

OUSEBURN FARM – the true story

White lead was manufactured at Ouseburn, in Newcastle, for at least a hundred years. It was banned in Britain in 1963 for use in paint and it was gradually phased out of domestic products. The firm that owned the lead factory beneath Byker Bridge subsequently went bankrupt and Newcastle allegedly seized the works in lieu of unpaid rates. This site became the City Farm (Byker) and was opened in 1976. Two people were allegedly employed by the council to assess the feasibility of the farm and one of these was very adamant that the site was totally unsuitable for a city farm due to the contamination of the ground by dissolved lead. She was acrimoniously replaced and the farm was opened with a few ludicrous safeguards - such as 'all water should be piped in'.

The farm ran for twenty six years and sold its vegetables, eggs and milk to the public, as well as preparing them for sale in its café. The farm expanded its boundaries, welcomed many school parties, and also hosted specialist courses, in Green Woodwork and Organic Gardening, for instance. It enjoyed the support of many grant making bodies, including Northern Arts - now Arts Council England NE.

An environmental student at Northumbria University carried out her final year project in 1992 on the City Farm soils. She had been suggested the topic by her supervisor, Prof. Phil O'Keefe, and she diligently sampled and analysed the soil all around the farm. She found widespread and serious contamination by lead, 'centred on the farm site'. The lady asked this writer for advice then and that is how the farm contamination eventually became public knowledge. Neither her supervisor nor the projects tutor took any action over her findings, which was negligent. Dr O'Keefe, whose doctoral thesis had been on soil erosion in Kenya, then shared a college room with Geoff O'Brien. Cllr. O'Brien was formally made aware of the farm contamination in 1994, along with the Leader of the Council and the local M.P. Dr. O'Brien combined teaching Environment Management, at Northumbria, with the role of Newcastle's sheriff and Deputy Mayor during 2011!

After many years of heavy persuasion somebody at the farm agreed to have soil and vegetables tested in a laboratory. Jerry Simon, then the farm gardener, reported verbally that 'the lead's in everything, even the tree leaves'. None of these test results have ever been made public and are possibly now lost. After more wrangling the Environment Agency became involved and ordered the council to take action. They hired an accredited local environment company to investigate the farm site. Their results were damning and fully vindicated the environment student's results. The most contaminated area was identified as the children's play area which was where tubs of lead liquor had been left to crystallise at the old works. In 2001 Tony McKenna, the chief executive of Newcastle Leisure Services, which then had overall charge of the farm, wrote "Our evidence is that none of the vegetables or livestock are now consumed and *very little has been in the past*. I am therefore confident that the use of the land for the City Farm, which is essentially an educational establishment, poses minimal risk to its users".

After the professional survey the farm site was closed, the animals dispersed, and most of the contaminated soil removed and replaced, at great expense. The outlying farm fields were untouched and the scandal was strictly kept quiet - even by the local paper. None of the workers or users of the farm had blood level tests nor were any of the historic visitors to the farm collated or contacted in any way. This is also clearly negligent.

It now seems clear that the opportunity should have been taken then to move the farm to another site, perhaps at Castle Leazes, with the entire farm site in Byker converted to native heath and woodland for the benefit of wildlife. Instead control of the farm was passed to a housing trust and renamed as

'Ouseburn Farm'. It was blessed by H.R.H. Prince Charles, with the remediation of the farm site subsequently treated as something needed to comply with overly strict Health and Safety regulations. Not one of the people that regularly visited the city farm over its first twenty six years, as children, were contacted and screened for the potential impact to their health and well-being. However one of them is a regular sight on the Newcastle streets. Matthew X is proud to be the toddler in the photograph taken at the farm opening in 1976. He was a constant visitor, on weekends and during the school holidays, and now busks his African drums at the Monument a few times a week.

Matthew X might be described as showing delinquent behaviour consistent with autism spectrum disorder, but he's never been medically investigated nor diagnosed. He hasn't passed a single exam nor has he ever done a proper job, as his short attention span simply will not allow it. He affably wanders the streets, with no fixed abode, and couch surfs friends' flats. He is utterly faithful to the city farm - "it made me what I am today" - and is curiously well adapted to finding (presumably toxic) fruit and nuts amongst the city's roadside trees. He's often the first to find trees being damaged but has no way to formally describe what he sees. He's not safe with a saw nor does he know how to use one and is condemned to bonging. He has just passed his forty second birthday.

A couple of years ago one of the contaminated fields at the City Farm was planted as a 'community orchard', with the help of a grant by Local Food, a subsidiary of The National Lottery. Their Senior Grant Officer didn't seem at all bothered that they're allegedly helping to poison people and appears to have been led to believe that the land was 'remediated' around 2005 along with the rest of the farm. The soil lead level in this Orchard Field is consistent with the busy roadside that it is and ten times what the Soil Association expect as a maximum for land suitable for organic food production. (It is allegedly almost inevitable that Local Food have grant aided other projects without due diligence).

The Ouseburn Farm Herdwick sheep and a pair of dwarf ponies are still grazed on adjoining contaminated land and are overstocked, which results in the turf being grazed down to bare soil. This allows it to become mobile as dust. One of the stated aims of the farm is "Growing food, including the fruit, vegetables, eggs and *meat* used in the Farm's kitchen". It is most unlikely these hungry Herdwicks have ever been blood tested for lead. The present ground-workers certainly haven't.

Lead is absorbed into the body by several routes. Very fine dust is inhaled and absorbed into the bloodstream through the lungs. Soil particles may be swallowed and ingested by the digestive tract, as is the lead present in contaminated food. If a child handles an animal that has been grazing contaminated land then that youngster is at risk from inhaling the fine dust off its coat. (It certainly wouldn't be allowed with radioactivity).

It now seems clear that the extensive regeneration of Newcastle's industrial riverside began more or less with the creation of the City Farm in the Ouseburn Valley. The desperate pressure to produce beauty in a former industrial wasteland was far greater than simple common sense. Innocent children were permanently damaged by contact with the appalling pollution of the former lead works and this has been covered up vigorously by everyone, from top to bottom, connected with the farm. The inner city kids who were intended to be enlightened by contact with the countryside in the city were actually treated shamefully. Nobody has been held to account and this story of the poisoned farm remains a secret until now.