

Solheimar Eco Village, Iceland.

Whilst on holiday in Iceland we happened to drive past Solheimar Community. I had wanted to visit this place as one of the CVT Trustees is Chairman to this community, Petur Sveinbjarnason.

It is a very remote, rural community; however it lies within the so called Golden Circle, which is the beaten track for tourist seeing the classic Icelandic sights, geysers, rift valleys etc. so about 30,000 visitor pass through the village each year, often to stay in their guest house, and the village features on many tourist web sites and brochures.

Solheimar started in a similar way and at a similar time to the Camphill movement. The founding lady kept ties with the Anthroposophical movement and applied it to caring for children in need.

You can walk around the village in about 10-15 minutes so it is much smaller and more compact than Botton. There are around 100 people living there, of which 45 have learning disabilities.

The English language web site gives a good description of the place. It seems the emphasis today is more on the sustainability and environmental issues than anything else, with a new building dedicated to this. Solheimar has the great advantage of having geo thermal water to heat the buildings and greenhouses; apart from that, I couldn't really see any difference in the element of sustainability and environmentally friendly ethos that we have had at Botton.

<http://www.solheimar.is/en/>

From the web page, one sees that the various shops etc are all run as Social Enterprises; the care to the disabled is delivered by carers who come in; there is no shared living or co-worker model. Meals are eaten in a central canteen, (or presumably in the independent living units if one chooses). There is a programme for a small number of prisoners and unemployed people to live and work there

We spent about 3 hours there, and with English, French and Norwegian, could chat to quite a few people, both employees and young volunteers from around Europe, who were all very friendly. We visited the eco centre, the shop, a beautiful and very large café, extensive green houses for growing organic produce, a bakery and we had a quick look into the wood work shop and candle making workshop. The facilities were all marvellous. There are several guest houses, one for people who have been sick. I talked to a chatty lady who was staying there for a week's holiday; and I asked if the learning disabled helped out there, as she said there were many volunteers working in the house, but she told me that the disabled people lived in the "other part of the community".

What surprised us was how few learning disabled people we actually saw, maybe about 4 in total. At lunch time there were about 20 people eating in the canteen, mostly young volunteers. Maybe there was a day outing arranged that day, although no one mentioned it. There was no one in the wood work or candle making shop and no one walking to and fro before and after the lunch break.

The other thing that I found strange was that there are very few learning disabled who actually work in the social enterprises; so in the extensive green houses, there are only 2 villagers working there, in the bakery only 1. None work in the shop, the café or the guest houses as it is "too much pressure for them". I was told that the workshops provide

meaningful work for the disabled. Maybe more work in the forestry section, I didn't ask about that.

This looks as if Social Enterprises become too focussed on output and money rather than being a place where less able people can work alongside more abled, contributing to the community in growing or preparing foods etc. In fact this is the case at Loch Arthur, in their beautiful shop and café; sadly it is too successful and commercial for the less able to work "up front". Whereas, I believe at Newton Dee, they stopped taking outside orders for bread at one point as it was getting too much for their preferred pace of work.

My impression was that Solheimar is a place that has diversified greatly, sustainability and tourism being a very important part of their mission, and that one part of this diversification is care and workshop provision for some learning disabled adults. It was hard to say exactly who the community was for. I did not get the feeling that I have always had at Botton that the village belongs to the learning disabled; it is their home, their place of work and where they all play an active part in running the community.

Is this perhaps the model that CVT have in mind for Botton? The first of the 5 managers at Botton talked for 2 hours to us about developing the 600 acres, with a hotel, spa and goodness knows what.

I wonder if Mr Sveinbjarnason is aware that at the CVT communities, some new carers sometimes can't even cook a meal, let alone a healthy one, and that readymade meals are the vogue. The meaningful work done on the land has had to be stopped in many cases as the Co-workers are no longer allowed to work there, or have left, so the land either lies fallow or is worked by employees who have no experience in organic farming. The wood burner in Stormy Hall needs an overhaul but it is considered too expensive to do, so instead of heating house and water with free wood from the Botton Estate, they have to use the emergency gas system. And as for recycling, look at the dustbins or read the Botton News to see where that is going these days!

Jackie Riis-Johannessen, 6.7.15