



# A farm for people joins RBST network

**Just a year after returning to Mudchute, Farm Manager – and RBST Board member – Tom Davis has achieved his goal of securing RBST Approved Conservation Farm Park status for this unique city farm. Mudchute’s livestock focuses on rare breeds but describing his role, Tom says: “I farm people.”**

Mudchute City Farm sits on 32-acres of countryside on the Isle of Dogs with a backdrop of Canary Wharf and the burgeoning city towers that are fast dwarfing that icon of dockland regeneration. Like all city farms, its activities are multifaceted and community involvement and service is at its heart.

Its sheer size makes it unique in the city farm world and it is, in fact, the largest city farm in Europe. It is a community charity, with a working farm, an equestrian centre, a children’s nursery and a wide range of education activities plus a popular café. The farm is open every day and admission is free of charge.

The range of native breeding stock at Mudchute is impressive. The farm has Oxford Down, Whitefaced Woodland, Southdown and Jacob sheep, Dexter cattle, Tamworth, Large Black and, the most recent addition, Middle White pigs – the Middle White appropriate as it was once known as the London porker. Goats include Golden Guernseys, with Bagots on the waiting list, and there is a wide range of poultry which includes Aylesbury and Exhibition Rouen ducks, Dark Dorking and Indian Game chickens plus others.

As Farm Manager at Mudchute, Tom is well and truly immersed in the world of city farms. Born and raised on a council estate in

Battersea, visits to city farms were the inspiration for his future career. He first became Farm Manager at Mudchute at the age of 18 in 2004 and spent five years there. He set up the farm park at Hatfield House and before returning to Mudchute was at Vauxhall City Farm. On a personal level, he started showing poultry and waterfowl at the age of 16. He progressed into sheep when on a purchasing trip for donkeys for Mudchute. He met Geoff and Briony Wild who had both kept many different rare breeds and during conversation, he mentioned that he would like to get some sheep to contrast with the farm’s Oxford Downs. This led to the purchase of six Whitefaced Woodlands, whose descendants formed part of Tom’s own small flock – which he has prefaced ‘Gypsy’ because they had no fixed farm address!

Meeting the Wilds also introduced Tom to the world of showing and walking off with prizes at his first-ever show “solidified the showing bug”. Showing also formed the basis for many strong friendships and the involvement with RBST. Tom met David Walton, who was judging at that first show, and went on to meet former Trustee Viki Mills and Bryan Coventry, with whom he now runs the sheep section of the Lambeth Show. Showing evolved into judging and the many friendships he formed got Tom more closely involved with RBST, culminating in his election to the Board last year, where he feels he can play a role representing city farms and addressing a younger audience.

Describing his return to Mudchute, Tom says: “Mudchute gets under your skin. It’s a magical place to work and coming back here was like coming home.” Asked if he has ever considered moving out into rural farming, Tom says: “I am passionate about teaching people about rare breeds and I don’t think I can do that in the middle of a field, in the middle of nowhere!”

Tom also believes that a city farm like Mudchute can give rare breeds the profile they deserve. Ark readers will have seen Tom grazing sheep in The Green Park in the last issue and other media opportunities have included teaching recording artist Nicole Scherzinger to milk a Golden Guernsey live on radio: “This all helps give rare breeds the publicity they deserve.”

Most important, however, are the people who pass through Mudchute, particularly the younger generation. The farm sees an average of 45,000 schoolchildren each year, and there is a wide range of opportunities for local schools to use the facilities. There is a waiting list for the on-site nursery because of the scope it offers for outdoor activities and Mudchute has its own Young Farmers’ Club.

Split into two age groups which each meet once a week, the Young Farmers come from an after-school group. They start at the age of 6 or 7 and continue up to 13 with around 12 to 15 youngsters across the two groups. They get involved in all the farm activities and for some, it





has proved a turning point in their lives.

Mudchute also offers work experience opportunities and has funding for an apprenticeship. Mark Ballard, whose fundraising efforts you can read about on page 9, started at Mudchute at 15 and, when Tom saw an interest, he encouraged him to take on an apprenticeship. Now with considerable experience under his belt, Mark has just completed a degree in International Agriculture and, while working elsewhere, still volunteers at Mudchute. Reece Heaven is another whose experience at Mudchute has influenced his life choices. Reece became interested after his younger brother started to volunteer and the experience brought him out of his shell. He has since worked at Hatfield and Vauxhall City farm and is now stockman at Mudchute and has thrown himself into showing.

Describing experiences such as this, Tom says: "A good stockman is born, never made, and when I see someone with a natural connection, I do my best to encourage it. I've only had a tiny, tiny part to play in Mark and Reece's stories and I wouldn't claim to have helped anyone – I'm a facilitator and try to turn sparks into bonfires. I farm people. It's the reason we are here and when you see the impact the farm can have on people with varying needs, you understand how important it is."

One example Tom gives is of a little girl who had been mute for most of her life. She started visiting at lambing time and seeing her excitement, the Mudchute team showed her how to bottle feed. Later, showing her parents around, she reached the pen where "her" lambs were, pointed and said "Sheep." Tom says: "Her parents were overwhelmed and that was one of the most humbling experiences I have ever had."

Older people too benefit from the interaction with both people and animals that Mudchute offers the local community. Tom says: "We are very embedded in the local community. There are Friends of Mudchute, which gives the community a sense of empowerment. They put money up to purchase breeding stock and help keep a general eye on the farm. For example, the Friends produced a rota for bonfire night. We need a place in the heart of the local community – the farm

is open 24/7 but when I go home, I know that there are eyes and ears taking care of the place."

Explaining why becoming part of the RBST network was important when he returned to Mudchute, Tom says: "Because of its size. Membership of the network puts us in the same place as farm parks like Tatton and Temple Newsam and gives us the opportunity to interface with their stock experts. We can house breeding males, so I felt that if we became part of the network, we should aim for conservation status.

"I also felt that it matters because of my own personal experience with RBST. It's created so many friendships and it crosses boundaries. It's exactly like a city farm – no discrimination and open to all to help out. And it's nice that people have realised that a farm in the middle of London can have good quality livestock."



# The history of Mudchute

**The Mudchute Park & Farm was established by the local island community and was originally a piece of land created from the spoil of construction from dredging Millwall Dock, hence the name: mud was channelled through chutes and dumped on the land.**

During World War II, Mudchute was part of the Home Front, helping defend London and its docks against bombing by housing a set of anti-aircraft – ack-ack – guns. Three of the four concrete gun sites now act as enclosures for livestock, but with the assistance of Heritage Lottery funding, one, together with gun,

has been restored to create an exhibition of Mudchute in the Blitz.

Left untouched for decades, Mudchute became a hidden natural wilderness but was earmarked in 1974 by the Greater London Council for a high-rise estate. The resulting public campaign against these plans secured it as the 'People's Park' for the area. In 1977, the Mudchute Association was formed, farm animals and horses were introduced, and plants and trees were planted by volunteers and corporate teams. The educational potential was recognised and local schools were encouraged to study the natural world on

their doorsteps. A registered charity, the Association is governed by a Board of 15 trustees, who are all local people and represent the full range of interests of the local community.

