

Home Farm New Mills - Interim Report 2021

The Home Farm New Mills project was launched by New Mills Festival in September 2020. It was intended to encourage local residents to look beyond the experience of the pandemic by planting seeds and anticipating their harvest. Over three hundred packets of heritage wheat seeds were taken from independent shops in the town. The project was modelled on the 'Bake Your Lawn' schools initiative that was run by Sustain as part of their Real Bread Campaign. The idea of growing a square metre of wheat in your own space and experiencing all the processes through to making a loaf seemed to neatly pick up on some of the lockdown interests in gardening and baking. It was also an experience we could share as a community whilst staying socially distanced.

The project is based upon the anticipation of a Harvest and the communal celebration this suggests. It is this aspect that Home Farm New Mills 2021 has developed. Funding from Transition Bounce Forward, Foundation Derbyshire, High Peak Borough Council and Derbyshire County Council will enable the Festival to deliver a range of celebratory and communal events in August and September 2021.

The continuing Covid restrictions are changing the nature of some of these events, for example the community play 'Lark Rise' has been postponed because of the impossibility of rehearsals, but it will be replaced by a weekend music festival including a harvest set. The other events planned include a dozen family baking and singing sessions, an art trail with commissioned pieces linked to Home Farm on display in central shops, classes in corn dolly making and scything and a town straw bear who will dance with a local Morris group to chase away the past year.

A particularly encouraging aspect of the project is how participants have started to add their own input to what is happening. We now have a microbrewery growing a large patch of wheat to make a Home Farm wheat beer as well as a local weaver making a Home Farm tweed (green with yellow ears of wheat) that will be made up into hats or bags by another local shop. Our baking tutor has suggested she could also pass on her experience of how to work with heritage flour to local bakers; they are keen on this idea so we will also run a session where they can all meet and work together. Following her example, we are also hoping to invite local farmers to this session so they can see the potential market for growing their own wheat crop.

Approximately a third of people who took seeds have joined a Facebook group to support and inform Home Farmers. There is also a page on the Festival website where a comic strip of growing tips is posted that everyone can follow. The scope of the project has increased by offering Spring Wheat seeds in February and March 2021 so more people can join and by offering White Clover seeds at the same time. These can be sown under the wheat and will improve the soil and provide valuable nectar for bees, showing the value of regenerative agriculture. The project is based upon the value of performative acts, that it is empowering to take part in activities even if their immediate practical effects are nominal. It is more about making the idea of change possible through personal action.

The project itself is also developing as we make contact with other groups and learn from their ideas. The ideas of a local, diversified and resilient economy, that the local Transition group have been promoting in the town, were a direct influence on the project and made it feel relevant and worthwhile. There are now growing links between the Festival and the Transition group with many suggestions being fed into the project. For example we are now hoping to take part in the Park(ing) Day 2021 and feature it in the Festival Art Trail. The Transition group also linked us with the Sheffield Wheat Experiment and the Seed Collectors Forum. The influence of both of these groups is to start seeing Home Farm New Mills as an ongoing project with a value in encouraging people to connect with local food production and even in facilitating such production. It is hoped that a Visioning session run locally can start to draw out a future for Home Farm New Mills.

Finally, the Festival committee are also exploring ways that Home Farm themes can be further explored via other events and with different audiences, especially younger adults. Discussions are ongoing with Live and Local regarding participation in the Livingroom Project; a series of micro-commissions, that will engage Live & Local artists/companies to create bespoke performances for a community with whom they are 'twinned'.

