattle shed who were waiting for the imminent birth of a calf to the buzz of creativity in the art room, everyone was engaged

and stimulated. This is a place where people have space to live and are encouraged to be themselves. "When there are 70 acres to walk about in, you create a very different environment," says Hall. "It means we can manage behaviour in a far more positive way."

There are so many good things that I could write about Thornage Hall, but it is best summed up in the lasting image I have of one of the residents introducing herself as a professional weaver. She was no longer a 'person with learning difficulties' instead she had an identity and a self confidence because of her learning abilities.



plants are sold as seeds under the Thornage logo.

The concept behind biodynamism is that everything works in perfect synergy - a perfect balance between soil, plants, animals and humans. The aim, as far as possible is to grow food for the animals on the farm; this will mean no artificial fertilisers are needed. In return the fertility of the soil will be enhanced by the composted plant waste plus the animal manure.

food consumed by its residents. Herbs, fruit, vegetables, eggs, bread and beef products are all grown, made or reared on site, while other meats and produce, which can't be grown on the farm, are brought in, using organic ingredients where possible.

Philip Culley is farm manager, a position he has held for 15 years. His knowledge and enthusiasm for biodynamic farming sparkles through his voice and body language as he discusses the Red Poll cattle, the clean grazing and the 'closed circle' that they operate on the farm. It is a system of farming that means they rarely have visits from the vet; their cattle are eating natural products, the pastures are clear of disease, and the end product is as healthy as you could wish for.

Over in the gardens, Birnie follows the same principles. There is no pesticide or fungicide being used; instead companion planting takes place, which means that marigolds, borage and nasturtiums jostle alongside lettuce, cabbage and courgettes. The companion plants act as a deterrent to the bugs and insects that would normally feast on the vegetables.

So successful has this been that Birnie has now implemented a growing programme that means companion

This is bio-security at its best - no biodynamic cattle have succumbed to foot and mouth for example.

In a further nod to biodynamic ideals, the community at Thornage recognises and celebrates the Christian festivals, which are largely associated with the farming year. Candlemas is one such festival - in early February a candle is placed in a hole dug into the ground, the idea being that the earth is beginning to warm up as the sowing season approaches. "For many of our residents, the day and month is immaterial," says Hall. "If you say it is the the second of February, that means nothing. If you say it is Candlemas, that has a meaning."

One of the things that Hall and her team are increasingly working hard to achieve is to get Thornage Hall more integrated with the local community. For a long time that was not the case, with some reservations on both sides. Now, she

