



Growth and Change at Quaker Acres

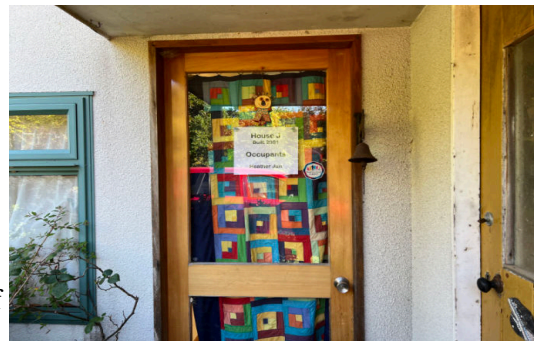
BY HEATHER JAN

When I first attended a work-gathering at Quaker Acres with my five children, I saw three houses being built in a rural setting with few trees and eroding sandhills. We took shelter from a leaking tent in the workshop which was financed by the first settlers and the only communal building at that time. When I announced at my Christchurch Meeting that I felt drawn to communal living, the response was “That’s like marriage. Do you really want to marry those people?” The answer was Yes. I knew all those people from Summer Gatherings and admired their vision and hard work.

In 1979, I moved with my three school age children into the Shared House, the only house not financed by settlers and built for those of more limited means to rent. By then four of the younger settlers with the guidance of a retired Quaker farmer had taken over the formerly leased out farmland and cared for sheep and bobby calves. The sand hills were now cloaked with baby pine trees and many other trees were being planted. The Garden of Peace was being established with an island in the middle of the pond as a sanctuary for mother ducks and their babies.

Our shared meals were held in the workshop while we watched the common room with attached library donated by a settler take shape. Settlers then used their various talents to raise money to equip the kitchen. Next came the Sleeping House to house the many Quakers flocking to seminars. As sewerage was managed by septic tank (with many red alerts when large seminars were held) the settlement was limited to eight houses. It was only when the sewage system was extended along our side of the road that the settlement could expand and a ninth house was built. In 1987 I left the settlement to establish myself in the house market as it was not possible at that time to get a mortgage to buy or build as you did not own the land. I left an inspired and hard-working community still developing in a rural setting with everyone involved.

When I returned in 1999 with enough money to build mortgage free, it was a very different scene. There were now fourteen dwellings with the Shared House now having been split in two. The units had been built as some Quakers as they aged found the Sleeping House too spartan. The flat was available for prospective settlers but sometimes with no Quakers applying it was necessary to rent to non-involved people. The pioneering period was over, we were into maintaining the vision and for newcomers that meant maintaining someone else’s vision, not nearly so exciting. The thing that seemed to draw new people, especially non-Quakers, was the land which was flourishing. The pine trees were reaching maturity soon to be replaced with a more permanent canopy of mainly native trees. Permaculture was taking centre stage. Australian



Heather Jan’s front door

Quaker Ro Morrow, a leader in this field, spent time with us. We found the original settlers knew what they were doing. No radical change was needed, just further development which included the food forest.

There are now seventeen dwellings and all residents are involved to varying degrees. There is the wonderful Quiet Room at our centre raised in one weekend with much joy. Where there were once bare sandhills, then pine trees, there is now a QE II Covenant area of native trees. I rejoice in events where we reach out to others and share their enjoyment of this unique rural sanctuary now surrounded by urban houses, but we are an overstretched and ageing workforce with 10 Quakers, half of them over eighty.

Of particular joy at the 50 Years celebration was the presence of children and grandchildren of early settlers and associates bringing with them fond memories.

The original vision was for a seminar centre. That has been achieved but, with an ageing Quaker population and the advent of zoom, demand is declining. A new vision is needed. My vision is for tiny houses in the hay field to meet the need for those with limited resources and an appetite for more communal living. But for that to happen we need younger energy. Maybe new young energy with its own vision should be my vision for the future.