

We meet Gillie Wilkinson who has turned a derelict allotment into a busy working garden, giving skills and hope to vulnerable people in her community



The proud Eton Avenue Grower's Association team and below, protecting the precious crops



and get on with whatever odd jobs needed doing and he came week after week because he said he felt he was making a difference. Local people often donate gardening tools and things such as wheelbarrows to us all the time which is lovely. It's funny because my husband was chairman of the Civic Trust and I was always known in the area as George's wife. But now after I've been so vocal locally about the Grower's Association, it's the other way around and he's known as Gillie's husband!"

Now Gillie and her team, who take no wages for what they do, are spreading their green-fingered spirit even further in the community as they've been asked to advise and donate tools to local schools and housing estates who are looking to create allotment spaces.

It's all quite an incredible achievement for 70-year-old Gillie, born with a mild form of spina bifida and told by doctors that she'd never use one arm after she crushed it aged four.

"I do have quite bad arthritis in one hand but I love gardening and love what I do here on the allotment. In a way, I can't really believe what we've achieved with this. It's just sort of evolved over the years and now everyone pulls together. At 70, I know I should be retired and putting my feet up but running this gets me out of bed and moving."

■ To make a donation, please send a cheque payable to Eton Avenue Grower's Association to: Mrs Gillie Wilkinson, The Cottage, Lincoln Road, Newark, Nottinghamshire NC24 2DB

GROWING THE GOOD LIFE!

By Katharine Wootton

From her spot in the polytunnel of the Eton Avenue Grower's Association, Gillie Wilkinson peeps out at the hive of activity going on in this amazing allotment as community volunteers push wheelbarrows, pot plants and turn their hands to weeding. As one volunteer kindly brings her a mug of tea, she settles down to explain to me how everyone here has an amazing story of transformation, having all come from rather desperate backgrounds, either struggling with mental health issues or long-term

unemployment.

"We pick up people here who, for whatever reason, have fallen through the gaps in the system. A lot have lost their disability money or sick pay and are struggling to get back to work. Sometimes they're even suicidal," says Gillie.

But this 2.5 acre allotment in Newark, Nottinghamshire, offers a little Eden for these people to come and find a sense of vocation, meet other people, learn new skills and hopefully get their lives back on track. Many are referred by the local job centre or come voluntarily but the idea is that no one has to pay to come. Once part of the team, everyone

here learns the necessary skills to help run and maintain this award-winning allotment garden that has an orchard, fruit garden, ponds, polytunnels, vegetables and flowers and even an extravagantly decorated compost loo.

"We teach people how to sow seeds, plant, weed, hoe and make bunches of flowers. We then sell the produce we grow on to the local community to raise money for the project, which costs about £700 a year to run, with anything left over available for the volunteers to take home," says Gillie.

"We always say we run on love and laughter and just a little bit of gentle teasing. But we find that this experience really brings people out of themselves and often once they start working here, they don't want to leave. It gives them a sense of purpose."

Gillie, who spent over 30 years as a commercial grower with her husband, created the Eton Avenue Grower's Association charity

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in 2009 after agreeing to take on an unused and unloved allotment site that had been left to go to rack and ruin. The plan was for Gillie to do it up and hand it back to the council after six months, but eight years later, it's bloomed into a real community success story she's so proud to still be at the helm of.

"What's lovely is that

many of the volunteers have now been here a while and have started to take more responsibility. So we have one chap who comes here to have a short break from being a carer for his disabled wife and he opens the garden up for me in the mornings. Then we have others who are now experienced gardeners who help me train up the people who arrive with no gardening knowledge."

And while the aim is to help those who are most vulnerable in their community, Gillie says anyone can come and visit the garden or join in.

"We had one local gentleman who was 80 and a very experienced gardener who used to come



Turning the allotment from barren to burgeoning took hard work and dedication



Gillie is rightly proud of the allotment which has benefitted the community in so many ways

