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# **DERELICTION, REDEMPTION AND IDENTITY: CHALLENGING INJUSTICE AND ENCOUNTERING GOD IN DERELICTION AND GREEN SPACE.**

*Reuben Aspden*

**URBAN TRACTS**



**William Temple**  
Foundation

# **Dereliction, redemption and identity: Challenging injustice and encountering God in dereliction and green space.**

**By Reuben Aspden**

*Urban Tracts, Book 9*

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# Editors' Introduction

Urban Tracts is a series of papers on urban mission and ministry commissioned in the lead up to the 40th anniversary of the Faith in the City report. The Brixton disturbances of April 1981 prompted, among other things, Archbishop Robert Runcie to set up the Archbishop's Commission on Urban Priority Areas. This led to the publication of the Faith in the City report in December 1985 with its recommendations for church and nation, which proved a great stimulus for urban ministry across the whole UK church.

In 2023 the issues of social inequality, racial justice, and the failure of the Church to flourish and grow in urban settings have not gone away—although the enthusiasm for urban ministry of the late 1980s seems to have waned. To mark the anniversary, the William Temple Foundation is commissioning and publishing (electronically) a new Temple Tract series on urban mission and ministry. Our aim is to produce three or four tracts each year in the lead up to the 40-year anniversary of Faith in The City in December 2025.

These tracts are aimed at practitioners and church leaders, offering reflection and experience from authors who have been involved in urban mission and ministry. We aim to highlight resources and lessons that are relevant for Christians in urban areas today and renew the challenge to the churches. In seeking an appropriate style for the urban church there will be plenty of photos and links to writings, websites, and videos to explore if you wish to delve deeper or check out sources.



In this Tract Reuben explores the relationship between derelict ground and the systematic undermining of our individual and community identity. He reflects on the challenges of battling large-scale systematic injustice in land use in the community, but also the richness of encounter with God when working for the redemption of creation. He discusses some activities that he has been involved with, particularly in the Claypits Local Nature Reserve and how through those activities space is created for encounter with God and redemption of identity.

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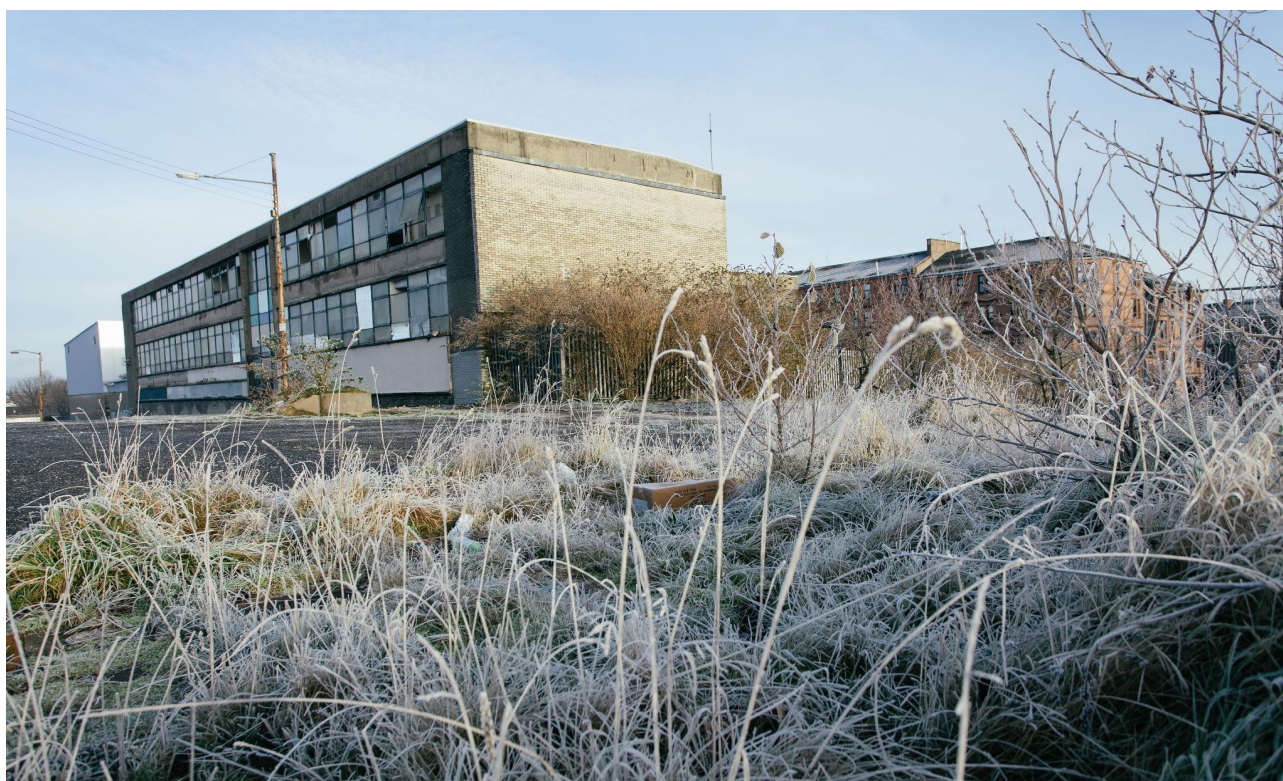
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# Introduction

Possilpark is a community in the North of Glasgow (see a satellite view [here](#)). It was established at the end of the 1800s as houses for the workforce of Saracen Foundry. Over the next century it became an industrial hub with lots of heavy industry and high employment. In the 1960s the Saracen Foundry closed, along with much of the rest of the industry. Over the next decades, the void left by industry was slowly mirrored in the community infrastructure as houses, schools, swimming pools, community centres and shops were demolished and not replaced. By the end of the 1990s large swathes of the community had been demolished, eventually resulting in 100% of the community living within 250m of derelict ground. The promised rebuilding that accompanied each phase of demolition was largely aspirational, with the first phase of large-scale rebuilding on some of the derelict ground finally starting in 2022.



*THE DERELICT POSSILPARK SECONDARY SCHOOL, CLOSED IN 1991<sup>1</sup>. PHOTO BY CLAIRE AUFHAMMER, USED BY PERMISSION.*

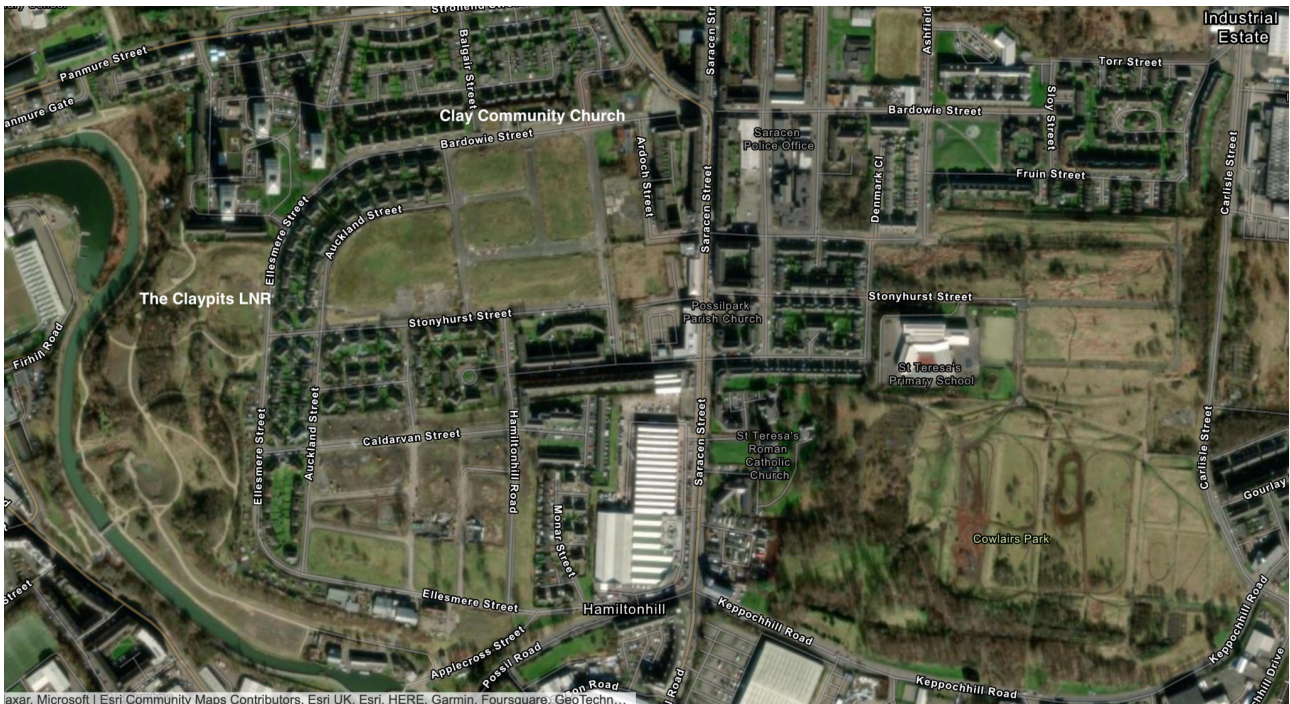
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<sup>1</sup> Despite local protest both at the time and since, Possilpark is in the only council ward in Glasgow that does not have any high school provision

As dereliction took hold of the land around the community, the identity of the community was greatly impacted. Educational establishments, police and other authorities echoed the [narrative](#) of the abandoned derelict ground – you're worthless and not worth any effort. Despite these strong official narrative influences, it is clear that Jesus views our community very differently. The gospel proclaims that we are made in the image of God and that our community as a whole, as well as each individual within it, presents a unique reflection of some of the characteristics of God. Unfortunately, these truths can be hard to hear, understand or act upon when a lifetime of experience has told you you're worthless. The vast swathes of derelict ground around our community and their challenge to the Gospel narrative have influenced the approach to ministry both of Clay Community Church, a local church in the community, and the InnerCHANGE missions team based in the area. We have discovered riches both through a theological consideration of environmental based mission (eco-mission), and through eco-mission as a practical tool to work with our neighbours in exploring our God-given identity. This has largely taken place around a former clay borrow pit in the community that was abandoned for decades until it was recently re-established as the Clay pits Local Nature Reserve.

In this tract I will give a brief overview of the development of the Clay pits as a nature reserve and some learnings from eco-mission that have inspired me. I will then share some stories of what eco-mission in our context has looked like and how we have used it as a vehicle for missional, prophetic and contemplative activities that have created spaces to meet with God and hear His opinion of our identity.





*MAP OF POSSILPARK SHOWING BARDOWIE ST HALL, HOME OF CLAY COMMUNITY CHURCH, AND THE CLAY PITS LNR, SANDWICHED BETWEEN POSSILPARK AND THE FORTH AND CLYDE CANAL. OTHER THAN THE CLAY PITS LNR, ALL OTHER AREAS OF EMPTY SPACE WERE FILLED WITH HOUSING UP UNTIL THE 90S WHEN WIDESPREAD DEMOLITION AROUND THE AREA BEGAN. THIS MAP IS REDISTRIBUTED USING THE CREATIVE COMMONS SHAREALIKE 2.0 LICENSE.*

## The deer and the tulips

When my (now) wife first moved into the area in 2015, she received a lot of concerned questions from fellow staff members at the hospital she was working in. Surely she was putting herself at unnecessary risk moving into an area such as Possilpark? She moved into the flat we still live in, and made the most of having a small garden by planting some tulips she had received as a house warming present. It wasn't long however until issues within the community came to light as the deer who live in the waste ground opposite quickly found and devoured the beautiful tulips. We have since learnt what plants deer enjoy and have adapted our garden to fit!



*OUR NEIGHBOURS ACROSS THE ROAD. THE FAWN HIDING IN THE GRASS BESIDE ITS MUM IS 2 DAYS OLD. THE PRIMARY SCHOOL THAT USED TO OCCUPY THEIR HOME SHUT IN 2012. PHOTO BY REUBEN ASPDEN.*

As is so often the case, the identity and description of the community that is widely reported is a far cry from the community we encounter when we move in and get to know our (human and non-human!) neighbours. Our aim, as we live in the community alongside our friends and neighbours, is to seek out the stories of true identity that Jesus is telling already and join in and amplify them.

## Clay Community Church and The Clay pits Local Nature Reserve

Clay Community Church is a local church based in Possilpark. It started as an [Urban Expression](#) team in 2007 when 4 families moved into the neighbourhood with the intention of living among their neighbours, getting involved in the community and seeing what



stories God was writing and highlighting in the community. By 2011 another family had come to faith and [Clay Community Church](#) was officially launched. It has been an exciting and often surprising journey from 4 incomer families meeting in a living room 16 years ago to the local church that we are today. When the Urban Expression church planting team moved into the area, some of the members joined a local green space group that was trying to address some of the issues with derelict ground around the community. Involvement in that group inspired them to start exploring eco-mission and led to wider involvement by the church and its members in green space events around the community. One of the sites that the green space group took on was the Clay pits, the derelict ground where the deer in the story above live. It is only 6.7 hectares, but was designated a local nature reserve in 2016 after a concerted community campaign. Formerly a borrow pit for extracting clay, the area was last dug in the 80s and was then backfilled and abandoned. Over the years it has been used at various times by locals for recreation, to house a city farm, and as space for the community built BMX track. During these years it was largely ignored by the landowners. In 2012 a local green space group commissioned a placemaking report for the vacant land around the community and it suggested the area around the former borrow pit could become a Local Nature Reserve. By 2015 the group had got the landowners on board with the idea, and they then ran a community consultation leading to both the opening of the space as a nature reserve and large amounts of funding to improve accessibility. Within north Glasgow, the development of [The Clay pits LNR](#) has become an interesting focal point for questions of development and gentrification. Over the past couple of decades, following the development of other areas of the city, the north of Glasgow has started to be developed. As you follow the canal north out of the city centre you now pass a hub of extreme sports and national sports organisations. These are followed by a gated community

in the refurbished warehouses on the banks of the canal and then the arts quarter of the city, which includes many national arts groups and internationally recognised artists.

Carrying on along the canal, you arrive at the Clay pits and Possilpark. As the tidal wave of gentrification barrels up the canal and thousands of new houses are built or scheduled to be built in the communities along the canal over the next decade, the Clay pits and its development becomes a focal point for these questions: in the face of gentrification whose voices are we hearing? Whose are important?

The Clay pits has played a significant role in my life both within Clay Community Church and individually. On a corporate level, it has shaped the praxis and approach to mission of Clay Community Church, and on a personal level I've been involved in the project in a number of ways from church volunteer to part of the community-led [Hamilton hill Clay pits Local Nature Reserve Management Group](#) (HCLNR). HCLNR was established with help of the landowners of the Local Nature Reserve to serve as a community group helping to care for the Clay pits LNR. It was established as a charity in 2017 and now has a consistent community of local people turning out at regular litter picks, bird watching, and nature based activities as well as working with local schools and organisations to facilitate activities on the site. I will use the development and activities in the Clay pits Nature Reserve over the years to highlight the ways we as a church have tried to use eco-mission and access to good quality green space to help tell a Godly narrative of identity in our community.



# ECO-MISSION; a Framework for Reflection

Eco-mission is a rich theme of theology in its own right, one that has been receiving more attention in the past couple of decades particularly as the climate crisis worsens. This crisis is a human one, but it is also a crisis for all of creation. Pope Francis' statement makes this point;

*“Today, however, we have to realise that a true ecological approach always becomes a social approach; it must integrate questions of justice in debates on the environment, so as to hear both the cry of the earth and the cry of the poor”<sup>2</sup>.*

My practice in Possilpark predominantly flows from the human elements of eco-mission, hearing the *“cry of the poor”* in issues of justice and identity that arise from disregard for the natural environment. However, and particularly as the climate emergency focuses our minds on the human cost of inaction, I find it healthy to sometimes take a step back and be reminded that there is an inherent importance of caring for creation and that it too has a status as something that is able to give glory to God. Pope Francis laments our disregard for this aspect of creation care with the strongly worded comment on the extinction of species *“Because of us, thousands of species will no longer give glory to God by their very existence, nor convey their message to us. We have no such right.”<sup>3</sup>.*

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<sup>2</sup> Pope Francis (2015), Encyclical on Climate Change and Inequality On Care for Our Common Home, Melville House. p30. Available [here](#)

<sup>3</sup> *ibid* p22.

So before we move on to stories of people and land and encounters with God I'd like to pause for a moment and reflect on a couple of eco themes. Partly as a way of reminding us of how our work fits in the much bigger narrative of God's redemption of creation, and partly as I have found it to add depth and richness to my understanding of the character of God. Within the scriptures there are numerous passages that explore eco-mission and the role of each member of the Trinity both for and in creation care. In [Romans 5: 12-21](#) Christ is described by the apostle Paul as the new Adam, and by doing so Paul highlights, among other things, that all Adam's tasks and failings are redeemed in Christ. Presumably this also includes the fulfilment of the mission to care for creation that Adam fell short on<sup>4</sup>. Discussion of the Holy Spirit in many of the Christian circles I have been part of starts with the outpouring at Pentecost. However, in [Genesis 1](#) the same Spirit of God was "*hovering over the water*" as God spoke creation into being, He was already a key part of creation and creating. And lastly, the Father is often signposted to by JesusHimself through the use of stories from the natural world. For example, in [John 15](#) Jesus describes the Father as the one who tends the vineyard in which Christ himself is the vine and we are its branches.

Exactly what happened to creation at the beginning of Genesis, and exactly what the redemption of creation will ultimately look like are questions well beyond my understanding. However, I am inspired by the examples of all members of the Trinity being intimately concerned and involved with creation and the redemption of creation and the value and love that God has for all His (human and non-human) creation. These themes of value and love for both human and non-human creation are carried on throughout the

biblical narrative. One particular example is found in the laws surrounding the sabbath. In [Exodus 20:8-11](#) God gifts humans with the sabbath, a time dedicated to God and to rest. Then in [Leviticus 25:8-22](#) God takes this idea even further, commanding a year of Jubilee - a year when the Israelites had the opportunity to rely entirely on God for their provision, and when any advantages or injustices that had built up over the last 50 years were reset. This goes beyond trust in God for a day's provision and strips away the temptation to rely on our own inherited wealth or advantage for provision. From the beginning, God tried to build into His people a sense of justice that was stronger than generational wealth and advantage. How different our communities would look if such a vision were enacted now!

Interestingly, while the human aspects of justice and jubilee are often discussed, I have rarely heard much acknowledgement of the implications for the land in these verses. Similar to our invitation to blessed rest, when sabbath and jubilee are enacted the land itself also has time to rest. God's love for the land He created extends in His giving of laws to protect and nurture it. Despite the fact that humans have never managed to achieve a year of Jubilee, God does not let our failings rob the land of the blessing He also desires for it. Indeed, in the middle of the chaos, loss and exile experienced by the Israelites as they turned away from God, the writer of [2 Chronicles 36:21](#) takes time to explicitly reference that *"The land finally enjoyed its Sabbath rest, lying desolate until the seventy years were fulfilled, just as the prophet had said."* Even when we neglect our role in God's redemptive narrative, He is still faithful to the blessings he promises all aspects of His creation.

Alongside the idea of God being intimately concerned with creating and caring for creation, the kingdom of God is often explicitly linked to the restoration of ecology. The promise made by God in [2 Chronicles 7:14](#) is a well known and often taught on passage:

*“Then if my people who are called by my name will humble themselves and pray and seek my face and turn from their wicked ways, I will hear from heaven and will forgive their sins and restore their land.”*

In my experience, teachings on this passage invariably link the restoration of land to the idea of all being in harmony in our own (human) lives. And yet if we look elsewhere in the Bible, a different interpretation appears to be valid. For instance, in [2 Kings 2:19-22](#) the first miracle recorded in Elisha’s life after he takes on the mantle of Elijah is to purify the water in a town. This would appear to be a direct enactment of the promise made by God in 2 Chronicles, and is a helpful reminder that sometimes reading the promises of God as they are written without our human slant is a useful exercise!

A further example of the vision of ecological restoration in the Kingdom of God is described in [Ezekiel 47](#), a passage which has become a favourite promise for our ministry in Possil. There are two aspects to this. Firstly, it has a clear vision of ecological restoration at its heart. As we read the passage we see that the water flowing from the temple flows like a river straight to the dead sea where it brings life, getting deeper all the time! It is a vision of ecological restoration coming to the dead places on a large and inspiring scale. Secondly, coming back round to a more human centred view of eco-mission, there is the promise of a future human flourishing alongside ecological restoration:



*“Fruit trees of all kinds will grow on both banks of the river. Their leaves will not wither, nor will their fruit fail. Every month they will bear fruit, because the water from the sanctuary flows to them. Their fruit will serve for food and their leaves for healing.”* ([Ezekiel 47:12](#))

As life is restored in the dead places we see that space is created for human flourishing with food and healing as permanent provision. This image of the trees bearing fruit for healing is repeated again in John’s vision of the new heaven and new earth in [Revelation 22](#). This serves as a reminder that we work today to see the coming of the promised vision of the Kingdom of God in our small way in our small community, confident in the knowledge that God will ultimately complete the fulfilment of His promises. It is inspiring and encouraging to realise that as we work for the care of creation, we join in with the work of The Trinity. And as we seek to model our lives on the patterns of work and rest encouraged by scripture, we join in with a dance that brings the rest and restoration of all creation. There is a particular depth of joy and rest available when discovering God through our natural green spaces.

As we pursue redemption of creation, we have seen in Ezekiel 47 that ecological restoration provides space for a full and contented life for human and non-human creation. When viewed through the broader scriptural narrative and promises of God, I think it is clear that a full and contented life has at its heart a clear and grounded identity as a beloved child of God. A recurring question for life in Possil in the face of huge social and physical obstacles is how do we create spaces for people to discover their Godly identity and the security that comes from that?

# Mission, Contemplation and Prophecy

I first moved into the community in 2012 to join Clay Community Church, and in 2016 joined the InnerCHANGE team that is also based in the community. [InnerCHANGE](#) is an ecumenical Christian order among the marginalised. It has teams across the world in a far-reaching range of contexts and cultures doing a broad scope of ministry activities. Each team across the order is united by shared rhythms, commitments and values. In InnerCHANGE we frame our work around three currents: the Missional, Contemplative and Prophetic, acknowledging that a balance between those three leads to sustainable, healthy ministry on the margins. I have also found these to be an important lens through which to look at identity and so will explore some of our experiences of eco-mission and identity through these three currents.

## Missionary current

The Missionary current is perhaps the most obvious of the InnerCHANGE currents. We want people to come to know Jesus and have their lives transformed as they encounter and live in the Kingdom of God. However, more often than not when confronted by decades of living under oppression and lies, simply hearing the Good News doesn't mean much – it becomes another unfulfillable promise from commuters to the area who aren't going to be around for long. My focus in the missional current is to seek the Kingdom of God. I cannot force an encounter with Jesus upon anyone, and am in no position to tell anyone exactly how God would change their life, though I can absolutely assure them He can and

will. With those things in mind we seek to work with partners in our community on anything that reflects the Kingdom of God, following the example found in [1 Peter 3:15-16](#)

*“You must worship Christ as Lord of your life. And if someone asks about your hope as a believer, always be ready to explain it. But do this in a gentle and respectful way.”*

Clay Community Church partners with [Bethany Christian Trust](#) to run a cafe two days a week in the church hall, providing work experience and qualifications to people around the city. The past two years the cafe has partnered with the community-run Hamilton hill Clay pits Local Nature Reserve Management Group to run an Easter egg trail. Clues are hidden around the nature reserve and once they’ve all been found they can bring their completed sheets to the cafe for an Easter egg and cake. It’s been great fun being able to both take part with my young boys and also volunteer at the event.

Through the Easter egg hunt, it has been a privilege being able to introduce over 100 mostly new people from around the community to the Clay pits Nature Reserve, and then to welcome them into the church building afterwards. A surprising number of people in our community are still unaware of the treasure of the Clay pits on their doorstep and events such as these enable access to be thrown wider than just to those who would naturally find it on their own. Similarly, offering a warm welcome into the cafe afterwards has been a great way of starting and developing relationships. Often for the message of a full life with Jesus to be heard, it also has to be seen and come from a trustworthy person. Welcoming people into the cafe is an important first step to getting to know people and giving space for friendships to develop.



*FINDING ONE OF THE CLUES ON THE EASTER EGG TREASURE HUNT THROUGH THE CLAYPITS LNR. FINDING ALL 10 LETTERS EARNED AN EASTER EGG AND CAKE AT THE CLAY CAFE. PHOTO BY IONA MACINTOSH, USED BY PERMISSION.*

This story highlights the approach we have taken within our community for seeking to welcome people into the Kingdom of God. The experiences of being in a beautiful peaceful space and spending time as a family are important aspects of life within the Kingdom of God and it's exciting to be able to create opportunities for people to experience them. Everyone in the church lives in the local area and in many ways nailing our feet to the ground in that way means relationships started at the cafe, or during an Easter egg trail are able to grow and develop naturally over time on the street, at the school gate and around the community. This, for me, reduces the pressure of trying to force some sort of spiritual moment at every event and half-opportunity and instead allows space in our everyday interactions for the Holy Spirit to work as He sees fit. A friend once reminded me that the God described in the Old Testament is a God of generations, and so while we pray



and long for all our neighbours to come to know Jesus tomorrow, we also appreciate that we are building on the spiritual legacies left by those who have prayed and lived in the community before us, and the legacy we leave will be built on by those who come after. Living in a community that has had its identity torn down over generations, it is humbling for us to remember that it is God who is restoring that identity and healing those wounds and He is not reliant on our hard work or impatient timescales.

## Contemplative Current

I find it much easier to connect with God in nature. Big horizons, background bird song and beautiful surroundings help me to let go of the stress in my head and allow myself space to start listening to God. In a community blighted by large scale fly tipping, dereliction and pollution it is sometimes hard to sink into the contemplative without leaving the city. We are blessed in our community to be in the north of the city and from my son's school you can see the mountain of Ben Lomond on a clear day. I love taking time to admire the view when I do the school run. One of my neighbours once remarked as we walked past the fly tipping and looked up to the hills *"this place is shite, but at least the view is good"*. However, there is a double challenge that accompanies a good view like that: how to remember to drag our eyes away from the dumped asbestos sheets and commercial waste and look up; and how to keep feeling positive when the beauty and hope of the beauty of creation is visible but out of reach. It has been a joy to be part of opening the Clay pits in the heart of the community to be used by all in the community as a readily accessible and beautiful space to de-stress and recharge.



*THE CLAYPITS LNR IS A SMALL OASIS OF BEAUTY AND TRANQUILLITY IN OUR COMMUNITY AND WITHIN 2 MILES OF THE CITY CENTRE. PHOTO BY CLAIRE AUFHAMMER, USED BY PERMISSION.*

Using green spaces as a means of engaging with the contemplative is a well known and effective method. Often these practices are associated with other religions and spiritualities, particularly those with Eastern origins. However, within Christianity, encountering God in nature is a practice with a rich history. From David's psalms, to the [Desert Fathers](#) who retreated into the wilderness, to the [Celtic saints](#) who engaged with the land around them, historic Christianity is full of examples of meeting God in His creation. For many years before the redevelopment of the Clay pits LNR, Clay Community Church celebrated the festival of tabernacles in the Clay pits. We would play parachute games, sing songs, build dens, do activities around the Clay pits and listen to a reflection on scripture. One of the activities that I enjoyed was a psalm writing exercise. We would be given paper and a pen and invited to go and find somewhere to sit and reflect



on what we could see, hear and feel. With some of David's psalms as inspiration we would be encouraged to write our own psalmic reflections. I found it much easier to engage with deeper thoughts, emotions and struggles when confronted by a tree and meadow than a tenement and fly tipping!



*DEN BUILDING IN THE CLAYPITS LNR AS PART OF A TABERNACLES CELEBRATION. PHOTO BY CLAIRE AUFHAMMER, USED BY PERMISSION.*

In my experience, it is often when life and our surroundings are busy that it is hard to filter through our own thoughts. Working out what is true and important is often a

struggle when it is confused by the busy, urgent and loud. If we truly want to discover and grow in our Godly identity it is important to be able to be still enough to hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit. In a community when it is not only the neighbours, traffic and speedway that are loud, but also the fly tipping and decay. Everywhere you look there are “*loud*” distractions, so finding spaces to be still and listen to God is a constant struggle.

## Prophetic Current

In InnerCHANGE the prophetic current includes calling out injustice in structures and in the treatment of our communities, we seek to be a sign community proclaiming that The Kingdom of God is here. A key task for me in the prophetic is to ask two questions: 1) Whose voices are we hearing? and 2) Whose voices are important? The ideal is when these overlap. Unfortunately, in our community, they rarely do. Even when the legislatively required community consultation for big infrastructure projects takes place it often involves complicated language and diagrams, little explanation and generally appears to be predicated on getting a handful of people through the doors who will agree with the proposed plans. One particularly illustrative example of the apparent disdain held for local community members came in the first public consultation for a new housing development in the area. The plans were presented by the developers with great pride along with promises of building a wonderful new community. Alongside the umbrage taken by all present at the dismissal of the existing community, there was outrage from the owner of the last surviving shop in the area. Her shop is stuck in the middle of derelict ground surrounded by uncontrolled fly tipping and ignored by the building's owners, yet despite that she succeeds in making her business thrive. In the new plans presented her shop was demolished and replaced with flats. Apparently, no one had noticed they were planning on

destroying a livelihood and community service without consideration or offer of a replacement. Consultations such as these often lead to despondency and anger from the local community, rather than any sense of shared vision and excitement about development.

As described previously, following a community led campaign, the decision was made to create a Local Nature Reserve at the Clay pits. The landowners managed to secure a huge amount of funding to increase the accessibility of the site. The scale of funding and vision was well beyond anything a small community group could have managed and has really enhanced the area. Unfortunately, as with many of these things, the process of developing the site conveyed a louder message than the outcome. For the initial phase of works, the community were informed on a Friday evening in February 2019 that work would be starting soon on the site, and on Monday fences went up to block access to the whole area. Initially publicised with a finish date of autumn 2019, the site eventually opened again in April 2021. Throughout these years the information signs displayed on the fences were consistently at least 3 months out of date with no effort made to correct them or communicate what was happening on site around the community. In my role as chair of the community group, I went to many meetings over the years alongside my co-chair. We were invited to sit round the table with funders, stakeholders and landowners, and be acknowledged as partners in the project. At each meeting we would raise community concerns about timescales, communication and access. Despite our seemingly privileged position, only two of our comments and concerns over two years were acted upon. Throughout these years of being shut out, the interpretation from many members of the community was *“It’s being taken off us. It was our site but now they want to develop it for*



*the West End and so they've shut us out and won't want us back."* When the site finally reopened, a big question was how to give ownership back to local people who felt that it had been taken off them.



*POOR COMMUNICATION AND AN 18 MONTH BUILDING PROJECT EXTENSION GAVE LOTS OF SPACE FOR DIGGER WATCHING AND GUESSING GAMES AS TO WHAT WAS HAPPENING. PHOTO BY REUBEN ASPDEN.*



# Dialectogram

When faced with large-scale developments, powerful stakeholders and agendas set from outside, community responses often seem to follow one of two patterns: either a protest stance fuelled by anger and a desire for justice, or a resigned despair that accepts that it's always been this way and there's no way of changing anything. However, we see throughout the Gospels that when He was presented with only two options Jesus always seemed to find a third way. One of our challenges in the face of large scale injustice is to seek God for a third way. Within the Clay pits committee, rather than just getting angry and shouting, or meekly rolling over, we tried to find ways of subverting the dominant narrative. Could it be possible to do something wonderful enough that it would attract the attention of the powerful stakeholders, but rooted enough in the community that it could give ownership back to those who feel they have been excluded?

The HCLNR has aims around arts and heritage, ecological preservation and community involvement. Overarching all of these aims, one of our goals as a committee is to create within the Clay pits a neutral space where members of all the surrounding geographic communities and communities of interest can take ownership of the space and enjoy it as a prized community asset. In order to achieve this we have pushed to ensure that everything that happens in the LNR is of a really high quality that is able to be cherished and respected. We have also investigated ways of making the entrances accessible and welcoming to the people who live around them. Mitch Miller is a well regarded artist based in Glasgow who has developed something he calls a [Dialectogram](#). These pictures combine cartoon, cartography and ethnography to create a living map of a site, representing the official, local and folk history. As a committee, with help from [Glasgow](#)

[Sculpture Studios](#) based down the road, we were able to engage Mitch to do a Dialectogram of the Claypits. The aims of the project were two-fold: 1) Have a clear and engaging display of local stories at the entrance to the site so people coming from the north felt welcomed and comfortable as they entered. 2) Commission and install something of sufficient quality that it would raise the standard of artistic and heritage debate in and around the Clay pits and encourage the landowners to constructively engage with the community as people who have a significant stake in the LNR. The project was designed to be carried out in two phases. The first phase focused on introducing Mitch to people around the community, offering his services to local groups so they could get to know him and help him start interviewing members of the community for their experiences of the site over the years. COVID-19 restrictions made some of this quite hard to achieve! Phase Two followed up the contacts he had made in Phase One, filled in gaps and communities of interest that hadn't been approached and eventually culminated with the installation of the Dialectogram at the entrance to the Clay pits.



*THE DIALECTOGRAM BY ARTIST MITCH MILLER AT THE ENTRANCE TO THE CLAYPITS. THE MIX OF CARTOGRAPHY, ETHNOGRAPHY AND CARTOON HELPS CAPTURE MULTIPLE DIFFERENT EXPERIENCES OF THE SITE. THE TEXT IS EITHER DIRECT QUOTES FROM PEOPLE WHO HAVE USED THE AREA, QUOTES FROM LITERATURE OR QUOTES TAKEN FROM OFFICIAL HISTORIES. PHOTO BY REUBEN ASPDEN.*

The Dialectogram now has pride of place at the entrance displaying a mix of official, local and folk histories. It is a small gesture, but serves as a permanent symbol that the past has not been wiped away by the redevelopment and those who used to enjoy the space are still welcome now. Reassuringly, a year after the installation of the Dialectogram at the entrance it has still not been targeted by graffiti, possibly a sign that it is recognised as displaying ownership for the people who live here and so there is less of a need to spray a symbol of ownership over the top of it.

## Doocots

Another interesting cultural flashpoint in the Clay pits is the presence of Doocots, [which are](#) pigeon huts. Doocots became widespread across Glasgow after the second world war.

High unemployment and the effects of traumatic war time experiences affected large swathes of the tenement dwelling population. The men caught up in those situations were encouraged to keep pigeons and soon many tenement lofts overflowed with doos. As the health and smell effects of the doos in the tenements became apparent, the men took to the waste ground around the city and constructed metal towers to house their birds, often with a small neighbouring hut where they could sit. The aim of the game, different from the much more expensive racing birds hobby, is to breed the most attractive bird so when it flies it attracts a bird from a neighbouring Doocot. If your bird is able to entice your neighbour's bird back to your Doocot then you claim the bird as your prize. Doo flying is becoming less common, but across Glasgow there are still Doocots to be found, and within the area in and around the Clay pits there are 5. I come from a middle class background in the north-east of the country, and before moving to Glasgow hadn't come across a Doocot. It has been fun learning about something that my neighbours take for granted as an established and visible part of their community. Within the Clay pits the Doocots have become a source of confusion, miscommunication and mistrust between the landowners and the community group. None of the people working on the development of the site come from communities where Doocots are commonplace. For them, the Doocots are unsightly blights on a beautiful space; private space in the middle of a public area, generally occupied by men who are often enjoying a drink while watching the birds. While all these opinions are largely true, they neglect many aspects of the lives of those who built the Doocots and the community they represent. An alternative narrative suggests that while the landowners were ignoring the land and the industrial fly-tipping that was occurring on it, the doo flyers chained up the gates that the vans were using and chased off those they caught tipping. As they spend a lot of time on the site, they keep an eye on all coming and



going, normally with a friendly greeting and any news of things that have been going on around the area. For nearly two decades they have acted as unofficial custodians of the area.



AN IMAGE OF THE DOOCOTS OR PIGEON HUTS IN THE FIELDS AROUND POSSILPARK

During the redevelopment HCLNR were approached on multiple occasions by the landowners about the Doocots. Every nine months or so the landowners expressed displeasure at the presence of Doocots, and asked the community group for help in getting rid of them. Each time we suggested we couldn't speak to that as we didn't speak on behalf of the whole community. Instead, given that Doocots are such prominent cultural symbols we offered to help setup community consultation processes to find out how the local users of the space felt about them and what they thought. Each time we made our

suggestion, it was ignored and things would go quiet for another nine months. In between times, whenever direct questions on the record were asked, they were dismissed with “*the doocots are on the plans, we wouldn’t dream of moving them*”. The lack of honesty and transparency has often been very frustrating! At its heart are again variations on the questions raised above. Within the development of the nature reserve: “*Whose voices are we hearing?*” and “*Whose voices are important?*”. Is it being developed for the local community in ways that enable them to feel safe and at home in the space? Or is it being developed for those who commute in? Is there an interest in hearing the voices from the local community and culture? Or are they excluded as they might disagree with the vision of the developers? The discussion has become emblematic of the apparent disregard for the voices of those who live on the doorstep. Unfortunately, several years on from the beginnings of these discussions on Doocots there still haven’t been any definitive moves towards either sensible community led discussions, or believable guarantees from the landowners.

## What we’ve learned

Possilpark has some of the worst statistics for health and mental wellbeing in the country. The detrimental effects of vacant and [derelict ground](#) on health and wellbeing are well documented, as are the positive effects on health of good quality green spaces. Somehow despite the obvious connections between the health of the community and the state of the land in it, there has been very little appetite by the various landowners around the community to make any changes. A leader of one of the Council’s arms length organisation



that owns a patch of derelict ground that had already been derelict for a decade, explicitly stated in a public meeting that

*“We aren’t planning on developing the land until the new houses are built and occupied (a ten year plan) as we would like to make sure the purpose suits the new community”.*

When faced with such large scale issues of health and justice, as a church we believe we are obliged to get involved. Ezekiel 47 describes a vision of human and ecological flourishing and Jesus proclaimed that He has come to bring life in all its fullness. Therefore when the ground is crying out under mounds of industrial fly tipping and contamination, the health of our neighbours is failing, and the official narrative is often explicitly that we are worthless, we cannot sit back and allow the landowners to sit complacently by until people who look and sound more like them are present to have discussions with. However, just shouting about injustice and battling with absent and uninterested landowners quickly leads to bitterness and resentment and does not ultimately benefit the community or ourselves. Instead we pursue the Kingdom of God and the wholeness, health, joy and hope that that brings. To that end in Possil we have, as already outlined focused on three currents of actions: the missional, the contemplative and prophetic.

## **Missional summary**

The Kingdom of God is inherently attractive! The offer of life in all its fullness and the joy, hope, grace and love of Jesus are an incredible invitation. However, the seeds of this incredible invitation often get choked by the thorns growing up around them. This sense

can be found in [Matthew 13](#). As a church and InnerCHANGE team we aim to be creative in getting to know our neighbours and creating spaces for encounters with the Kingdom of God. We have had the privilege of partnering with some amazing local organisations over the years, particularly in recent times with the Clay pits LNR community group. Working with partners allows us to run events and activities that enable encounters with love, joy, hope and other markers of the Kingdom of God as well as creating spaces for getting to know people and hearing their stories. Over many years our experience is that it is these encounters that lay the foundations for an encounter with Jesus.

## Contemplative summary

The contemplative is an important part of pursuing Jesus. Creating space to slow down and be quiet enough to hear the whisper of the Holy Spirit allows us to grow and learn from Him. In my experience, this can be particularly powerful when it is done outdoors. It is encouraging to see a revival of some of these ideas taking place in more mainstream settings in England, particularly within [Forest Churches](#) in the Church of England as explored in episode 6 of the [Out of the Margins](#) podcasts. Charities like [A Rocha](#) have also been on the forefront of raising awareness of eco-mission and eco-church for many years and Sally Mann's [Urban Tract](#) describes an inspiring approach to green space redemption and contemplation in the community. As a church we've explored a variety of different ways of being contemplative in the Clay pits LNR. Finding space to take inspiration from the Psalms and write our own versions of them has been a fun and meaningful way of tapping deeper into our thoughts and experiences and creating space to let God speak to us through them. I have recently been inspired by the feedback from friends after attending other spirituality-based contemplative events held in the Clay pits, leading me to reflect on

how we as a church can better invite our community into contemplation focused on Jesus rather than other religious or spiritual influences.

## **Prophetic summary**

There are large systematic injustices facing our community in Possil, demonstrated recently by fencing off a community asset for two years with little communication, and trying to remove symbols of the local community and culture in redevelopment plans. Creating spaces for the voices of those who are most impacted by changes is important if we want to see an empowered community. Paul's writings and Revelation paint a picture of the Kingdom of God where rich and poor, men and women, educated and not all join together with equal rights. If we want to be part of introducing people to the Kingdom of God then we need to be able to encourage everyone that their voice is important and should be heard.

## **Conclusion**

Derelict does not always have to mean useless. However, when the dereliction and official narrative enhance each other in increasingly negative spirals the narrative can impact generational identity. Working with God's concerns for the redemption of creation creates spaces to allow for the redemption of our individual and community identity. Our communities are not generally resource or confidence rich, yet by working with all who are interested, sharing resources, and lots of prayer it is possible to see change in our land and community

# Questions to Ponder

- What message is the built environment around your community telling you and your neighbours?
- How does this story impact the community and its outlook and identity?
- Go for a prayer walk around your community (can also be done virtually on google street view). As you walk, ask God to give you His Kingdom eyes to see the parts of the community He is inviting you to?
- As you walked and prayed, were there any places that stood out as contributing to a negative identity within your community?
- How is God inviting you to partner with Him in redeeming that space?
- Which of the three currents stands out as being an important framework to help redeem a space and enable your neighbours to encounter Jesus?
- Are there any of the currents that you have neglected? What would engaging in that current enable for you and your neighbours?



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