

MUCH Newsletter Autumn 2023

Sustainable Living for Over 50s **Building A Community for Our Futures**



Now that autumn has arrived here in Manchester with misty mornings and the changing colours, we've been remembering our 'holidays'. With things a little quiet on our own cohousing project we thought we'd tell you about a couple of them, one made possible through an international virtual community, and another by a new cohousing community.

Our grand rail trip

by Pam, MUCH member

“Servas International is an international, non-profit, non-governmental federation of national Servas groups, encompassing an international network of hosts and travellers. The purpose of the network is to help build world peace, goodwill and understanding by providing opportunities for personal contacts among people of different cultures, backgrounds and nationalities.”

In April and May, my partner Lydia and I travelled by Inter-rail through France, Sardinia, Northern Italy, Switzerland, and France once more, before returning to Manchester.

The ferries to and from Sardinia provided fixed dates around which to plan our travel and contact potential SERVAS hosts.

MUCH Newsletter Autumn 2023

The new SERVAS website makes searching for hosts and provision of our letters of introduction very easy. Having looked at the rail map, we decided to stay in Lille, Aix -en-Provence and Toulon on our way outwards to Sardinia.

We were very fortunate to be accepted by everyone we contacted. We were made welcome by three hosts on the way down through France and one in Italy, Fabien and Dominique in Lille, Yves in Aix-en-Provence, Anne and Mikael in Toulon, Rosella in Genoa, Fred and Merlin in Paris.

We also revisited good friends who formerly lived in Lyons, and hosted us there, but who now live in Paris.

Our return journey took us to Genoa. From there we stayed in youth hostels and one hotel (the luxury!) in Switzerland before travelling to Paris and then back to the UK.

Highlights:

Trade unionists demonstrating in Lille. Afternoon tea and cake with Fabien at Le Wilderie, Rue St Etienne.

Tapestry Museum in Aix featuring Don Quixote and Sancho Panza, plus the Detective comics exhibition. Also, a bus trip to the immense Barrage de Bimont (a dam). Meeting refugees from Ukraine on the bus.

Meeting Mikael as a day host in Toulon, having realised that he is a good friend of our host Anne. All four of us taking a day trip by boat across the harbour to Les Sablettes for lunch together. On the day we were scheduled to leave, sharing a wedding anniversary lunch. Being delivered safely to our ferry.



Being escorted through the medieval centre of Genoa by Rosella. Also being taken to the celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Centre Against Violence Against Women in the magnificent surroundings of the Municipio building. I speak only a little Italian but listening and observing allowed me to get the gist. Volunteers, hard work, battles, sponsors. Going with Rosella to the Cineclub Fritz Lang to see the film *Los Lobos*, in Spanish, with Italian subtitles, with some English and some Chinese. Watch out for this film if you can.

Walking with Fred around urban gardens and small parks, enjoying the greening of the arrondissement, part of the carbon reduction plans for Paris.

MUCH Newsletter Autumn 2023

We were away for a month, all told, staying with our friend Francesca for two weeks in southwest Sardinia.

Our travels showed us the best of SERVAS – welcome, hospitality, open-ness, sharing, kindness, political and social engagement.

Since our return to Manchester, we have hosted Sophie from Kansas City, USA and Daniela and Nazzareno from Italy.

We are appreciating the small and large kindnesses of our hosts on our Grand Rail Trip and hope that we have been able to reciprocate and ease guests' travels through the UK.

Volunteering in Dorset

by Sian, MUCH member

More than half of the Bridport Cohousing residents in Dorset have now moved into their new homes at Hazelmead. Unfortunately, due to construction cost increases, they were unable to build the Common House as planned. As a fundamental element of cohousing they had to find an alternative way of building this space...

... which was to adopt [A Radical Approach to Building our Common House](#). This approach involved design studio Common Practice and the School of Natural Building (SNaB), training courses, volunteering opportunities and an educational and practical weekend festival.



I got in touch to ask whether I would be able to contribute as a volunteer, and attend the weekend 'BuildFest'. The answer was yes, so at the end of September I headed to the south coast on my adventure.

MUCH Newsletter Autumn 2023

A massive dairy shed on a local farm has been converted into a sustainable building workshop, and the Saturday BuildFest workshops were held here. We learnt that they will be using local clay, either from the cohousing site or from the farm, to make clay plaster for the internal walls. We prepared clay plasters using different recipes to see which ratio of the local clays to sand and straw worked best. We also pounded and sieved lumps of clay for plastering – an ongoing and laborious task for the cohousing community.

In the afternoon we learnt how to apply lime slip onto clay tiles and use natural pigments to decorate the tiles. We each decorated a tile or two to reflect the local area, and the tiles will be incorporated into the external render of the Common House.

That evening a local street food van arrived, a fire was lit in the top field, and a band arrived to provide entertainment in a marquee. This was the first big event at Hazelmead and many of the residents joined in the fun, with children toasting a *lot* of marshmallows on the fire and all ages dancing in the marquee.

On Sunday morning residents, trainees, volunteers and visitors assembled in the marquee for a guest panel discussion on natural materials, affordable construction and community housing. I learnt that some local farmers are piloting the reintroduction of hemp as a crop – Bridport was once well known for rope making, and hemp is a sustainable material with many uses. Later that day, after the festival was over I walked into the historic town of Bridport and saw the long wide streets where the ropes were once laid out.

I put on PPE on Monday morning and headed down to the Common House. By now the foundations were in place, as was the timber frame structure made of beautiful pink tinged Douglas Fir and covered with tarpaulins. The floor was boarded out using Oriented Strand Board (made from scraps of timber) and the walls had been 'raised' by the trainees the previous week to a height of 8ft or so. One job was to 'dress' straw bales (to make them more rectangular), another was to sweep loose straw for reuse as stuffing - extra straw which we stuffed into the gaps between bales in the walls. I also helped straighten one of the walls with a spirit level and a large home made wooden mallet known as a 'persuader'. I watched the bales being compressed using boards, props and hand held hydraulic jacks to allow the top layer of bales to be eased into the gap below the box frame. After two and a half days manual work I was pretty tired but I thoroughly enjoyed the experience, especially the experimentation and creative solutions employed.



I was made to feel very welcome by everyone: Caz who was organising the volunteers (and who kept in touch with me as I was getting lost in Somerset on my drive down); the family

MUCH Newsletter Autumn 2023

who let me stay in their home while they were away on holiday; Bee and Sally who invited me to eat with them and Derek who invited me around for a chat and a cuppa - I had some lovely conversations with all of them. I also chatted with other friendly residents, trainees, volunteers and people who came for the weekend festival, all with different life experiences and interests, but all committed to living lightly, and learning more about cohousing.



It was a wonderful opportunity to stay in cohousing and to get my hands dirty! I look forward to a return visit in future to see the finished Common House being enjoyed by the residents.

Cohousing in the news

Cohousing was discussed in mainstream newspapers and on TV several times in August. Thanks to our contacts for letting us know about these media items, which are still available:

- [Woman's Hour: Loneliness](#) (BBC Sounds from 2m 30s 3rd Aug 2023)
- ['We have brothers, sons, lovers – but they can't live here!' The happy home shared by 26 women](#) (Guardian 24th Aug 2023)
- [Woman's Hour: Communal Living](#) (BBC Sounds from 46m 30s Fri 25 Aug 2023)
- [Meet the Friends Who Built a Village Where They Can Grow Old Together](#) (The Times August 2023 – but unfortunately behind a paywall)

MUCH Newsletter Autumn 2023

We hope you've enjoyed this newsletter. Do get in touch if you'd like to know more about any of the content.

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