

## Al Hilal – Green Space of the Month – October

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In the heart of ‘sunny’ Manchester, palm trees line the street and small children play safely in a paradise garden. At the Cheetham Al Hilal Community Project, the whole Muslim community has participated in an innovative project to improve the built and natural environment in a way which reflects the cultural diversity of the area. Female and male, young and old, everyone has contributed something to change this tiny plot from a waste ground into a rich resource for outdoor activities. Islamic elements of garden design lend the whole project a sense of integrity and make a powerful statement of presence to the wider world.



The Cheetham Al Hilal Community Project has been active since 1978 providing support to Muslim / Asian (predominantly Pakistani) people in the area and engaging in anti-racist and interfaith work. After a long struggle to establish themselves and secure funding, they moved to their current premises in 1982.

The centre now caters for all ages with activities such as the adult and toddler group, women's and men's groups, youth clubs for both girls and boys, supplementary education and mother tongue classes in English, Urdu and Arabic, training courses, recreation and leisure facilities, charity and cultural events, activities for disabled and elderly people, specialist and general advice and support. Although the centre now has a team of paid staff, many of the activities are still volunteer led.

The centre itself is in two parts, the original building and a newer, purpose built structure housing recreation and leisure facilities. In the heart of 'sunny' Manchester, very near to BEN's office in Cheetham Hill, the Al Hilal Centre, occupies a very prominent location at a fork in the road. A narrow triangle of land in front of the old building was formerly used as short cut by passers-by. According to a case study by Groundwork Manchester Salford and Trafford (MST), "the garden was previously neglected, overgrown and full of broken glass and rubbish. This created a danger to local people, portrayed a poor visual impression of the area, and did little to enhance the appearance of the well-maintained building."





But with help from BEN, Groundwork (MST), and the multi-agency Environment Working Group in Cheetham, Al Hilal have been able to completely transform this postage stamp of land from an eyesore into an attractive feature and a useful facility for the community.

The first phase of the project began to tackle the front garden in January 2003. Sandra Wong facilitates the Al Hilal Adult and Toddler group which meets here twice a week. This group is linked with the Sure Start programme and has among its aims the provision of quality learning environments to promote early learning and enjoyable play for babies and children up to the age of 4. Sandra met me to show me the new garden, of which the community are justifiably proud. She explained that being situated right on the main road, there was no safe outdoor space in which the children could play. So the first priority was to create a fenced off area, using funding from Voluntary Action Manchester, Community Chest, Manchester City Council Cas:h (Clean and Safe), Viridor Community Fund distributed by Red Rose Forest, Living Spaces and Cheetham and Broughton Single Regeneration Budget.

The whole community has been involved in contributing ideas for the different elements of site improvements. With consultation from the groups, one of Groundwork (MST)'s landscape architects designed the fencing. The pattern of the railings reflects an Islamic theme which complements the shape of the plot and ties in well with the style of the buildings. An iron/steel worker will hold workshops with the boys club in January and February to design and weld seating to match the fencing, for use by young and old. The girls club installed a wall, decorated with mosaic designs illustrating their wishes for peace and harmony and made using tiles donated by B&Q. Throughout the project, the Al Hilal user group has been consulted about each phase of development. New flower beds have been made and plants and shrubs have been planted. Most significantly, at the tip of this pointed garden, a stand of palm trees makes a powerful statement about the cultural diversity of the area.

When the garden was first opened, Sandra was clearly filled with delight to describe the sight of 100 little children out in the sunshine for first time. Boys aged 5-16 years from the supplementary school will volunteer to water the new garden regularly, using a hose pipe run through window. (At first, when they thought this duty would involve lifting heavy watering cans they seemed daunted, but the hose pipe makes this responsibility into an enjoyable activity to look forward to.)

The next steps include improvements to the community centre car park. Al Hilal has to accommodate lots of cars during the daily school run between 4.30-6.30pm. Al Hilal are really starting to think about how to make their project more environmentally sustainable. For instance, they already participate in a Muslim 'clothes for charity' scheme and have clothes banks outside the community centre. Sandra suggested that in order to address the litter problem they might consider installing some drinks can recycling bins.

In the longer term, a range of building improvements and extensions are envisaged. An additional row of palm trees has been put in along the side of the building and there are plans for more palm trees to be added at the back. Planting palm trees was initially suggested by BEN Development Worker Saleem Oppal. These are the first of a kind to appear in Manchester, and now other mosques and community groups are inspired and want to follow suit.



***Resources available:***

*BEN can help with an information sheet about what kinds of palm trees grow in the British climate.*

**Useful Contacts**

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