

# THE ROMANS HAVE LEFT BRITAIN

Two large ex-industrial buildings, Red Brick and Zigzag, stand side by side on the edge of the Somerset levels – high profile outposts of community endeavour, nestled among big-box retail. A lovingly tended garden acts as a demilitarised zone between these, at times, uneasy neighbours. Opportunities may soon arise to rediscover the spirit that saved the buildings in the first place, perhaps bringing the two projects closer together. S M PARSONS investigates.

## Vision



There have been various attempts at community-led regeneration of the Morlands site between Glastonbury and Street, once the largest derelict industrial site in the South West. In its heyday Morlands, a Quaker company founded in 1825 whose roots are shared with nearby shoemakers Clarks, produced high quality leather and sheepskin goods including jackets worn by WW2 RAF pilots. Until the 1980s it employed hundreds of local people (most of whom cycled to work) on this large and architecturally mixed site, before going the way of most of Britain's manufacturing base.

The company itself survived, and still makes boots and slippers (its original product), though on a vastly reduced scale. Indeed when this author moved to Glastonbury in 2003, his now 100 year old grandmother asked excitedly if there was a Morlands factory shop where her favourite pink sheepskin slippers could be procured at a discount. The daughter of a Dundee shopkeeper, she has a keen eye for price. Other notable customers (for boots not slippers) have included Sir Edmund Hillary and the 1992 British Olympic Bobsleigh team.

Developers bought the site from Clarks in the 1980's. Failing to get planning permission for a big shed retail park, they eventually sold it on to the South West Regional Development Agency (SWERDA), who proclaimed themselves open to working with locals to achieve something more community-friendly. This rather scuppered the plans of The Land Is Ours, who, working with one Chris Black, had been about to squat Morlands as a protest.

Local activists, notably Black, turned instead to badgering SWERDA to deliver on their vague promises. Early plans for the site included a visionary eco-village, using much of the existing architecture and layout. Very few cars, off-grid micro power generation, lots of trees, and green spaces where possible.

Cycle paths with little mini traffic lights, a bicycle shop, a city farm with associated co-op/cafe, an arthouse cinema and, crucially, low-rent units for light industry/manufacturing. Obviously the plans came to nothing.

Another scheme, the wonderfully named *Gateway to the Mendips*, likewise never made it off the drawing board. Though it was a serious proposition, for some reason it conjures an image of two 100ft ram horns forming the entrance, a bit like Saddam Hussein's monumental swords in Baghdad. Sadly perhaps, no dictator was on hand to see the project through to completion. The natives did try. Gentlemanly activist Humphrey Temperley pulled together people such as Tom Clark (scion of the shoemakers), to pitch the idea to the landlords. Clark recalls the SWERDA folks as "utterly detached" (one of the more polite descriptions), and all that now remains to mark this valiant effort is a delightful quote from Temperley whose presentation concluded "of course, ladies and gentlemen, if you don't like these principles, we do have others".

One imagines the smartly dressed quango-istas sitting stony-faced, wondering what principles have to do with anything. Different kinds of "values" were in evidence later when SWERDA, in the process of being abolished by the Cameron government, sold the iconic building later known as the Zigzag (*opposite centre*) to a local developer, reputedly for £1.

## Reality: Get Your Hindsight In Early

In 2009, the Red Brick Building (RBB) was squatted by an eclectic crew (once again involving Mr Black), and thereby saved from the wrecking ball. Chapter 7 News reported locals saying that SWERDA were trying 'to demolish as much as possible on the site so that they can offer oven-ready brownfield sites to their friends in the development industry.'



Heritage meets flat-pack supermarket. Other off-the-shelf developments on the site include Tesco, Premier Inn, and Screwfix.

The community coalition which evolved out of the squat (an epic tale in itself) was eventually given the RBB by the doomed quango after much convincing that local people could be trusted with at least a small chunk of their own pie.

And thus did this regeneration pantomime play out. Squandered public money, dodgy land deals, and the world's most expensive round-about – surely the local tourist office should make more of this (*below*). Dreams, schemes, fantasies, heroes, villains, and all and everything in between. Out of all this human and political rubble, two sizeable community or 'alternative' elements have survived the conversion to Boxville. Two dames, who the townsfolk either cheer, boo, or ignore. Both standing somewhere near the crossroads, futures uncertain as befits these strange and stressful times.

### Legions Pull Out

The RBB (*above*) is now a community building owned communally and run commercially. On its facade are the words Community, Arts, Education and Enterprise.

Many see the project as 'flying the flag for local self-sufficiency'. Up to a point this is true. The building does generate income. It gets rent from groovy office, studio, catering, and event space, and co-runs a programme of, mostly music-based, entertainment; these are often very well attended and of high quality. A Friday youth club is also very popular. However, it has also received grant money (upon which it has relied to pay staff wages for nearly three years) and this is now coming to an end. The flag will now need to be flown even higher – and perhaps repaired, redesigned, or even re-made.

There are also questions around what self-sufficiency model has been, or should be, adopted. Either way, the people must once

again fend totally for themselves – with no help from Rome. Who will bring the required energy, action, and enjoyment to the project remains to be seen. An old adage aptly quoted for this article by eco-builder Robin Howell, who worked on

the project in the early phase of reconstruction, may offer some counsel:

"If you want to build a path, first let the people walk it."

### Zigzag: Fragments Of The Tribe

The punkier Zigzag building (*below*) is more in step with this 'organic' approach, though its modus operandi may appear more chaotic than at the sensible neighbour next door. Zigzag is privately owned by Chris Black, who bought it from the aforementioned developer for considerably more than £1. Black is very clear that this means Zigzag need not answer to 'the community' or to shareholders in the same way that RBB does. But it is still a thing which functions for the – or a – community. It is shanty, less defined, but communal in a way that the Red Brick is not.

At the heart of Zigzag is the kitchen. Meals can be cooked and shared by volunteers.

Beyond that are spaces for performance art, intriguingly arranged industrial sculpture parks, workshops, and a huge open space at the top where one may confidently proclaim (as they did in May 68) 'L'imagination prend pouvoir'. People are indeed trying to figure out where to put the path by walking the terrain first. It may not be obvious what it is, but something different, something cultural, is being attempted.

### Look Behind You!

A splendid garden (*overleaf*) connects the two worlds; gently proclaiming a deeper, underlying purpose – more soulful than the acres of Morlands thus far 'regenerated' with tarmac.





There are clearly things that Zigzag does that could work at the Red Brick, and vice-versa. Things that both do well, and things that both do badly or not at all. After some spleen venting at the RBB AGM in Feb 2017, where loud objections about the ethos and management of the RBB were raised by some Zigzag folks, peace has broken out. Of course tension can be creative. If the two groups can engage constructively, this could be a very positive thing. Equally it may be healthy to have entities with different visions that rub along but don't necessarily work together.



There is another long established community project round the corner from both buildings, called Bridie's Yard. For many years there has been a weekly food co-op there, alongside a friendly little event space, and small workshops to rent. Feed Avalon are based there; a community food organisation that either of the two bigger beasts around the corner might do well to work with, replicate or even house. It runs all kinds of interesting courses, from fermenting cabbage to mushroom cultivation, and in its wider role works to 'optimise local food resilience'. The best young (as in not fully fermented) organic, bioregional kimchi I have ever eaten was made there. I still dream about it sometimes, never quite getting to the jar.

## Communities And Granfalloon

Communities are curious entities, made up of beguiling things called people. Kurt Vonnegut mused (loosely) on such things in his comic sci-fi novel *Cat's Cradle*. In it, a fictional religion called *Bokononism* unravels the threads of life and organises them into a coherent system. People you meet in your life, and have some meaningful relationship with, are said to be part of your *karass*. A more or less functioning community can form a *karass*; but here's the catch – there are also *false karasses*, known as *granfalloon*:

'a group of people who imagine they have a connection that does not really exist.'<sup>1</sup>

One way to check that you are not in a *granfalloon* is to make sure that your *wampeter* is functioning correctly. A *wampeter* is the central theme or purpose of a *karass*. A *karass* generally has one *wampeter* that it revolves around, but there can be two if one is shifting out of focus (waning) and a new one is coming in as the central theme (waxing).



Interestingly the *karass* pictured in the window to the right seems united around a *wampeter* of food and industry. Perhaps the moral from Vonnegut is that your *karass* need not be too ambitious and all encompassing but neither should it be a *granfalloon*.

### Dream It. Make It. Share It.

Of course, the reason any of these buildings exist was the need to keep feet warm and comfortable. Manufacturing was a powerful focus around which the original Morlands 'community' was built. For many this also represents the future of the RBB. All of the big schemes for community-led initiatives on the Morlands site have put 'making stuff' at the heart of their vision. This creates more sustainable wealth and arguably more meaningful livelihoods than, say, jobs in retail.

Another proposal long ago rejected by SWERDA was a partnership with Bristol University Technology Hub. Such ideas are still favoured by many as the way to go for the largest section of the RBB – the still derelict building C (*above*), twice the size of the currently occupied part – but, faced with the massive financial challenge of renovating it, time is running out. Many with deep and long standing connections to the project now believe that people power should once again take centre stage. The old model of 'rent to repair' may be the only viable way to save the crumbling edifice. Entrepreneurs take risks, say the proponents of this approach, let those with that spirit and drive do so here.

### Common Ground

Finally, back to that inspirational garden. There are several highly productive organic farms nearby, and obvious potential for an amazing community-run cafe / dairy / People's University of Fermentation. A cosmically stinky Glastonbury tofu (or Somerset Roquefort) could be the thing that future grandmothers ask their grandsons to pick up from the factory shop. Or it could be slippers again, who knows.

1 A *grandfalloon* and other Bokononistic terms require slightly more explanation than space in this article permits. The definitions I have quoted are from Wikipedia (itself part giant *karass*, part *granfalloon*). In Vonnegut's own words: 'A *wampeter* is an object around which the lives of many otherwise unrelated people may revolve. The Holy Grail would be a case in point. *Foma* are harmless untruths, intended to comfort simple souls. An example: "Prosperity is just around the corner." A *granfalloon* is a proud and meaningless association of human beings.' Further information can be gleaned from *Wampeters, Foma & Granfalloons*, a collection of essays, reviews, travel accounts, and human interest stories written by Kurt Vonnegut from c. 1966–1974.



Above: People's imaginings on a facade of derelict Building C (the final and most difficult section of the RBB renovation).



People and plant power. Left: an activist scopes out a Morlands building for potential occupation in 2002.



The Morlands skate park. Local kids campaigned hard for this facility. Teenagers were also involved in the RBB squat.