

Incredible Edible Todmorden: Eating the s

The Yorkshire village of Todmorden has taken local food to heart – and to the street. The planting of food crops at forty public locations throughout the village offer locals, and visitors, the chance to pick their own fresh fruit and vegetables, and it's all free. From the local police station to the cemetery, from the health centre to the elderly care home (with raised garden beds at wheelchair height), in tubs on the street and in plots dug by the canal, Todmorden is embracing “local edible” with a passion.

Text and photos: John Paull

Todmorden has a population of 17,000. It is not immediately obvious to a visitor what there is to recommend the town – it's not the climate, there is no coast, manufacturing departed long ago, and as quaint and pretty English

Fred Hunt has turned a barren roadside corner into a productive mini-market garden.



villages go, it is probably not in the top one thousand. Nevertheless, Todmorden is now talking up “vegetable tourism”. It is a destination where visitors can see just what can happen when a group of dedicated local people decide to “liberate” public spaces and repurpose them for growing food. It is a curiosity, but, just maybe, it's the future. The *Incredible Edible Todmorden* movement is turning public open spaces into edible nooks.

Open source food Internet users are by now familiar with open source newspapers, journals, and software which are free at the point of consumption, but the idea of open source food took some time to catch on in Todmorden. The concept of picking and eating something that someone else had planted was a novel idea, and it took two years to catch on.

Pam Warhurst, co-founder and champion advocate of *Incredible Edible Todmorden*, describes the public space food plantings as “propaganda gardens” – something to use as a tangible expression of a set of bigger ideas – including growing local, eating local and fresh, eating seasonal, and knowing the provenance of food. She sees these as “Trojan horses” which can carry bigger ideas into the consciousness of a town – and beyond.

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The Incredible Edible Todmorden street-front garden outside the local Community College.

The project began in 2008 with an idea, a name, and a public meeting which sixty people attended. United by a common language of food, this grass-roots project has grown and now claims the involvement of more than one third of Todmorden's residents and some support from the local authorities.

As Pam Warhurst says, "We're bored to death and cynical about strategies and policies and rhetoric", so the essence of the Todmorden project is simple: "do something, take action". The project has appropriated neglected verges, and spaces around halls, council buildings, the canal, and the local railway station, for food growing.

The *Incredible Edible Todmorden* project has a participatory vision of "three spinning plates" – community, education and business. Each of the three are now involved. All the local schools now grow food. Businesses have donated goods and services, some shops have planter boxes, local farmers are now raising more free range chickens and eggs, they are marketing their produce as "local", and a local cheese has emerged. As Mary Clear, one of the co-founders, explains, local farmers benefit from the developing market for their local and specialist produce.

The keys to success The project began with no funding, just some "sweat equity" from participants. It did have two vigorous champions, co-founders Pam Warhurst and Mary Clear, and a team of perhaps a dozen strongly committed advocates who engaged in planting and growing, community engagement, producing newsletters and managing the website. Thirdly, there is a local paper, the *Todmorden News*, which has published many stories on the actions and vision of *Incredible Edible Todmorden*. Fourthly, food is a unifying theme ("if you eat you're in"); the common language of food cuts across barriers of culture, race, class and age. Fifthly, there has been an emphasis on action, replication and visibility – with promi-

nent propaganda gardens and associated signage reinforcing the *Incredible Edible Todmorden* "brand" and explaining the crops and the idea.

Incredible Edible Todmorden is also finding a fertile social milieu in twenty-first century Britain. As the country gets fatter and poorer, as the recession and now "Austerity Britain" begin to bite, and the reality hits home that the "greatness" of Great Britain is fading and seems unlikely to return, *Incredible Edible Todmorden* opens discussions about perennial questions such as how we feed Britain, and whether Britain can feed itself.

Bit by bit Todmorden is exploring these very questions one vegetable at a time. It claims to have spawned copy-cat projects in England, Ireland, Spain and Canada, so perhaps the *Incredible Edible Todmorden* meme is contagious. As Mary Clear sums it up: "We are an action group with no staff, just committed volunteers... a measure of our success is that there are now at least twenty other 'Incredible Edibles'".

Now, with a successful application to the Lottery Fund, *Incredible Edible Todmorden* has more than £ 500,000 to expand its vision of local food, with plans for a demonstration project including aquaponics, orchards, bees, and an "edible learning landscape".

Incredible Edible Todmorden is putting the otherwise unremarkable Todmorden on the map. It puts local food on the plate and successfully injects the twin issues of food and localism into the agendas of businesses, farmers, schools, and the community. And, if it works in Todmorden, why not elsewhere?

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