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Art- and Land-Oriented Educational Programmes in Britain, 1925 to the Present

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Abstract

This article proposes an exploration of British educational initiatives since 1925 that have brought together art- and land-oriented practices, particularly ones that are social, regenerative, and reparative. By juxtaposing historical and contemporary case studies, this article highlights uncharted connections between artistically infused ecopedagogies of past and present. Beyond surveying defunct and currently active educational programmes and comparing and analysing their mode of operation, pedagogies, and contributions to systems change, the article highlights a pattern of emergence, brief flourishing, and closure in art and ecology educational and research programmes in Britain since the 1990s. While Dartington Hall and the Village Colleges, the historical case studies, draw on secondary research, the contemporary ones—Goldsmiths' MA Art & Ecology, Black Mountains College's BA (Hons) Sustainable Futures: Arts, Ecology, and Systems Change, The Gathering, and The Gramounce—are composed from interviews conducted with their founder and other key protagonists as well as from empirical research. This article captures the continuities and discontinuities between historical experiments and contemporary initiatives, arguing for the ongoing relevance—and the institutional fragility—of an educational mode that refuses the separation of art and land.

Keywords: art- and land-oriented education; critical pedagogies; ecopedagogy; regenerative practice; systems change; art and ecology

1. Introduction

This article is dedicated to the subject of educational programmes, both historical and contemporary, which have brought together art- and land-oriented practices, particularly ones that are social, regenerative, and reparative. It explores initiatives established by artistically informed pedagogues and artists over the past century, who have put artistic and land-based training, and more recently land ethics, on an equal footing. While the focus of this text is Britain, the dialogue, both direct and indirect, which has existed between British initiatives and like-minded international educational projects, is also touched on.

This article discusses the motivations behind the establishment of selected art and land educational initiatives over the last 100 years. It surveys, compares, and analyses defunct and currently active educational programmes, focusing on their mode of operation, pedagogical approaches, and contributions to systems change. As it develops, it highlights a pattern of emergence, brief flourishing, and closure in art and ecology educational and research programmes in Britain since the 1990s. As a whole, this article captures the continuities and discontinuities between historical experiments and contemporary initiatives, arguing for the ongoing relevance—and the institutional fragility—of an educational mode that refuses the separation of art and land.

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This research starts with Dartington Hall in Devon and The Village Colleges in Cambridgeshire in the first part of the 20th century and continues with recently established endeavours. These are the university-affiliated MA Art & Ecology at Goldsmiths and Black Mountains College's BA (Hons) Sustainable Futures: Arts, Ecology, and Systems Change; the Permaculture Association-accredited programme The Gathering; and the independent educational platform The Gramounce.

The proposed transhistorical juxtaposition aims to cast light on how these early experiments and their incentives resonate with and may inform present-day art and land-conscious educational programmes. A further aim of this article is to survey like-minded initiatives that have not yet been written about in conjunction with each other and which, for some, have yet to be written about by researchers other than the founders themselves.

Critically, the text tells a story of entanglement between alternative education, social practice, arts-based pedagogies, and commitment to the land as a teacher. The subject of skills and their transferability between artistic and land practices, common to all initiatives, is explored throughout the essay. Indeed, in the discussed endeavours, arts-led pedagogies have almost consistently been utilised as the means through which to develop critical minds and value the power of imagination, observation, attention, and situated experience. The same values are integral to cultivating, listening to, and caring for the land. One could argue that in the two historical case studies, if the land was already considered a producer and repository of knowledge, and a pedagogy, it was nonetheless largely apprehended in physical terms, as the ground and soil in which plants and trees grow—as a resource. Spearheaded by ecofeminism (Maathai [1985] 2006; Merchant 1980; Mies and Shiva 1993; Gaard 1993; Wall Kimmerer 2013; Hernandez 2022), the understanding of the land has expanded to further recognise it as a system of physical, social, spiritual relations, and ethical practices; and as an entity calling for healing, reconnection, and kinship (Wildcat et al. 2014; Battiste [2013] 2017). In the contemporary case studies, ecosystems' degradation, biodiversity depletion, food growing and justice, permaculture-inspired practices, systems thinking, and land as a living relative are considered hand-in-hand.

This text is organised around six case studies, each introduced through a description of their mission, the subjects of study, and assessment methods. The section that follows provides an analysis and comparison of the programmes, questioning where and how their respective aims and ideological underpinnings connect. Following on from that, it explores how the Deweyan philosophy behind the historical art- and land-based programmes, and subsequent critical pedagogies, including those extending into ecological territories, have informed present-day art and ecology training and the spaces in which interdisciplinary knowledge is produced. This article's conclusion returns to the topic of cross-disciplinary skill transfer and ends with a speculation on why the flourishing of art and ecology programmes in the 1990s and 2000s waned after a few years, and what the future may hold for currently active programmes.

2. The Dartington Experiment

2.1. Introduction

The rationale for choosing Dartington Hall as a starting point is determined by the fact that its landmark pedagogical approach and influence—itself following a lineage of earlier international experiments—persisted well into the 2000s and continues to be referenced by some of the contemporary art- and land-oriented programmes discussed in this text.

Compiled from secondary research sources, this section traces the trajectory of the engagement of Dartington Hall Trust (1925–present) with art- and land-based pedagogies, from the Trust's inception to the closure of the renown Dartington College of Arts (1961–2010). If the latter has featured prominently in the history of British experimental ed-

ucation, in contrast, the Trust's first offspring, Dartington Hall School (1926–1987), remains relatively little-known in this field of research. The College of Art's last degree programme, the MA Arts and Ecology (2006–10), which concludes this section, anchors the conversation in the relevance and relatively short-lived nature of art and ecology programmes in the face of institutional instability.

2.2. The Making of Dartington: International Influences

Dartington Hall Trust was founded in rural Devon by two philanthropists, Leonard and Dorothy Elmhirst, preoccupied with bringing together education, agriculture, and horticulture to revivify the Hall's 1200-acre estate. The American Dorothy Elmhirst was deeply engaged in progressive education and the arts, and was also known as an advocate of women's trade union rights in the US. An Englishman of modest means, Leonard Elmhirst trained in agronomy at Cornell University, where he learned about botany, animal husbandry, poultry, bacteriology, chemistry, farm management, and rural education, supporting his studies with farm work (Cox 2005). A fact that should be noted is that if Leonard's name is prominent in the Dartington narrative, it is because he was entrusted by his wife Dorothy with shaping the vision and framework of the project, with the support of her significant wealth as well as her foresight.

Dartington Hall Trust was the result of years of planning and was directly informed by the pedagogical philosophy of two figures: the American educational reformer and philosopher John Dewey and the Indian poet and social reformer Rabindranath Tagore. While Dorothy (then Payne Whitney) had attended Dewey's lectures in New York, and W. B. Curry, the second principal appointed to run Dartington Hall School, had been a student of Dewey, Leonard Elmhirst had helped Tagore set up, in 1921, the Institute of Rural Reconstruction in Sriniketan, West Bengal (Tagore and Elmhirst 1961; Elmhirst 1975; Young 1982; Cox 2005).

Conceiving of education as "a social process" and "a process of living" (Dewey 2015, p. 77), the reformer and philosopher supported the idea that learning should be attained through direct experience rather than through teacher mediation (Dewey [1916] 1930; Tanner 1997; Mayhew and Edwards [1936] 2017). Between 1896 and 1903, Dewey put his theories to test in primary education at the Laboratory School, under the auspices of the University of Chicago's Department of Pedagogy, also founded by him. At the Laboratory School, learning would be connected to experiences achieved using an equal share of intellectual and manual skills. Dewey described how acts of cooking, weaving, gardening, and crafts led the students to amass "information of practical and scientific importance in botany, zoology, chemistry, physics, and other sciences, but (what is more significant) in their becoming versed in methods of experimental inquiry and proof" (Tanner 1997, p. 83).

To give but one example of Dewey's experiments relevant to land practice, drawing, mathematics, carpentry, and chemistry were the skills used for the creation of a sand-table farm made to scale, utilising the school's land as a site for an imaginary complex composed of a barn, a dairy, a chicken coop, and fenced patches of land where corn and wheat would be grown. Pupils spent two weeks elaborating and improving their model, learning about the art of concentration facilitated by precise, manual activity, as well as about cooperative working and the division of labour. At the end of the process, freshly harvested wheat was transformed by the pupils into flour to bake a cake (Mayhew and Edwards [1936] 2017).

Eighteen years later, in 1921, Rabindranath Tagore entrusted Leonard Elmhirst with developing the Institute for Rural Reconstruction in Sriniketan, West Bengal. It would open in early 1922, completing Tagore's vision of a dual artistic and agricultural education. Indeed, in 1919 he founded the art school Kala-Bhavana in the nearby Santiniketan settlement and educational complex, which would formally become known as Visva-Bharati in

1921. In his 'Wednesday, March 1, 1922' diary entry, Elmhirst recounts being told by Tagore that "he'd always hoped for two things at his school, a good Art Department and a good Agricultural School and now he'd got them both" (Elmhirst 1975, p. 134).

In the first year, ten local college-aged men joined the Institute. Among other activities, their land work entailed tank digging for water management, building a cow house, poultry keeping, observational visits to local farms, and discussions with farmers about soil fertility and fodder storing. In the evenings they took part in cultural gatherings with students from Kala-Bhavana, which included music, singing, and life-drawing. As Tagore's biographer Krishna Kripalani would later write, "culture of the mind and culture of the soil went hand in hand" (Elmhirst 1975, p. 9).

2.3. The Institute for Rural Reconstruction and Dartington Hall Trust: A Connected History

In *Rabindranath Tagore: Pioneer in Education* (Tagore and Elmhirst 1961), a collection of writings by Tagore and Elmhirst on the philosophy behind the Institute for Rural Reconstruction, Elmhirst recounts his experience of running the Institute in its early years. In comparing this text with his other accounts specific to Dartington Hall Trust, one perceives that the line between the two is blurred and, as such, that this account cannot be separated from that of Dartington. Indeed, the two initiatives were intricately connected and operated almost simultaneously. Launched four years later, in 1925, Dartington was also referred to by the Elmhirsts as an experiment in rural reconstruction.

Similarly to Dewey's ecopedagogy, planting, harvesting, and farming experiments replaced textbooks at both Sriniketan and Dartington. Geology, chemistry, physics, entomology, and ornithology lessons would equip students with knowledge about fertility, soil amendment, water management, pests and diseases, and the role of invertebrates and birds in land ecology. According to Tagore and Elmhirst, freedom of discovery, imagination, creativity, and patient observation constituted essential attributes for students to confidently venture into the sphere of the arts—from poetry, to music, drama, and dance (Tagore and Elmhirst 1961). The poet and the plowman, as Elmhirst called Tagore and himself, believed in the transferability of skills and knowledge from one field to the next and placed it at the centre of their pedagogy.

2.4. Dartington Hall School

The foundational years of Dartington Hall School (1926–1987) attest to the primary aim of the Trust to bring art and land education together in a symbiotic relationship. This relationship, however, would last five years only, with a split occurring in 1931. The records and accounts, both old and recent, mostly concentrate on the general ethos of the project and offer little information on the minutiae of the curriculum in the School's infancy. One description of the educational environment that is frequently repeated in the literature is how the Trust's 1200-acre estate constituted Dartington Hall School's classroom (Young 1982; Kidel 1990). The Trust's twelve departments, which included Building, Garden, Forestry, Orchard, Farm, Accounting, and Workshop, were sites of placements for the pupils to work on real-life projects, under the guidance of the departments' staff. These included keeping bees, building shelters and garden huts for crop storage, installing ventilation in the quarters for the hens, researching markets to sell their feathers and manure, and undertaking repair work in the farm or garden (Cox 2005). Such activities were tailored not only to support the everyday demands of the farm, woodlands, gardens, and poultry—a project that would be recognised as unviable a few years down the line (Curry 1934; Neima 2022)—but also to enable the "children to grow up inquisitive and creative, free of fear and repression, in order to reach their full potential as individuals" (Cox 2005, p. 8). This would not only be facilitated by contact with nature, but also through art practice: while poultry

keeping, ploughing, and vegetable growing took place in the day, life drawing, singing, dancing, and sewing kept pupils occupied in the evening (Neima 2022).

Mark Kidel, a documentary filmmaker who worked for Dartington Hall Trust in the 1970s and 1980s, described the school and its developments as follows:

> The curriculum covered much the same ground as in ordinary schools [but] [t]here was more project-work than in more conventional schools: there was a school farm, which in its most flourishing days kept the establishment in vegetables; and non-academic pursuits such as pottery, art and music were considered as valuable to the development of the child as more conventional education subjects. The School had become, however, a separate institution with little except history to connect it to Tagore and Dewey and to the Elmhirsts' original vision. (Kidel 1990, p. 39)

Dartington Hall School echoed Dewey's principles: "(1) Curriculum should flow from children's own interests [. . .]; (2) Learning by doing [. . .]; (3) Adults should be friends, not authority figures [. . .]; (4) The school as a self-governing commonwealth" (Young 1982, pp. 136–39). The workers who looked after each of the estate's departments and were not qualified in education became teachers by default. The only two formally trained teachers appointed at the school, Wyatt Rawson and Marjorie Wise, largely worked on the organisation and vision of the school as well as teacher training (Neima 2022). Both American, Rawson was involved in the New Education movement and Wise came from a calligraphy background. Control over arts-based learning largely remained in the hands of the Elmhirsts until the appointment of a first principal in 1928, replaced three years later by W. B. Curry. Curry ran the school from 1931 to 1957, developing his own vision for it and parting with the old ways. In his conception, cooperation, co-education, democratic learning, and minimal rules were ingredients for the development of creative children. But Curry, an elitist, saw limits in the conjunction of estate and school, and in the educating of children alongside estate workers (Young 1982; Neima 2022). With the establishment of Dartington Hall Ltd. in 1929, which soon made the commercial viability of the estate's resources a primary goal, "[t]he company could not be lumbered with the education of funny-looking and funny-behaving children. How could the employees revere children at the same time as balance sheets?" (Young 1982, pp. 167–68).

2.5. Conclusion and Opening

This history of Dartington's symbiotic relationship between land- and arts-based education lasted five years, yet its principles would infuse later endeavours, especially towards the end of the life of Dartington College of Arts. In 1977, the Art and Social Context programme was launched under the direction of artist and teacher Chris Crickmay. Informed by the British community arts movement, Art and Social Context notably promoted "the importance of process over product; the value of group work; the development of environmental and ecological awareness; [and] the use of live community projects" (Crickmay 2003, p. 120). The programme, which was the closest to the original ethos of Dartington, would be relocated to the University of the West of England in 1991, marking a new era.

Directly inspired by this now defunct programme, in 2006 the MA Arts and Ecology, started by Alan Boldon, a graduate of the Art and Social Context programme, was launched as the College's final course. If the programme's approach to ecology had more to do with "cross-sectorial approaches to complex social and environmental challenges" (Richards 2015, p. 139) than with ecology per se, the MA nonetheless developed close associations with the nearby Schumacher College. Established in 1991 on Dartington's estate and operating under the umbrella of the Trust, the college offered ecology-oriented degrees and short courses until its demise in 2024. The seeds of the MA Arts and Ecology were sown

through conversations between Boldon and Schumacher's staff and visiting scientists and ecologists on the connections between art and science, and what it would mean to teach art and ecology together (Richards 2015). Little trace remains of these discussions, of the 'Desire Lines' conference, which marked the launch of the MA in autumn 2006, and of the programme itself, which attracted fourteen students in the first year and only two in its last year.

Socially, politically, and spiritually minded, the course was modular and structured around intensive teaching interspersed with independent project development. The curriculum notably featured meditation sessions with artist and Dartington College of Arts alumnus Ansuman Biswas, a module led by Chris Crickmay from the former Art and Social Context degree, and another by the collective Platform London, which since 1983 has developed projects and campaigns at the crossroads of environmentalism, art, and social justice (Richards 2015). The programme changed hands twice in its four years of existence, with the last director Richard Povall reporting that students withdrew on the basis that, quoting one of them, "[t]here's no art, but we're artists, so we don't understand why we're doing it" (Richards 2015, p. 322).

The MA Arts and Ecology ended in 2010 with the College's closure. In 2024, Schumacher College closed following financial losses and the withdrawal of support from Dartington Hall Trust, leaving forty-six students to fend for themselves in the middle of their studies[1]. In 2025, the private foundation Satish Kumar Foundation bought the name and launched non-accredited courses, parting ways with topical subjects such as regenerative economics and farming, and ecological design thinking, marking a difficult time for pedagogies engaged with critical ecologies.

3. The Village Colleges

3.1. Introduction

This second case study is much lesser-known in the field of research this article is preoccupied with. Indeed, if the Village Colleges placed an emphasis on rural education development and on the relation between art and agricultural practices, they did it in a manner that was less symbiotic than at Dartington, in that the two practices mainly operated side by side. Yet, the College's early connections to Dartington and its founders make it a relevant object of attention. Much of the literature available on the Village Colleges is based on the writings of their founder Henry Morris, some of which are available in The British Archive for Contemporary Writing, University of East Anglia, and most of which have been compiled by his biographer Harry Rée.

Invented by Henry Morris, Cambridgeshire's Chief Education Officer between 1922 and 1954, the concept of the Village College responded to the recognition that education in rural areas was deficient. Morris argued that country children had the choice of going to school in towns, but that they came out equipped with skills that bore no relation to the life and habits of the countryside. His concerns also extended to the poor provision of adult education in rural zones and the isolation of social agencies (Rée 1973). Aiming to "sustain, invigorate and enrich learning and living in rural areas" (Fieldhouse [1996] 2006, p. 111), Morris envisioned the Village Colleges as taking:

> all the various vital but isolated activities in village life—the School, the Village Hall and Reading Room, the Evening Classes, the Agricultural Education Courses, the Women's Institute, the British Legion, Boy Scouts and Girl Guides, the recreation ground, the branch of the County Rural Library, the Athletics and Recreation Clubs—and, bringing them together into relation, [to] create a new institution for the English countryside. (Rée 1973, p. 154)

During his appointment, five Village Colleges were created in the county, and three more were established after his retirement. This number does not reflect the scope of his vision for a widespread movement, but institutional resistance and financial pressure were met at every step of his journey (Rée 1973). Some of the few people who actively supported Morris were the Elmhirsts. Sharing his belief in the potential afforded by the entanglement of education, agriculture, and the arts, they helped finance the movement early on and, in particular, the building of Impington Village College (Young 1982)—the fourth college to be built after the Sawston, Bottisham, and Linton Village Colleges.

3.2. Architecture at the Service of Transdisciplinary Education and Community

In 'The Village College: Being a Memorandum on the Provision of Educational and Social Facilities for the Countryside, with Special Reference to Cambridgeshire'—which Morris wrote in 1925 and sent to county councillors and bodies including the Board of Education and the Ministry of Agriculture—the education officer delineated the contours of the Village Colleges. Morris envisioned and effectively enabled the creation of countryside community centres complete with primary, secondary, and adult education, including agricultural instruction. The community centres' activities largely gravitated around multi-purpose halls, which were used by pupils in the daytime for assemblies, lunch, and physical exercise. In the evenings, the children's families would come together for recreational, artistic, and community activities such as concerts, drama and dance performances, lectures, and local meetings (Mahon 2023). Associating education, from primary to adult, with the experience and practice of art, literature, poetry, dance, and music, was part of Morris' programme.

His vision further crystalised in the construction of buildings whose architecture and interior design constituted artistic excellence. The educator adorned the colleges' building with his own art collection and commissioned new works through his lithograph company to the likes of Paul Nash, John Piper, and Barnett Freedman (Rée 1973; Matless [1998] 2016). Being acquainted with Henry Moore, he asked the artist to make a proposal for a sculpture to be sited on the grounds of Impington College, but the project was rejected by the council, which deemed it too costly (Rée 1973).

A prime example of educational architecture excellence was Impington Village College, the fourth college to be built and completed in 1939. Morris commissioned a major figure of the Modernist movement, Walter Gropius, the former director of the Bauhaus, to build it. Gropius had lived in England between 1934 and 1936 and had been commissioned by the Elmhirsts to design and oversee the last stages of the Barn Theatre conversion on Dartington's estate. Gropius collaborated with the British architect Maxwell Fry on the design of Impington Village College. They made plans for a single-storey building following the finger plan—thin corridors leading to several classrooms and, at the tip of the building, a swimming school and a gymnasium, all looking out onto the gardens and surrounding woods. The adult wing was in the north part of the building alongside the hall and was connected to the main school through a central promenade. The college was described as "a chaste and severe, but intense [. . .] masterpiece" by Morris (Burke and Grosvenor 2008, p. 87), and "the pattern of much to come" by architectural historian Nikolaus Pevsner (Rée 1973, p. 77).

In *Education Through Art* (Read 1943), the art historian and literary critic Herbert Read dedicated part of the 'Environment' chapter to Impington. He described the various features of the college, which he argued every school, whether rural or urban, should adopt. He notably listed the promenade and theatre hall; the withdrawing room—"a place where the pupil can retire to read or meditate undisturbed"; recreation rooms which, as Impington's lay-out plan reveals, numbered three—one for table-tennis play, another for

pool play, and a third one for card games; workshops and laboratories; and "external services and experiments (vegetable garden, horticultural and stock breeding stations" (Read 1943, p. 299).

3.3. The Village Colleges and Agricultural Training

In his 1925 memorandum, and later in 'Rural Civilisation: Address to the British Association at Blackpool' (1936) (Rée 1984), Morris provided a small amount of detail on agricultural learning, including the necessary spatial conditions needed for its delivery. He posited that the grounds of the Village Colleges should be a minimum of eight acres. Besides accommodating play and physical exercise, the grounds would contain a vegetable garden and be used for crops and horticultural demonstrations. Larger-scale demonstrations led by the Agricultural Education Sub-Committee would take place at nearby farms. In addition, each college building was to contain an agriculture instruction room opening straight out onto the vegetable garden. In the case of Sawston Village College, the agriculture room was complemented by a mechanics workshop for the teaching of agricultural engineering, a facility that was also funded by the Elmhirsts (Mahon 2023). The agriculture room was complete with:

> maps, charts and specimens, to be used gently with a science laboratory. Such a room with a laboratory would provide for the theoretical portion of [. . .] agricultural education [. . .]. The Village College would also be the natural centre near which instruction in manual processes such as thatching, hitching and ditching and the use of agricultural machinery, would take place, and demonstrations given in veterinary science and farriery [. . .]. (Morris cited in Rée 1973, p. 149)

3.4. Conclusions

The Village Colleges, and in particular Impington, the most relevant to this study, differ from the previous and forthcoming case studies in that their arts- and land-oriented education could be said to have cohabited rather than to have fully merged. Nonetheless, paying attention to the college's vision and achievements remains important, for they constitute the first endeavour in the lineage of educational institutions to be inspired or indebted to the Dartington experiment. In the case of the Village Colleges, the 'debt' to Dartington was not only financial but also ideological. Indeed, the Colleges continued the work started by the Trust in its early years and transferred its approaches to Cambridgeshire, sharing the belief that art appreciation and practice were essential to the promotion of an education that would be "conterminous with life" (Morris cited in Rée 1984, p. 38). The Village Colleges still exist to this day and while it is unclear when they effectively stopped teaching agriculture, some still provide non-vocational adult education in domains such as cookery, crafts, and pottery.

4. Art- and Land-Conscious Education Today

4.1. Introduction

This section explores four currently operating educational programmes, this time solely aimed at adults. These are Goldsmiths' MA Art & Ecology; Black Mountains College's BA (Hons) Sustainable Futures: Arts, Ecology, and Systems Change; and the non-university-affiliated programmes The Gramounce and The Gathering. They have been chosen as objects of study for they represent the principal active UK programmes that substantively integrate artistic and ecological or land-based training at postgraduate or undergraduate levels.

Three significant endeavours that took place in Britain prior to the establishment of these programmes, as well as during and after the life of Dartington's MA Arts and

Ecology, and sometimes in entanglement with Dartington, ought to be acknowledged. The first one is the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World (CCANW), which operated from 1995 to 2020 in Haldon Forest Park (1995–2013), the Innovation Centre at the University of Exeter (2013–15), and Dartington Hall (2015–20). Dedicated to the exploration of environmental and scientific issues through contemporary art, the charity hosted exhibitions, seminars, residencies, and workshops that engaged with subjects such as soil conservation, sustainable materials, and the fashion industry's environmental impact[2].

The second one is Research in Art, Nature & Environment (RANE), founded by the artist Daro Montag at Falmouth University (2004–15), who would go on to co-direct CCANW in the last four years of its existence. The RANE Group was committed to developing sustainable futures through art practice and action, an undertaking which took the form of commissions, exhibitions, and lectures. Directly growing out of the RANE research group, the MA Art & Environment at Falmouth was launched in 2010[3], the very same year Dartington's MA Arts and Ecology closed. It was discontinued in 2015, when Falmouth University withdrew support for RANE. While virtually no trace of the MA remains in the open domain, RANE's research projects live on the website of art.earth, an organisation started in 2016 by artist and researcher Richard Povall, the last director of the MA Arts and Ecology at Dartington, and brought to a close in 2023.

The third one is the Arts & Ecology programme, developed by curator and educator Michaela Crimmin under the aegis of the Royal Society of Arts. Between 2005 and 2010, Arts & Ecology brought public awareness to the engagement of artists and cultural practitioners to environmental challenges, from pollution to the loss of habitats, in the form of conferences, commissions, and publications.

Unlike the historical case studies, the four objects of inquiry that follow are composed from interviews with the founders and other key protagonists, access to programme specifications, personal experience of observing one of them and participating in another, and exploration of their online resources. Having come into existence only recently, the literature around the programmes is still nascent and mostly generated by the founders themselves.

4.2. Goldsmiths' MA Art & Ecology

Before delving into Goldsmiths' MA Art & Ecology, a programme started by Ros Gray in 2021, I must impart that I am close to it and its founder, for I too run a postgraduate programme in Goldsmiths' School of Art and co-direct the Centre for Art and Ecology (established in 2024) with Gray. In consequence, I have had direct interactions with the programme's students and alumni over the years, through studio visits, attending degree shows, collaborating on projects with some of them, and gardening in their company in the Art Research Garden, a plot of land on the university campus which, since 2020, has served as a site of enquiry, experimentation, conviviality, and artistic interventions for both the MA and the research centre. I have chosen to start with the MA for it is the longest-running of all the programmes explored in this section.

In its fifth year of existence, the MA remains committed to its initial raison d'être, that is, to support the practice-based research of artists wishing to engage with urgent and complex ecological issues through the perspective of social justice[4]. As Gray put it in our interview, "approaching ecology in the plural, that is in terms of plural cultures of ecology, and reflecting on how artists have shaped and been shaped by these cultures"[5] is central to both practice and theory, which are deeply entangled in the programme. The themes addressed in the weekly lecture delivered by Gray and titled History and Theory of Art & Ecology are closely connected to her own artist-centred research into climate justice, "decolonial, eco-feminist and queer approaches to ecological stewardship"[6], planetary healing, and more recently, "foraging and gleaning as modes of artistic research"[7].

The subject of materiality, "the ethics of what it means to make, the history of processes, and the trauma of materials"[8], and the impact of extractivism on Indigenous communities and land, feature prominently in the programme. Ros Gray and Jol Thoms, studio lecturer on the MA Art & Ecology, ask:

> What methodologies and questions might be needed for developing accountability to our material worlds appropriate to the current moment of climate breakdown, ecological unravelling and enduring injustice, conditions accelerated over centuries by colonialism, capitalism and consumerism? What might art works say to us and how might they make us feel if their making were supported at every stage by a critical and caring awareness of the situated social and environmental histories of their materials? (Gray and Thoms 2024, p. 39)

The students, who number fifteen a year on average, address these questions when working in their studio and in the Art Practice Areas, the School of Art's eleven teaching workshops and facilities, which include textile, ceramics, woodwork, casting, and photography. Another facility, currently only available to Art & Ecology students, is the Art & Ecology Laboratory, used for microscopy and the observation and propagation of microorganisms, working with fungi and distilling scent. Gray explains that learning in the lab is provided by practitioners with scientific expertise, leading the students to acquire knowledge that is essential to understanding the organisms that make up the living world. Tactile and sensory experiences of materials, as well as failure, for instance, with mushroom growing, are integral to student learning. Gray highlighted the time and attention such experiences require, citing anthropologist Anna Tsing's concept of 'attunement'. Tsing writes:

> To nurture and protect even small fragments of liveability, we must get to know the lives of others, human and nonhuman. The Anthropocene collates projects of erasure, and we forget that we need companions. What might it take to bring us back into remembrance? I use the word 'attunement' [. . .] to refer to attempts to get to know, through alignment, how others express themselves in the world. (Tsing 2024, p. 78)

Embodied practices such as walking and creating ceremonial and ritualistic moments also constitute core elements of the student experience. One subject Gray mentioned having seen emerge in the past two years is grief work as "a necessary process to care and be in love with the world", as she put it in our conversation: as a way to develop interconnectedness and gratitude, and 'honouring pain", this time citing eco-philosophers Macy and Brown ([1998] 2014). Unlike other programmes, the MA Art & Ecology makes the work of its students visible not only through an exhibition, but through their contributions, treated as an assessment, to the *Journal of Art & Ecology*. An importance resource for students, but also for curators and researchers, the online platform brings together students' projects since the start of the programme in 2022. One example of these projects is Grounds Provision by Becky Lyon (graduated in 2022), an artist-led syllabus structured around nature as a 'school'. Lyon also runs The Department of Artecology, an experimental and interdisciplinary environmental department x art studio. An important note to conclude on is that, as Gray insists, if ecological urgency is at the heart of the MA, the "joyfulness of togetherness", the "sense of alongsideness", and the importance of conviviality (ibid.) also occupy a central place in this course of study.

4.3. Black Mountains College

Named after its location in Wales' Black Mountains, but also in reference to the liberal art college Black Mountain College (1933–1957), North Carolina, which claimed

allegiance to Dewey and incorporated farming activities (Silver 2024), Black Mountains College was established in 2019. Initially offering year-long Further Education courses and short courses in vocational and technical subjects such as Forestry and Arboriculture, Regenerative Horticulture, and Nature Restoration, its provision has expanded to offer an undergraduate programme. Accredited by Cardiff Metropolitan University, the BA (Hons) Sustainable Futures: Arts, Ecology, and Systems Change was set up in 2023. The students, who currently number about twelve a year, mostly live in Talgarth, where the main campus is located, thus forming a tight-knit community. Their engagement with the college goes further than their studies in that they are given the opportunity to be part of a conversation about the evolution of the BA by sitting on committees and the board of trustees, in a way that is reminiscent of the historic Black Mountain College's practices.

For this case study I interviewed the artist and educator Natalia Eernstman, who leads the Creative Practice modules in the first year, and originally trained in environmental science, agriculture, and environmental education. I was first interested in asking about the relationship between the vocational courses and the undergraduate programme, to which Eernstman responded that they are almost entirely separate. They are nonetheless all taught on Black Mountains College's 120-acre plot, whose functioning farm, the epicentre of the College, serves as one of the main learning sites for all courses. The undergraduate programme is underpinned by what Eernstman calls "the practice of practice", the process of "get[ting] comfortable with trying an idea, failing, trying again and refining it through the doing" (Eernstman 2025). Sensing and listening through the body; deconstructing dominant epistemologies; engaging with science through systems thinking and ecological methodologies; exploring the role of art in climate action; and, last but not least, "learning in the 'real world' [about] applied problems for meaningful and socially useful ends", are all integral to the BA curriculum, which "not only teaches but also prepares for the future" (Black Mountain College Prospectus 2025).

Besides Black Mountain College, some of the other references cited in the BA brochure are Dartington and, further afield, the Bauhaus. What they have in common is a commitment to making and training students to move "from an intellectual or conceptual place to a practical space"[9], as Eernstman puts it. This approach is close to that of anthropologist Tim Ingold, who places value on "thinking through making" (Ingold 2013, p. xi), thus resisting the Humanities' tendency to consider theory as more significant than practice. As with the MA Art & Ecology, at Black Mountains College theory and practice are intertwined rather than hierarchized. Accordingly, with the flow between the two being reciprocal, the act of making does not rely on "acquiring theoretical precepts for subsequent application in practice" (Ingold 2013, p. 52).

While the BA's first year focuses on Systems Change, Learning How to Learn, and Creative Practice, the second year is about consolidating the students' specialisms "in context and practice" (Black Mountain College Prospectus 2025). Besides the mandatory modules, the students home in on a specific area, whether Agroecology for Food System Transformation, Sociotechnical Systems for Future Generations, or Creative Practice for Future Generations. As for the last year, it largely consists of developing a research project and undertaking a work placement (Black Mountain College Prospectus 2025). Throughout the three years, students are taught by ecologists, environmental activists, systems thinkers, and artists who include, among several others, Morag Colquhoun, who leads the second-year modules in Creative Practice and is a PhD affiliate at Goldsmiths' Centre for Art and Ecology. Distancing itself from core science, Black Mountains College approaches future sustainability strategies by bringing in practitioners engaged in problem-solving, design thinking, embodied learning, and responsive critical thinking.

4.4. The Gramounce

The next object of enquiry is The Gramounce, an organisation originated in London in 2014. Initially holding food events in support of the arts collective MilesKm, it evolved into an exhibition-supper-club before starting its online education platform in 2020. After several years of experimentation, in 2023 The Gramounce launched the non-accredited, year-long Food and Art Alternative MA, which in 2025 shifted to a two-year model.

The Food and Art Alternative MA operates both online—with sixty sessions including seminars, guest lectures, and tutorials—as well as in-person across five international locations where participants meet for ten days at a time. It was founded by artist and researcher Nora Silva, who today shares the directorship with Inês Neto dos Santos, also an artist, researcher, and educator. The Gramounce is described as "an organisation reconceptualising the world through food" and "establish[ing] food as a legitimate discipline in the arts"[10]. Unfolding across six terms over the two years, the programme's ambitious set of themes are given earnest and playful titles that borrow from food growing, cooking, and transformation. Among others, Bitter Sweet Cartographies, Unexpected Edible Partnerships, and Brewing Gender Politics address food systems, cultures, colonialities, justice, and sovereignty through the lens of art practices, ones that are social, ecological, and preoccupied with world-building (The Gramounce Programme Specifications 2025–2027).

In the interview I conducted with Silva and Neto dos Santos, Silva explained that the impulse behind the programme was "to create an infrastructure and an imaginary that would be productive, not in a capitalistic sense, but for a creative practitioner to develop their work, speculate, disrupt, and challenge the status quo"[11]. Continuing Silva's train of thought, Neto dos Santos sees the educational platform "as a fruitful standpoint from which to think about our relation not only to food, but also to land [. . .] and enable and value the intermingling between the art, land, and food preparation practices that meet on the programme". The pool of guest speakers reflects the diversity of the participants' backgrounds by including growers, food consultants, culinary activists, artists, architects, philosophers, anthropologists, and designers—including the aforementioned future-farmers.

Some thirty-five participants join the programme in full every year, with an additional sixty onliners who only access seminars and lectures. Accordingly, fees differ widely, for five ten-day residencies are organised in international arts organisations for the core group. For 2025–2027, these have, so far, taken place at the art centre Mediamatic.net in Amsterdam; the artist studio Espacio Báltico in Mexico City, in collaboration with colectivo amasijo, a Mexican women's collective engaged with land regeneration and food biodiversity; and in the Serra da Estrela mountain range in Portugal, together with Space Transcribers, a network of architects, urbanists, and artists. The fourth residency, due to take place in the programme's second year, will be hosted by the cultural organisation Massia, Estonia, before the group goes to Madrid for a final gathering to present the projects they have developed during their time at The Gramounce. Reinforcing connections between the participants, the residencies are conceived around workshops, encounters with local experts, and peer-learning activities. If the skills and gestures pertaining to art and food practices permeate each other in the programme and, as such, afford transferability, The Gramounce's intersectional pedagogies are first and foremost oriented towards undisciplined acts of future-making.

4.5. The Gathering

The final case study is the Permaculture Association-accredited programme The Gathering, initially known as Permaculture Design Course for Artists and Creatives, and the first of its kind to be established. I was part of the first cohort (2023–2024) of the year-

long online course created and taught by artist Liz Postlethwaite, alongside some twenty participants whose backgrounds ranged from art to architecture, community activism, and youth work. The course was and continues to be structured around twenty-four three-hour long sessions led by Postlethwaite, and a design project to achieve certification. Guest speakers are invited on a regular basis and in my year included artist Sean Roy Parker, forest gardener Pippa Chapman, community activist and musician Kate Gathercole, and theatre-maker and researcher Malaika Cunningham.

I joined the course thinking I would learn about permaculture in the agroecological sense of the term, which felt refreshing after eighteen months of Further Education training with the traditionally minded Royal Horticultural Society. And I did indeed learn about permaculture, but in far more conceptual ways than I would have imagined. The first lesson I learnt is that ethical gardening practice and permaculture cannot be equated, for the latter encompasses much broader components. Indeed, according to biologist Bill Mollison and environmental designer David Holmgren, who coined the term in the 1970s, permaculture is a design method that integrates elements of ecology, agriculture, earth sciences, architecture, indigenous knowledges, technology, and systems thinking to create sustainable food production systems and human settlements in balance with the environment (Mollison and Holmgren 1978; Mollison 1991; Holmgren 2002; Grayson 2025; Burnett 2006; Macnamara 2012). How such principles could be applied to a creative practice and the structures supporting that practice was the question asked by the course.

Postlethwaite's vision of a dialogue between permaculture and art echoes that of artist Jill Giegerich, which she shared in an email correspondence with ArtMill founder Barbara Benish, back in 2019.

> Permaculture is the art of seeing the subtle connections and patterns of the natural world and then designing systems accordingly. It's just like art-making in that way. Permaculture principles and ethics lead naturally to a consideration of vast interconnectedness, and that can lead to seeing how racism, food deserts, food security and climate justice are interlocked. (Benish and Blanc 2023, p. 107)

As Postlethwaite recalled in our interview, her own trajectory had involved learning about gardening and taking a permaculture design course some fifteen years ago, yet her socially engaged art practice remained separate from these activities. This changed when she established a grassroots project in 2017 in Springwater Park, Whitefield, Bury, which became an integral part of her Diploma in Applied Permaculture Design and led to the park being officially designated as a local nature reserve six years later—the first new nature reserve in her town for over twenty years[12]. This achievement enabled her to truly experience what she calls "the crossovers between the edges of permaculture and art practice"[13], a metaphor that would become key to her teaching. Postlethwaite taught us how to view permaculture not as a movement, but as a set of open-source tools that can be transferred to creative and life practice in multiple ways, starting with the basics, that is, how one plans a project, resources it, and evaluates it in ways that "produce regenerative change".

Beyond the three ethical pillars of permaculture, People care, Earth care, and Fair share (Mollison and Holmgren 1978), and the twelve permaculture design principles, of which "use edges and value margins" is one (Holmgren 2002), bioregional and ecosystemic thinking, honouring indigenous connections to the land, and repairing our lost connections with it constitute some of the knowledge that Postlethwaite imparts to students earnestly, undogmatically, and affordably—the very qualities associated with permaculture design practice.

The project I developed for my design project was on the expanded use of the aforementioned Goldsmiths' Art Research Garden as a functional and biodiverse site for obser-

vation, experimentation, and learning. The project first mapped the existing garden and its more-than-human and material components. It then related past and future discursive, co-learning, convivial, and planting activities to permaculture's ethics and Holmgren's principles, using the Design Web. Proposed by permaculture educator and designer Looby Macnamara, the Design Web is a non-linear framework for visioning through limits identification, pause, and integration (Macnamara 2012).

In the past five years, permaculture has gained significant currency across sectors, including the arts. Yet, as Postlethwaite commented, its multiple components are often "cherry-picked" for rapid theorisation and discourse that often fail to align with permaculture's core values. In contrast, The Gathering methodically and sensitively conveys the multiple layers and possibilities afforded by permaculture as a framework. The students are left with tools and concepts to reflect and pause on, to test, and to apply to their practice or leave it aside, over a long practitioner's journey rather than in the short period in which social permaculture may trend.

5. Edging Disciplines

The article has traced the educational programmes' shared conviction that art and the land are not merely compatible domains but mutually illuminating ones, capable of generating knowledge and agency that neither produces alone. What connects the endeavours discussed in this text is not a direct line of institutional descent but a diachronic pattern of return—a recurring affirmation, across different decades and political conditions, that artistic sensibility and land practice belong together in education. This pattern is rooted in a critical pedagogical tradition that extends beyond Dewey. The philosopher's foundational insistence on learning through direct experience, and on the integration of manual, intellectual, and creative labour into the curriculum, ran through Tagore and Elmhirst's Institute for Rural Reconstruction and into the Village Colleges. By the time the contemporary programmes discussed here were conceived, this inheritance had been deepened by the critical pedagogy of Ivan Illich, whose *Deschooling Society* (Illich [1970] 2013) not only argued that meaningful knowledge is acquired and drawn upon unintentionally, in unexpected places, moments, and situations outside the stated curriculum, but also, and more importantly, that formal educational institutions are structurally incapable of delivering genuine and differential learning for they confuse process and outcome, and certificate with competence. Where Dewey's pedagogy was reformist, Illich's was explicitly anti-institutional. His position resonates in that sense with the non-university-accredited character of The Gathering and The Gramounce, while also speaking to the institutional pressures and failures under which some of the discussed accredited programmes have operated and, in some cases, closed.

Henry Giroux's elaboration of critical pedagogy (Giroux [2011] 2020) connects this lineage to questions of political agency and democratic life, asserting that education must attend to both the conditions under which students come to knowledge and the power relations that make some forms of knowing legitimate and others marginal. The programmes examined in this article precisely engage with such questions: they challenge the authority of extractivist, colonialist, and Western and androcentric epistemologies through the decolonial, Indigenous, and ecofeminist frameworks drawn from Vandana Shiva, Maria Mies, Robin Wall Kimmerer, Jamaica Kincaid, Donna Haraway, Malcom Ferdinand, Max Liboiron, Anna Tsing, and Joanna Macy, among others. In so doing, they extend Giroux's critical pedagogy into explicitly ecological territory, a direction taken by environmental educator Annette Gough, who not only insists that ecopedagogy cannot be disentangled from feminist politics, but also that environmental education is inherently multi-disciplinary. Recognising the importance of Dewey's experience-based outdoor education, she writes:

> You can take an environmental problem—you can study the ecological concepts that underpin it and you can also perhaps look at the chemistry that is involved, the physics that is involved, the geology that is involved, the mathematics, the artistic responses. (Gough 2009, p. 191)

Scholar and artist Matthew Fuller's concept of art as a metadiscipline offers a particularly generative lens. Fuller argues that art has increasingly come to operate not only within its own domain but upon the objects, methods, problematics, and "forms of knowledge of other disciplines", treating them as "a commons for reworking" (Fuller 2025, p. 223).

> The findings, styles of thought, and habits of operation and conduct of the sciences, sociology, mathematics, literature, governance and education, amongst others, have become resources for reworking and expanding. They are used [by artists] to probe questions of power, imagination and invention. (Fuller 2025, p. 217)

In the context of art- and land-based education, this formulation is enlightening: each of the contemporary programmes described in the text operates across disciplinary lines, treating ecology, food systems, permaculture, and earth sciences not as neighbouring fields to be consulted, but as active territories for artistic reworking. In turn, art practice is understood and taught not as illustration or commentary, but as a distinct and rigorous form of inquiry.

This metadisciplinary character is inseparable from the programmes' commitment to transdisciplinarity and intersectionality. At Black Mountains College, systems thinking, creative practice, and agroecology are not sequential modules but interpenetrating approaches. On the MA Art & Ecology, decolonial theory, ecofeminist politics, and studio practice are brought into productive friction. The Gramounce distances itself from the premise of disciplinary containment, founding its programme on the idea that food, land, art, and politics constitute a single assemblage whose components cannot be addressed in isolation.

Permaculture, which underpins The Gathering and informs several of the other programmes, offers a vocabulary for thinking across scales: from the micro-ecology of a garden bed to the bioregional and planetary. Central to this vocabulary is the concept of edges—the zones of transition between two different systems or habitats, such as where forest meets meadow or land meets water. In ecology, the terms 'edges' and 'ecotones', coined by ecologist Frederic Edward Clements in 1905, signify sites of heightened fertility and diversity: more species flourish where two systems meet and support each other. Worth noting also is the use of the term 'edges' in graph theory, invented by mathematician Leonhard Euler in 1736 to describe the connectors between nodes. Not only do methods, conducts, and forms trespass disciplinary lines, but so does terminology.

Accordingly, to "use edges and value the marginal" (Holmgren 2002) is both an ecological and a pedagogical principle. The concept maps directly onto what happens at disciplinary boundaries in knowledge production more broadly: the territories where ecology meets social science, where art meets agriculture, and where ecofeminism meets systems thinking tend to be sites of unusual generativity. The programmes discussed in this article have all located themselves at such edges, and it is precisely there that their pedagogical vitality resides.

6. Conclusions

A consistent thread running through all six programmes is the bi-directional transfer of skills: the discovery, made and remade across a century, that the competencies cultivated in artistic practice—observation, attention, patience, collaboration, intuition, lateral thinking,

speculation, and the embrace of ambiguity—are not symbolic and tentative additions to land-based education but arguably, for the most part at least, structurally homologous with the skills demanded by ecological practice itself. To attune oneself to the growth rate of a mushroom culture, as students in the MA Art & Ecology laboratory do, requires the same quality of sustained, non-instrumental attention that Dewey's pupils brought to their sand-table farm, or that Dartington's children brought to beekeeping on the estate. Conversely, the experience of growing food, tending soil, and thinking at the scale of a pond or a bioregion trains a form of systems intelligence that feeds directly back into artistic work: one that may benefit, service, or bring necessary attention to that very pond or bioregion. When The Gathering makes this reciprocity explicit through permaculture design principles applied to creative practice, The Gramounce enacts it through the porosity it maintains between culinary, agricultural, and artistic gestures. In each case, the transfer is not a borrowing but a recognition of structural affinity.

Another narrative that has run through this essay has to do with the transient nature of educational projects connected to the relation between art, land, and ecology, particularly those which have emerged between the 1990s and today. Dartington Hall School's symbiotic relationship between art and land only lasted a few years and the Village Colleges' impetus to teach agriculture side by side with art and formal education did not perdure, although the lack of published information does not enable one to ascertain how long Morris' vision continued. Dartington's MA Art and Ecology lasted four years, as did Falmouth University's MA Art & Environment, when funding was pulled from RANE, whose archives now survive on the website of a short-lived art and ecology organisation itself created by the last director of Dartington's defunct MA. Dartington's support to CCANW, itself connected to RANE, ended in 2020, while its support to Schumacher College ended in 2025. The Dartington node is no longer connected by edges, leaving a field of education and a regional ecosystem of art and ecology artist–educators depleted. Adding to this already long list is the MA Regenerative Design at Central Saint Martins, UAL, started in 2022. The two-year long online programme, grounded in systems and materials thinking, is not currently recruiting for 2026 entry, suggesting it may follow the trajectory of earlier closures.

One reason to explain these losses is that programmes that train students not for a specific profession but for a mode of engaged, critical, and metadisciplinary practice cannot easily justify themselves in terms of graduate employment metrics or citation indices. Student numbers for all four currently active programmes are modest and in some cases declining, and each operates with cohorts of between twelve and thirty-five students. This makes them pedagogically intensive, financially precarious, and structurally marginal within their respective institutional contexts. What is lost in such closures is not only the education of particular individuals but the cultivation of ecological artistic imagination: the capacity to challenge, hypothesise, and make at the intersection of ecological urgency and creative practice. In the context of accelerating climate breakdown, biodiversity collapse, and the deepening entanglement of ecological and social injustice, this capacity is not one to overlook. Artists think differently from scientists: they speculate where science demands evidence, they dwell in ambiguity where science seeks resolution, they make visible what policy frameworks may render invisible. Those formal and informal spaces in which differential thinking and irreplaceable forms of knowing are trained and practised need not only to be cherished, but also propagated.

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Notes

1 https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cged8vqenrlo (accessed 30 May 2026).
2 https://ccanw.org.uk/ (accessed 30 May 2026).
3 https://impact.ref.ac.uk/casestudies/CaseStudy.aspx?Id=44647 (accessed 30 May 2026).
4 Breaks & Joins Podcast, Series 5, Episode 9: Dr Ros Gray. Available at: https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/series-5-episode-9-dr-ros-gray/id1609475984?i=1000655825470 (accessed on 6 March 2026).
5 Ros Gray, interviewed on 10 March 2026.
6 https://www.gold.ac.uk/art/research/staff/rg/01/ (accessed on 10 March 2026).
7 https://volume4.thejournalofartandecology.com/intro-page (accessed on 10 March 2026).
8 See note 5 above.
9 Natalia Eernstman, interviewed on 3 March 2026.
10 https://www.thegramounce.com/ (accessed on 6 March 2026).
11 Nora Silva and Inês Neto dos Santos, interviewed on 17 February 2026.
12 https://smallthings.org.uk/love-springwater-park/ (accessed on 6 March 2026).
13 Liz Postlethwaite, interviewed on 9 February 2026.

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