

Oven Building to October 2011

Members of the Oven Group have been busy throughout the year with cob ovens built at Newton Rigg in the Forest Garden, by the watermill at Acorn Bank, behind the smokehouse at Castle Court, Shap, and a working "show" oven at The Watermill, Little Salkeld, where it attracted plenty of public attention during August 2011. Two temporary bases on which oven building skills can be demonstrated and practised have also been constructed at The Watermill where a series of one day oven building courses have been successfully run by Niall Wildwoode.

Interest has been shown at other venues for building community ovens but nothing firm has yet been arranged. It would seem that while people are interested, fascinated and excited by the project, interest dwindles once they have a good understanding of the time, manpower and on-going commitment involved, including use of available local materials. Although financial cost is low, time/labour cost is high as a suitable base or plinth has to be raised and a shelter – essential for an earth oven in our climate – needs to be constructed. Specifications for building ovens could be drawn up and made available to interested parties who could then decide at leisure how they would best like to proceed.

For practical reasons, future sites need to be restricted to those where a clear benefit can be seen, for example, privately owned, commercial or managed sites rather than community spaces with the proviso that the community is welcomed, invited and encouraged to get involved. This way issues like financing, managing, insuring and protecting can be undertaken more easily.

Instructional courses would seem to be the best way forward with a "show" oven, such as the one at Little Salkeld Watermill periodically fired to show a quality working model.

The Watermill oven has been fired every week during August with excellent temperatures raised and over fifty pizzas baked and three loaves of bread. Reports from Smoky Jo's at Castle Court, Shap have also been very positive with pan loaves and pizzas made by Jo Hampson.

The mobile oven has been to Calthwaite School, Little Salkeld Watermill, Crosby Ravensworth School, Crosby Ravensworth village hall (twice), Hunter Hall School, and Askham Community Swimming Pool for its re-opening. Although never actually catching fire, it was twice badly charred once perlite became the insulating material of choice. This product enabled working temperature to be reached within ninety minutes and less fuel to be needed to maintain that temperature. However, if this side of the project is to continue, radical alterations are required. Ideally, the oven casing would be made from stainless steel, sited on a solid base preferably within a mobile food trailer containing hygiene facilities. Licensing such a vehicle would not appear to be an insurmountable problem although cost and manning might be.

Peter Dicken, October 2011