

Transcription of an interview conducted 26 April 2018

Interviewee: SIMON JAKEMAN (SJ)
Interviewer: KEITH McMAHON (KM)
Kingston-upon-Thames, England

Transcription: JAREK ZABA

[00:02] KM: This is the 26th of April 2018. Errm this is Keith McMahon and I'm interviewing Simon Jakeman at the Kingston History Centre. For the ShedX project. Gonna be talking about allotments and Simon's experience of er growing his own food. So Simon er if we can start off by err telling me a little about erm a-do you have an allotment? How long have you had an allotment, things like that.

SJ: Yep. So w-we got our own allotment. We've had it in Hook since 2010. Erm it was first from a conversation of neighbours. And we said we must do something, start growing some ow-some of our own food, getting the children involved. So it was one cold night - winter's night and we thought let's do it. So put our name down for an allotment, long waiting list down at Hook. But they actually decided to open up part of the allotment what hadn't been used for a very long time so it was all overgrown. So we went down, had a look - and it really was overgrown. 120 foot allotment, probably 20 foot high brambles. Bits and pieces, we had to cut our way in. Erm that's how it started and then we started clearing it slowly. Er preparing the ground so that was back 2010 and we got everyone involved. It was family, friends, neighbours. All ages. Our youngest was 3 at the time. And the eldest was in their 80s. So er yes we all got down there, erm. Started clearing a bit - we done a lot of the hard work and then yeah. We started building [raith] beds, greenhouses. Someone had donated us a greenhouse. Local greenhouse what we carried down there. Erm. Couple of sheds. Yeah, just superb. So 2010. That's when we started.

[01:42] KM: And the fact that it was totally overgrown didn't uh - didn't deter you?

SJ: Not at all, it was more of a challenge. It would have been lovely if it was ready to go as an allotment that you - y'know picture in a book. But it was great because it was like a blank canvas so we could do whatever we wanted to do then. Er there was brambles, huge brambles. I don't know how long this part of the allotment had been empty, it was a big challenge. So it probably took good six months just to get it cleared more than anything. But we started growing straight away, that's somewhere - I think it was just potatoes to start off with. Erm but yeah we had er - we had a few barbecues and that kind of thing, there was 30 or 40 of us down there one day and we just blitzed it. So er yeah. Fantastic.

[02:23] KM: So it's more of a uhh - community or d-more people involved than just yourself and the family.

SJ: Yeah it started off like that because of neighbours. I think there was about five or six families and then we got our children's friend's families involved as well. And the idea was erm we noticed that so many of the children were just plugged in, they're not out playing, that kind of thing. So we just wanted to get them outside and we thought if they could start learning where food comes from, what it looks

like, rather than it being in a supermarket then they might - some birds and butterflies, and insects. What's that, that kind of thing. Just get them outside.

[02:58] KM: And how did the children react to - to this?

SJ: Yeah really good, they really enjoyed being outside and just y'know. Getting in the mud. And digging. And some of them were really young but they were so helpful and i-yeah brilliant. We even had a few posters - we had one of the sheds, we turned that into a sort of like a main hub so we had an old desk. We had all the children paint the desk and they put butterflies and flowers on it and activities that kind of thing. Just to get em involved and even our - our sign, our number on our allotment we had the children painting that, we've still got that there. And that's 8 years ago now. So yeah really good. Just-just brilliant.

[03:36] KM: And have you managed to keep the children and other people involved in uh- in the allotment or has it sort of gravitated to just one or two people?

SJ: Yeah there's a few that have slowly disappeared as there always is. But erm we always have at least three days where everyone turns so it's - everyone turns up so we have an event in March time what we call the Great Big Earth Dig. And we made posters, we've even got a website just for us really and then we take photos of everyone and that kind of thing. Erm so that's spring. Then usually sort of round Father's Day we manage to get everyone up there sort of June time. Erm for a bit of a weed and erm - tidy up, that kind of stuff. And then harvest time - so we try and do Halloween, have a bit of a bonfire and get everyone up for Halloween and a bit of another tidy up. So that's the main things - main three days. And the children still talking about it now, they're all teenagers now. Erm but they still love the allotment and talk about the days they've had down there so hopefully we planted that seed for when they're older, then they'll pass it onto their next generation. That's what it was all about. Where it started for me was my - my grandad had an allotment. What was absolutely fantastic and then he actually moved further away. He moved to Gloucestershire so he could have a bigger garden, so he could have his allotment in his garden and the whole garden was able to grow food. I still remember the smell of his greenhouse. I still love watering tomatoes. It just **[05:00]** reminds me of my grandad's garden. It's just brilliant, yeah, so that's where it comes from. Erm. Dig for Victory. I suppose, he was World War Two. Dig For Victory, where everyone was growing. Erm and that's where his idea - self sufficiency of, well doing their bit. And er - he was a great [shift] as well.

[05:17] KM: So whilst - whilst you've got your grandfather's legacy. Was 2010 the first time that you personally started growing food or did your- did your parents do anything or?

SJ: Yeah we used to - as children in our garden we used to have a veggie patch. Erm when we were quite young and then it got turned over to lawns like everyone. Everyone wanted a lawn rather than growing vegetables, it just sort of fell out of fashion I think. Probably in the 80s everyone stopped growing so much food and it just yeah fell out of fashion. Erm. But yeah we always used to do bits and pieces and grow potatoes and that kind of stuff. Erm. But yeah it's probably around - just before 2010, being a - being a firefighter. Erm being on the front line of climate change, that seed what was planted when I was a child suddenly popped into my head. Erm. Being a firefighter, being out in the climate, y'know front line of climate change, floods, wildfires, storms. I started thinking about - well we've gotta trying to do something about it. So if we could start growing our own food, locally sourced food. It's not coming

from the other side of the world. So that's how it sort of started. So we got our allotment and then I took it to the fire station and that started with one fire bucket up on the roof with one tomato plant. And that's - we thought well we're grow some tomatoes for our mess in the fire station. Erm and everyone realised by growing those tomatoes how great they tasted. Everyone thought they were just getting older and tomatoes didn't taste of - they just taste of water. But that's because they come for so far, been frozen or whatever they done. You eat a tomato straight off the plant, it's just the best thing in the world.

[06:53] KM: So t-so is the er Surbiton Fire Station g-do they grow their own food?

SJ: Yes so it started off with that fire bucket. Erm up on the roof, it's a flat roof, there used to be - the station manager used to live there with their own family. So it's like a balcony kind of terrace garden. So it started off with that one fire bucket. Erm got permission to grow the tomatoes. And to clear a garden. So we've cleared it - it was just covered in moss. Erm there's the whole allotment up there now. We grow erm potatoes, leeks. S-erm. What else is there. There's kale up there - cauliflower. There's fruit trees up there. Everything just goes into the kitchen, into the mess. Everyone can help themselves. We grew enough food for Christmas dinner. Sprouts, erm, from up on the roof. Erm it's on the back of the fire station. But it's just an oasis. With all that concrete everywhere. It was just a concrete box before. There's wildflowers up there. There's bird boxes, there's bug boxes.

[07:48] KM: And what's the feedback been from the other firefighters at the station? So you've started the idea.

SJ: That's it.

KM: What was the sort of feedback from the other firefighters?

SJ: So at first they asked what are you up to? What are you doing, why are we doing this? Er got a few involved. And then everyone's realised how great it is. People have been different plants in as well. We've got a water feature up there as well now. Obviously we've got more important things to do than gardening. But it's great for health and wellbeing. Erm we've even got a mindfulness in London Fire Brigade what's in Brixton. So where it started off - one fire station, it started spreading out. New Malden Fire Station have got a wildlife garden. Kingston Fire Station looking at doing a community garden and maybe growing some vegetables with local schools. But it's spread across the whole of London Fire Brigade so everyone's now growing their own food. Erm. Yeah it-it's just fantastic. It's amazing that one step has just gone off all directions. Yeah, fantastic.

[08:49] KM: And the spin off from your involvement in allotments an-and the fire brigade has led to erm other gardening activity shall we say? Erm an-and display gardens.

SJ: Yeah so erm we managed to take the fire station garden so Hampton Court Flower Show in 2016. What was just amazing. Erm always attended Hampton Court Flower Show. Possibly because of my grandfather. And not just growing vegetables, he loved flowers as well and was part of the garden. So yeah we took the fire station garden along in 2016 and we were really proud and honoured just to be there more than anything. Awarded a silver guild medal, what was just amazing, that landed on the garden. It was all fire station themed. It was fire helmets. Erm. Fire buckets. That kind of stuff. Ladders. Recycled tyres what were growing erm different vegetables in at the - we got three thick trees in just recycled tyre planters up on the station. So that was 2016. Went back, 2017. Erm. Done a garden for

pollinators. But this year we've just been accepted for twenty s-er 2018. And we're doing a vegetable garden. Based on the fire station. So we're gonna be [10:00] doing runner beans up fire ladders. Erm. Cauliflower kale again. All based around the four watches so red white blue and green. So we're trying to get different vegetables with the colours. Erm fantastic, we've also found out - you may not know. But erm our nextdoor neighbours at Hampton Court Flower Show is ShedX. So we're right next to each other, what is superb.

[10:25] KM: Absolutely wonderful.

SJ: What is just brilliant.

KM: So we've got your la-your grandfather's legacy coming through your father. You're recognising climate change so y-you've started growing your own food. Erm so you're doing your bit erm and obviously you've got a lot of the other firefighters at erm er-at Surbiton and other fire stations across London. Very er-very heavily involved. Erm. What-what's your sense of y'know whether other people in the community are erm are wanting to get involved? Can't be bothered? Erm. Don't see the-see the value of it.

SJ: So the great thing with the fire station garden is that fire stations are a hub in the community. So it's not just about the fire stations, we do get community groups coming along. Cubs, Brownies, schools. And it's a great way to show that if we can do it a fire station anyone can do it. So we've actually had a couple of local schools come up to the fire station. They videoed and made a film of the garden. Gone back to school and start- started their own gardens, what is just brilliant. We've had councillors up onto the garden. We've had our own local MPs. Er-NGOs. We've had WWF come along to have a look at the idea. And it's w-it's just amazing. So that's the whole point of it. If we can get - if we can do it, we can show other people how easy it is. We started to look at - maybe we were gonna grow some vegetables at the front of the fire station. I've been in conversations with a scheme called Incredible Edible. And that's about community growing. Erm actually spoke to the lead on that and we started growing vegetables out the front of Clapham Fire Station. For the community to help themselves. Just in big tubs. Erm. So that was a couple of years ago. Yeah. So if y'know - get people involved, everyone can do it. It's so easy.

[12:19] KM: So once you start to get people involved. The interest spreads.

SJ: It really does.

KM: Erm and doing it through the schools. Are there any other community groups that-

SJ: Erm we've had Transition Town Kingston to come and look - to have a look as well. Surbiton Wildlife Group have been up as well. Er we made a film with them actually. Erm about the garden. So that's out there. Erm. Trying to think of all the different. We've had so many different people. Lots of residents have come up as well and had a look and taken photos. We've actually been erm the Surbiton Fire Station roof garden - vegetable garden has featured in a book as well on er global - small global gardens. So it's called er My Tiny Garden. There's gardens in Tokyo. San Francisco. Erm. Actually fantastic and Surbiton as well. So all the g-all the garden features in that. So it really has gone global, what's just amazing.

[13:15] KM: Erm and do you grow any vegetables - apart from your allotment which is obviously fairly close to - fairly close to home which makes it nice. Erm do you grow any vegetables at home or any - anything like that?

SJ: So tomatoes, chillies, strawberries. They're all out in the garden. Erm we've got lots of pots. Start lots of the stuff off at home. We've got obviously the greenhouse. But yeah there's vegetables and plants everywhere. We're even growing now erm - er strawberries, tomatoes and chillies at London Fire Brigade headquarters. They're all on window sills up on the top floor. There's a balcony garden there. Er - we've done an event for Earth Hour and our waste contractors - we managed to get them to supply plastic bottles. So we've upcycled plastic bottles and turned them into planters. And that's where all the seeds are all germinating, all the seedlings and they're right on the window sill and we got everyone involved. There's a gardening club at headquarters. So it's literally just spreading everywhere. Planting seeds. Literally.

[14:18] KM: Absolutely. And people wh-who work at headquarters of London Fire Brigade obviously presumably live throughout London. Th-the-they're not all southwest London so the word is getting out to - to other parts of er of the capital?

SJ: That's right yeah. So we planted lots of seedlings. We've just repotted them only last Wednesday. All the ones where we had too many we've said you can take them home. Take some photos. And we've been told their families, their children are gonna get involved. Already had feedback from last week that there's tomatoes being planted about all over the place. What were planted at headquarters. What's just brilliant. And that's all it's about. Getting other people involved. If it doesn't work it **[15:00]** soon tells you, y'know. If you don't do something wrong, needs more water, it's not hard. It really isn't. Everybody's worried about doing the wrong thing but yeah but it's pretty simple.

[15:11] KM: And have - have you put any support mechanisms in pla-y'know if people don't know how - they've never done any gardening before or. An-an-and have got this sort of hesitation, y'know am I gonna kill the plant.

SJ: Yeah so we've done some workshops on how to report. How to be gentle with the seedlings and what to look out for. Erm. W-we've actually got an urban garden gardener working with us up in Southwark. Erm so yeah we're doing workshops. And bits and piece-and just showing people what to do. That's the thing. And directing them in the right direction. Y'know websites, that kind of thing. Obviously [the] book as well what I was just talking about. So yeah.

[15:49] KM: Fantastic. So - Simon I'd like to say thank you very much. That really is interesting. Erm. Not only erm how you done your own allotment err as er as other people do and er - in many locations. But the-the work you do for the London Fire Brigade. Simon, many thanks indeed.

SJ: Thank you.