

Case study 10

‘Please pick me’: how Incredible Edible Todmorden is repurposing the commons for open source food and agricultural biodiversity

John Paull

Background

Perhaps it is the recipes, the climate, or the Manchester School of free trade advocacy. Whatever the reasons, food has not been one of Britain’s great gifts to the world. Apparently, British school children generally do not wonder where their next meal is coming from beyond the supermarket freezer. In a survey, 36 per cent of school children did not know that the main ingredient of chips was potato, and 37 per cent were unaware that cheese is made from milk (Homeyard, 2005); and while 99 per cent could use a DVD player, only 58 per cent could use a vegetable peeler and only 43 per cent could boil an egg (Slattery, 2006).

The English town of Todmorden in West Yorkshire (North West England), with a population of about 17,000, was once a thriving hub of activity supporting the rapacious textile industry of a Great Britain in the midst of an Industrial Revolution that oversaw the near-extinction of non-industrial textile production. Now the region has one of Britain’s highest unemployment rates. Houses in Todmorden are modest even by English standards. Front yards are non-existent or tablecloth size; and ditto backyards.

In the past, food production was off-shored with cheaper land and labour under foreign skies to ‘better’ climates, and, with British ships ‘ruling the waves’, feeding Britain cheaply took priority over feeding Britain locally or seasonally.

The wisdom of scouring the world for the cheapest foodstuffs while neglecting British agriculture and local food production came adrift during WWII when German U-boats were doing their darnedest to torpedo supply. At the Economic Reform Club, Lord Northbourne raised the question: could Britain feed itself? (Northbourne, 1940). The campaign ‘Dig for Victory’ and food rationing and shortages, which extended into the 1950s for Britain, brought home to the British their lack of food security and sovereignty.

Thus, when the Incredible Edible Todmorden (IET) project raises the question of food self-sufficiency for Todmorden – and by extension the rest of Britain – it is treading on historical carcasses and the skeletons of British



Figure C10.1 Canalside – vegetable patch and Incredible Edible interpretative panel along the canal tow path at Todmorden. Photo credit: John Paull

imperialism, the dogmas of free trade, and the faded ‘greatness’ and arrogance of an empire well past its use-by-date.

On a daily basis, newspapers report dysfunctional eating and the obesity epidemic engulfing Britain. The National Health Service (NHS) is funding lap-band surgery for obese Britons as young as 16 years old (Bond, 2011). British women are the fattest in Europe and a quarter are obese (Bates and Hope, 2011), while national facilities are expended on repurposing resources. For one morbidly obese Briton: ‘On one occasion firefighters had to be called out to demolish the front wall of his former home so they could drive a fork lift truck inside to lift him out and put him into an ambulance ... Two female carers take up to four hours to wash (him) because his size makes it impossible for him to clean himself’ (Whitelocks and Bates, 2011).

The benefits of agricultural biodiversity: why, what

In March 2008 a public meeting was held in Todmorden. The topic was food – and the premise was ‘we need to talk’. The meeting attracted about 60 attendees and was a local response to the growing awareness that Britain needs to have a conversation about food. In many ways it was a meeting against the tide of the Americanization of the British diet, of the Tesco-ization¹ of food retailing, of the dissociation of food from its agricultural and geographic provenance, as well as of a centuries-late response to the off-shoring of British agricultural biodiversity and of food production generally.

From that meeting, *Incredible Edible Todmorden* (IET) was born. The town was scoured for land and space that could be repurposed for food growing.



Figure C10.2 Education – the Community College of Todmorden tempts passers-by with open access radishes growing in a pavement plot. Photo credit: John Paull

Permission gardens and guerilla gardens² appeared around town planted out with cabbage and carrots, rhubarb and radishes, chard and chives, becoming ‘propaganda gardens’ – their very presence, designed to precipitate public and private discourse on the subject of food. They serve as ‘Trojan horses’ to smuggle food issues into public awareness.

A herb garden planted out beside a footpath and planter pots outside the Hippodrome Theatre added edibility to the streetscape of Todmorden. One senior school and six primary schools in the town all now grow food and the local cemetery has had an Incredible Edible make-over tended by school children. The local medical centre features an apothecary garden, and planter boxes in the adjacent car park have been shared out between IET and Blooming Todmorden, a practical compromise between the contesting ideologies of prettification versus edibility.

The novelty of IET’s produce is that this is help-yourself food where passers-by are invited and encouraged to pick this fresh local produce. A message on IET boards is: ‘Go on, take some. It’s all free.’ Signage presents pictures and names of planted produce, and suggests when it is ready to pick and how it may be cooked. Against an image of kale, consumers are advised: ‘Harvest: June–February. Use in any recipes that are suited to cabbage or Brussels sprouts.’ Of lovage (*Levisticum officinale*) we read: ‘Harvest: All year. A lesser-known and underrated herb. Tastes a little like celery, so great in soups and stocks’. Adjacent to an image of chard: ‘Harvest: All year. Great as a side dish. Just cook and add olive oil and salt. Mmmmm.’

Many are now familiar with open-source journals where the content is free to the end user, but the concept of open-source food, of picking and eating

something that someone else had planted and nurtured, took some time to catch on, and represents a cultural change in Todmorden.

Plots are mixed – there is no monoculture for IET – which is visually more interesting and attractive, and encourages mixed picking as well as sampling of the unfamiliar.

The benefits of agricultural biodiversity: how

IET has created 40 public fruit and vegetable gardens. The gardens and orchards in ‘the commons’ are the public face of IET and they are its most visible, tangible and immediate community benefit. They are a constant reminder that ‘food doesn’t grow on supermarket shelves, you know’. They deliver visual interest, opportunities for participation and engagement, gastronomic novelty and amenity, as well as fresh seasonal local nourishment.

IET has also created a variety of communication, educative and celebratory events in the town. Such events have included street cook-offs, ‘Tod Talks’, targeted campaigns such as ‘Every Egg Matters’ which maps local egg production, cooking courses, the field to plate lunch, and seed swaps. Regular newsletters, an active website (www.incredible-edible-todmorden.co.uk, accessed August 2012), presentations beyond the local district, and veggie tourism, all serve to maintain the momentum of IET.

A celebrity visit, such as by Prince Charles, to IET adds endorsement and gains media exposure beyond what free carrots in an obscure West Yorkshire town may otherwise attract. It can add Todmorden to the celebrity-circuit and, as an online commentator offered: ‘Congratulations to the folk of Todmorden for being so innovative that the Prince of Wales just had to come to see it for himself’ (wrinkles, in Moseley, 2010).

The benefits of agricultural biodiversity: impacts

The local and immediate outcome of IET is the transformation of the commons with edible townscaping. IET has raised the profile of food in general and local food in particular. Residents and food vendors have a raised awareness of localness. A survey of Todmorden shoppers reported that 64 per cent ‘buy locally produced food regularly’, with the leading reasons for doing so being to ‘support the local economy’ followed by ‘quality and freshness’ (Lee-Woolf, 2009).

The Todmorden local market has survived and even prospered with a banner declaring: ‘Your Local Market. Great people, great value, great service. Local food on sale here. Put markets back into market towns.’ Of the fresh produce on offer in the market, many items are prominently labelled as ‘local’. This creates a motivation for producers to grow such differentiated produce and shoppers to preference it.

The movement against the Tesco-ization of small-town Britain is active in Todmorden. Decals reading ‘Save our markets. No more supermarkets’



Figure C10.3 Views – Incredible Edible pumpkins planted with a view over Todmorden, West Yorkshire, UK. Photo credit: John Paull

are on prominent display throughout the town and a recent application for a further supermarket has been declined by the local council. The *Todmorden News* carried the comment endorsing that decision: ‘This should now send Sainsbury’s a clear signal, should they appeal, that they are not welcome in Tod. This message could also be extended to any other supermarket chain wishing to build another supermarket in the town. Three is enough thank you!’ (Sutcliffe, 2011).

The first Todmorden cheese was launched on the market in August 2009. The new Pextenement Cheese Company restored a seventeenth-century dairy, and its East Lee branded cheese is made from local organic milk (Pextenement, 2010). It is perhaps at the forefront of a new wave of niche, boutique and artisan local food products.

A survey in Todmorden had 47 per cent of respondents reporting that they ‘have grown food at home this year’ while 35 per cent reported that they are ‘fairly new to food growing’. Seventy-nine per cent stated that they ‘would like more food growing around town’ (Lee-Woolf, 2009).

A local mother stated: ‘I’d never grown a vegetable in my life and I had absolutely no idea how to do it, but when I heard about Incredible Edible from another mum ... I knew it made sense. I started in my own garden by growing vegetables. It was far easier than I’d expected it to be. This year we’ve had potatoes, leeks, carrots, cabbage, strawberries, onions, garlic, peas, parsnips and sprouts, and I don’t spend more than two hours a week in the garden’ (Pauline Mullarkey, quoted in Moorhead, 2009).

Scale up efforts and challenges

IET has used a strategy of ‘find what works’, and duplicate it. The Todmorden core activities of creating propaganda gardens and propaganda orchards using local and heritages varieties have been successfully replicated across the town. Sites continue to be identified, and the corpus of such gardens and orchards continues to grow.

Residents of at least sixteen towns and villages³ have adopted the Incredible Edible model and moniker and are in various stages of reproducing the Todmorden project for themselves. These copy-cats are generally villages and small towns. It remains to be tested if Incredible Edible is a small-town phenomenon that can readily be scaled up to larger conurbations, cities, and perhaps even mega-cities. Scaling down is plausibly a less problematic enterprise.

A different species of ‘scale-up’ is about to be tested in Todmorden. Following a successful application to the Lottery Fund, IET has been awarded £500,000 to expand its vision of local food with plans for an ambitious demonstration project including aquaponics, with integrated orchards, bees, and an ‘edible learning landscape’. Just how will this major injection of funds with its attendant commitments, demands, promises, staffing, infrastructure, management, and reporting requirements impact on what has been a volunteer enterprise? Stories of lottery winners squandering their winnings are by now a cliché. Just how will IET articulate its own change of fortunes, and perhaps even negotiate with a potential ‘saving Nemo’ backlash? What is certain is that half a million pounds will change the dynamics of IET and, when the cash runs out, IET will have a fascinating narrative to share – about scalability (and fish).

Stakeholder involvement

‘If you eat, you’re in’ is a tag of IET. It identifies that we are all stakeholders in the enterprise of food, and thereby all potential constituents of the Incredible Edible project.

Pam Warhurst, one of the IET founders, characterizes ‘The Model’ of IET as ‘Three plates spinning’ where she says ‘One is boring, two is clever, three’s a show!’ According to Warhurst these ‘plates’ are the ‘Community – Everyone’, the ‘Business sector including farmers’ and ‘Learning/education – cradle to cradle’ (Warhurst, 2010). IET has successfully recruited these three plates into the IET vision.

IET began without funding and it was the sweat-equity of community members that was initially invested in the enterprise. An early engagement with food businesses was to give them each blackboards where they could advertise what was ‘local’. Businesses have reciprocated and their support has generally been in kind – timber, plants, seeds, planter boxes, signage, and the space for planting.

All schools in Todmorden participate. The catering manager of Todmorden High School, Tony Mulgrew, reported that the school started growing food in

February 2009. By the summer of that year the school was serving soup in their dining room made with their own school-grown tomatoes, potatoes, courgettes, beans, endive and chard (Moorhead, 2009).

Policy impact

IET is a vehicle to argue for systemic change, and its proponents are not blind to the wider context of their small-town project, perhaps even to the global context. The emphasis has been on direct action, and as Pam Warhurst says: 'We're bored to death and cynical about strategies and policies and rhetoric' (quoted in Paull, 2011). Nevertheless the IET people are not silent about the bigger picture, and the opportunities for engineering systemic change at the policy level. Ten proposals have been generated that, if implemented at a government policy level, would inject, by fiat, food growing into urban planning (Table C10.1).

IET's success to date has been the success of a grass-roots idea that has taken hold in its hometown and has spread to other towns and villages. Just how this success might port to government is unclear as well as contested. A recent newspaper report about Todmorden and its Incredible Edible project attracted favourable feedback from readers as well as tapping a vein of cynicism about government intervention (Graff, 2011). One correspondent commented: 'This is one light at the end of the tunnel that is not an oncoming train' (mkb, in Graff, 2011). Another expressed optimism that others would take up the idea: 'Wonderful inspiring ladies, with a beautiful vision. I dearly hope more towns,

Table C10.1 Proposals from Incredible Edible Todmorden for edible townscaping (Warhurst, 2010)

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1. Build schools for the future that have the living edible world at their heart
 2. Transform health buildings with edible plants and trees as an integral part of the design and workplace
 3. All public bodies to release land for food growing
 4. Plan for food - Support local food production through the planning system with local plans identifying places for growing
 5. Tick all the boxes - Make growing a performance indicator for 'wellbeing' for all Public Services
 6. Insist all new homes have ready-to-grow spaces
 7. All social landlords to allocate space for growing
 8. Charter for truly local markets - support local food producers and farmers and campaign for the reallocation of subsidies
 9. Make sure public bodies like schools and health authorities have as a priority to procure local food
 10. Invest in food skills for the future. We need incredible degrees and diplomas, cooks and technologists, farmers and fabulous food producers
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cities and villages think the same and take part in this fantastic scheme' (Kroger, in Graff, 2011). A positive role for government was envisaged by one reporter: 'Perfect! The way it should be. I don't want to knock the beautiful flower beds around town but increased fruit and vegetable planting (instead of flowers to some extent) should be a national policy' (PrivateSi, in Graff, 2011), while others raised a note of caution regarding its involvement. One correspondent pleaded: 'Please do not involve government, ministers or councillors – that is instant death to anything. People feel they are being pushed and so rebel or are disinterested. It would instantly be loaded with health and safety rules as well. Keep councillors out' (Flora, in Graff, 2011). Another wrote: 'I agree that it's a brilliant idea but like an earlier comment "don't get the politicians involved, local or national" they'll find a way to tax it and throw the "elf and safety" book at it' (Get it right eh, in Graff, 2011).

Whether IET could successfully make the transition from 'grass-roots' and citizen activism to local government or national government policy, remains uncharted territory. While some draw from a deeply sceptical vein, what is clear is that the IET group are themselves optimistic and more than optimistic since they are actively advocating a governmental uptake of Incredible Edible precepts.

Key lessons learned

There are at least seven lessons that can be drawn from the successes of the IET project. These lessons can be characterized as: champions; actions; visibility; engagement; media and message; replication; and contagion.

Firstly, the success of IET has been driven by local champions who have imaginatively, enthusiastically and articulately taken up the challenge of localizing food. The initial public meeting moved the project past the idea stage, and taking action is the important second lesson of IET. Thirdly, those actions, whether permission gardens or guerilla gardens, shared the common element of visibility. IET gardens are highly visible. They are labelled with IET logos and interpretational text ranging from handwritten, for example 'Food to Share – Please do not pull veg. then leave to die – this is sad and wasteful. Enjoy it!' through to the professionally illustrated signage, in full-colour and sponsored.

The fourth lesson of IET has been engagement. IET actively recruited from the outset its 'three spinning plates' – community, business and the education sector. This engagement leveraged commonalities, resources, skill sets, and interests. The success of IET has been accompanied by regular coverage in the *Todmorden News* which has provided frequent refreshment of the message in the local weekly newspaper. The fifth lesson is the constructing of regular stories, photo opportunities, fresh angles, the framing of messages (e.g. 'If you eat, you're in').

A sixth lesson from IET is replication. Find out what works and do that, again and again. Some activities, such as street gardens and verge orchards, can proliferate to occupy the available niches. Rituals that work, for example street cook-offs and seed swaps can become regular or annual fixtures. The seventh

lesson of IET is to foster contagion – keep it simple, open, replicable, non-proprietary, and continually refresh the momentum.

IET is successfully reinvigorating food discourse, ‘one stick of rhubarb at a time’. Food is increasingly being acknowledged as the issue of our times. Incredible Edible has created a vehicle to inject food issues into the public domain and to project them well beyond its hometown of Todmorden.

Acknowledgements

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Notes

- 1 Tesco is a British multinational grocery and general merchandise retailer.
- 2 Gardening on land that the gardeners do not have legal right to use, often an abandoned site or area not cared for by anyone.
- 3 Todmorden as well as: Accrington; Cloughmills; Glossop; Holmes Chapel; Hoylake; Huddersfield; Lambeth; Llandrindod; Prestwich; Ramsbottom; Rossendale; Totnes; Wakefield; Wight; and Wilmslow.

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