Changing lives: how park life helped Matt, Pat and

Volunteering at HLF-supported Burslem Park in the Potteries helped Matt, Tom and Patricia to find purpose, make friends and transform the park.

Burslem Park in the Potteries, Stoke-on-Trent, was restored in 2012 with a grant of £2.19million from HLF. Since then, visitors to the Grade II listed Victorian park have increased by nearly 50%.

But the restoration was only the beginning of the story. Thanks to National Lottery players, a team of volunteers now keep the park pristine and undertake a variety of gardening and maintenance tasks.

“Everyone is equal here and we know each other’s strengths and weaknesses,” says volunteer Matt Bateman. “It’s teamwork.”

Matt and his friend Tom Emery both have mild learning difficulties and are part of the core volunteer team, planting bulbs, weeding the borders and litter picking. They didn’t know each other before they volunteered but they are now firm friends who enjoy a bit of friendly football banter – Tom supports Port Vale while Matt is a Stoke City fan.

A new allotment in the park provides a sustainable project to utilise their skills. They grow potatoes, vegetables and summer fruits, which are made into hearty meals and tasty puddings in the park’s new Pavilion Café. The profits are then used to buy seeds, creating a virtuous cycle.

“Digging the allotment was hard work – it was all concrete and rubble underneath. That’s why I’ve got grey in my beard,” laughs Matt.

> “I love coming here. I don’t mind getting muddy and it’s better than sitting in the house feeling bored.”
>
> – Tom Emery

Tom provides the muscle and is happy to dig. “We keep going even when it’s wet and muddy,” he says. “I love coming here. I don’t mind getting muddy and it’s better than sitting in the house feeling bored.”

“HLF has been immensely supportive about keeping the volunteers engaged,” says Tom Pine, park liaison officer for the Burslem Park project. “Our volunteers take great pride in the work they do for the community. They act as a bridge between the park management and the families, dogwalkers and other park users, chatting with them and pointing out different features.”

Restoring the park

Not everyone is able to dig and weed, of course. When retired secretary Patricia Roberts was knocked down by a car six years ago, she felt her active life had ended. Her injuries mean she has to use a crutch and she still can’t walk far, but she was able to start helping out in the Pavilion Café.

> “Everyone is equal here and we know each other’s strengths and weaknesses. It’s teamwork.” – Matt Bateman

“Volunteering has changed my life drastically,” says Pat, who grew up right opposite the park. “I have lots of lovely memories of the park and it’s absolutely brilliant to see it back to its former glory.”

New planting has transformed the jaded formal beds into colourful borders with drifts of spring and summer bulbs and perennials such as delphiniums, verbascum and chamomile.

“Victorian landscape designers tended to choose trees and shrubs such as rhodendrons which over time made the park dense and dark,” explains Pine. “But this has been cleared and local people now have free access to a high quality green space right on their doorstep. The National Lottery players of Stoke-on-Trent and beyond should feel proud that they’ve made this possible."

The restoration work brought the volunteers and the Friends’ group together. As the Burslem Park Partnership, they work with Stoke-on-Trent City Council to keep the park vibrant with seasonal colour and enjoyable activities including jazz on the bandstand and weddings. The volunteers also post the park newsletters through local letterboxes.

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Matt Bateman gets to work Simon Hadley Photography

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