

Completing the Outdoor Learning Space (OLS) in the Edible Woodland Garden (EWG)

a project of the Findhorn Hinterland Trust (FHT) SCIO



With the funding from the Pebble Trust, People's Postcode Lottery, The Findhorn Wind Park, and a local crowdfunding campaign, we were able to implement the second phase of building our unique OLS. We are now ready to provide a wind and rain-free, warm space where people can reconnect with nature and learn skills that support them to live in a world where the impact of climate change becomes increasingly felt.

For the first phase of the project (outwith this funding phase), members of the FHT Woodcutters Collective felled trees from the community woodland to construct a round pole timber frame. Participants learned how to build the structure with tenon and mortice joints and oak pegs. Larch timbers, sustainably harvested from the banks of the Findhorn River, were used to support a turf roof.

In this recently completed phase, we laid the wooden floor and enclosed the building with timber and earthen walls. Inside the building we have an earthen cookstove and heated bench. On the outside of the building, we installed wood storage cupboards and a washing-up area. We also equipped the space with a large wooden worktable, gardening tools, and cooking equipment. All the timber used in this phase of the project came from trees that have grown in the FHT community woodland. We brought in a portable sawmill to transform the logs into the timber sizes we needed for the project.

The OLS is nestled in our Edible Woodland Garden, a small demonstration food forest. Installing the cookstove makes it possible to cook food harvested from the garden or hold other training programs where cooking or heat is needed, for example, dying fibres or making beeswax candles. The heated bench helps to keep the space warmer on cooler days, making it possible to be outside learning for longer.

The construction work took place as a series of workshops and mentor-lead work sessions with volunteers. We started with the earthen elements, then installed the wood elements, returning to finish off earthen elements that had to be done once the floor and walls were in place. In considering how to construct the building we were aware that local people wanted to gain hands-on experience building with natural materials. Thirty-two keen community members participated in the construction of the building.

In October 2019, we worked with the Roundhouse Company Ltd to construct the cookstove, heated bench, and earthen wall as part of an Earthen workshop. These elements needed to be put in place before the floor and walls. We accomplished a good deal in the workshop, and community members learned skills that meant they could then take the lead in completing the earthen elements of the building after the workshop ended. Along with learning about building with cob, the participants also learned technical aspects of building the stove system for the heated bench to heat would move through the pipes rather than flames.



The round pole timber frame with the sketching in of where the floor, bench and stove would be located. Before this phase of construction began.



The building with materials and tools in place, ready to receive workshop participants.



The cookstove, ready for the decoration



The batch-box for the bench.

Following on from the earthen workshop, Henry Fosbrooke, master carpenter and round timber frame builder, mentored volunteers to lay the timber floor and walls and build the storage cupboards. Some finishing off took place in February 2020. Fortunately, all the wood elements of the building were completed just before Scotland went into national lockdown due to the COVID-10 pandemic.

The lockdown impacted the timeline for completing the remaining earthen elements of the project as we could not gather to mix cob and work in close quarters. At one point during 2020, when lockdown eased, we were able to work in small, physically distanced groups of two to three people at a time to move the project forward. Other lockdowns or restrictions stopped the project altogether for some months.



In May 2021, we were able to work again in small groups to complete the remaining earthen elements of the building. We look forward to making good use of the building in conjunction with the Edible Woodland Garden from June 2021.

Throughout the various construction phases of the project, hundreds of people were exposed to it. The building is next to a frequently used path to the beach, so people stopped to ask what was being made, and we gave brief introductions to the project.

Now that the OLS is complete to a point that we can use it, we will be able to offer learning programs and events that can raise greater knowledge and awareness of sustainability issues in people attending the programs. Through this, we hope to disseminate and inspire people to take action in their communities to become more self-reliant as they move away from fossil fuel use and reduce reliance on global markets.

The project is part of the Findhorn Hinterland Trust's work which included action and education on diverse habitat management and support for biodiversity. We see the OLS as a special and unique learning hub for both the Edible Woodland Garden and the rest of the Trust manages.

By renting the OLS as a workshop venue to partnering organisations, we will generate income for its operations, with a long-term vision to generate enough revenue to employ one part-time manager.

The lockdown brought about by the arrival of the coronavirus in Moray meant that the work to complete the building was not as efficient as hoped. Still, even before the building work was complete, based on the interest of passers-by, we saw that it attracts people. During Lockdown when it was possible for small groups to meet outside, the OLS became a place for people to hold physically distanced meetings.

This project was made possible through a combination of grants and volunteer efforts. If it had been fully costed from the outset, it would never have been built, yet buildings like the OLS engage and inspire people to learn more about living in a way that is with and more connected to nature. We're looking forward to putting our educational programs in place and inviting people to join us when Moray moves into levels where it is possible to gather groups of people.

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A Selection of Photos from the Project



Building the foundations for the heated earthen bench.



Annabel shows how cob is made and the theory behind this simple construction material.



Annabel and Alan from the Roundhouse Company show participants how to mix cob.



Mixing cob for the earthen elements



Putting the finishing touches to the earthen wall



Almost completed, the cold north-easterly wind is being closed out.