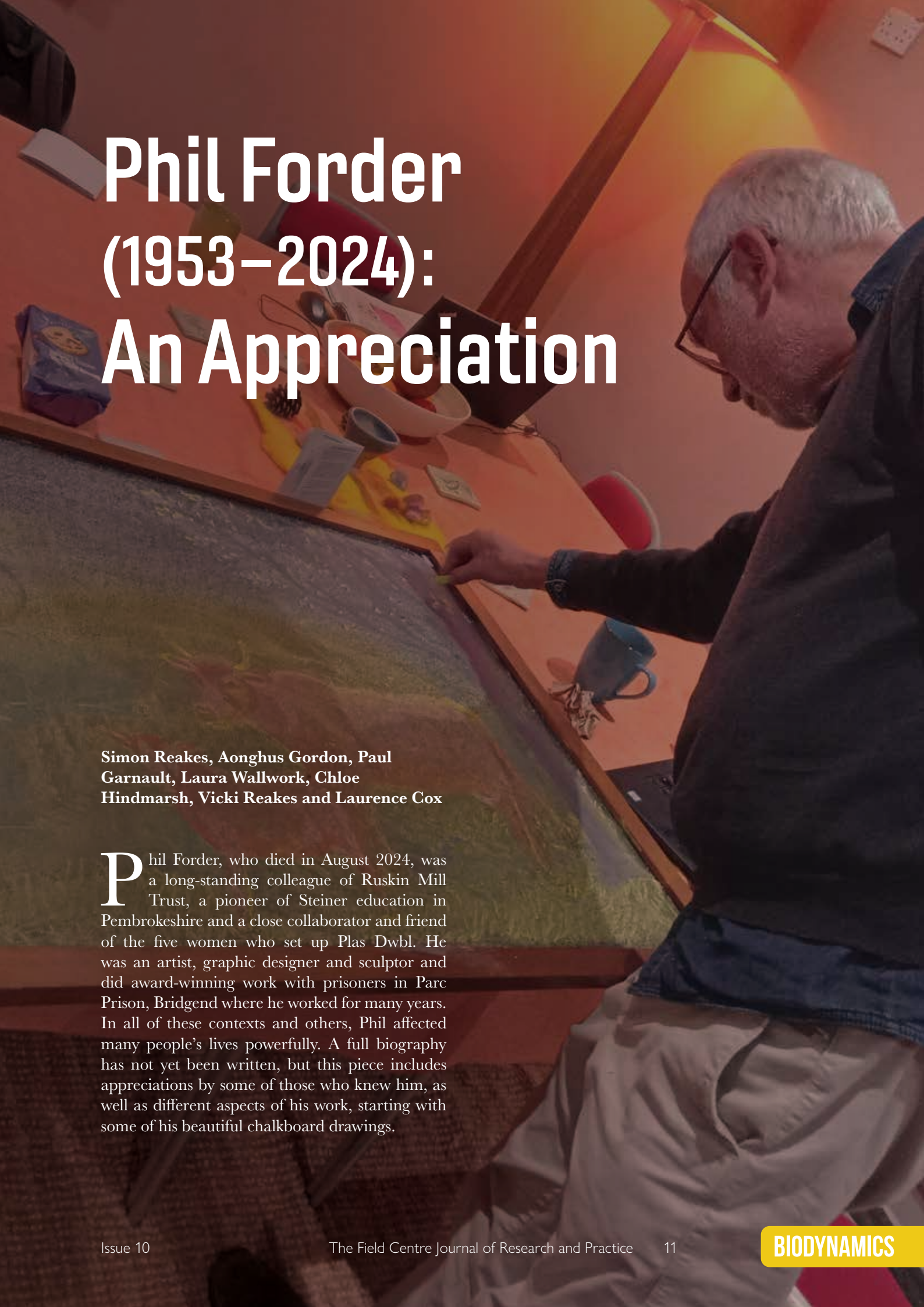


A photograph of an older man with white hair and glasses, wearing a dark blue shirt and light-colored trousers, leaning over a large chalkboard. He is using a piece of chalk to draw on the board. The chalkboard is covered in a large, abstract drawing with green and yellow tones. On the desk in front of him are various items: a blue mug, a small bowl, some papers, and a yellow object. The background is a warm, orange-toned wall.

Phil Forder (1953–2024): An Appreciation

**Simon Reakes, Aonghus Gordon, Paul
Garnault, Laura Wallwork, Chloe
Hindmarsh, Vicki Reakes and Laurence Cox**

Phil Forder, who died in August 2024, was a long-standing colleague of Ruskin Mill Trust, a pioneer of Steiner education in Pembrokeshire and a close collaborator and friend of the five women who set up Plas Dwbl. He was an artist, graphic designer and sculptor and did award-winning work with prisoners in Parc Prison, Bridgend where he worked for many years. In all of these contexts and others, Phil affected many people's lives powerfully. A full biography has not yet been written, but this piece includes appreciations by some of those who knew him, as well as different aspects of his work, starting with some of his beautiful chalkboard drawings.



Were the eye not sunlike,
How could we behold the light?



Chalkboard drawings were a key element that Phil brought to the Teaching in Specialist Steiner Garden School's course. For each session, Phil would produce a colourful, deeply meaningful drawing. Following the cycle of the seasons, Phil's expertly crafted but eminently accessible drawings conveyed ideas from Steiner education and its informing principles.



On seeing Phil's chalkboard (left), the following verse by Goethe came to mind:

"If the eye were not sun-like,
It could never see the sun;
If the power of God itself did not lie within us,
How could the divine enchant us?"¹

This idea from Goethe, beautifully and succinctly phrased, reflects a fundamental principle about perception and knowledge. What Goethe is expressing is the idea that we perceive or understand something because we share some essential quality with it. That is, there must be a resonant correspondence between the observer and the observed, the knower and the known. In the literal sense, Goethe is saying that our eyes must have something "sunlike" about them (the capacity to receive and process light) in order to perceive the sun's light. But he's also making a broader philosophical point: we can only recognise and understand what we already have some kinship with.

Goethe's concept of epistemic kinship derives from the third-century Neoplatonic philosopher Plotinus, who wrote in his *Enneads*: "Never did eye see the sun unless it had first become sunlike, and never can the soul have vision of the First Beauty unless itself be beautiful." This expressed Plotinus's mystical philosophy that understanding requires fundamental kinship between knower and known.

Goethe encountered Plotinus during the Neoplatonic revival among German Romantic thinkers in the 1780s–90s. However, he transformed Plotinus's mystical insight into something more scientific and poetic, applying this principle of kinship to his natural scientific work – especially colour theory – and to his understanding of perception and artistic creation. Goethe thus converted ancient spiritual wisdom into a comprehensive epistemology for understanding both natural phenomena and human knowledge production.

Although highly conversant with Goethe, Phil, being an artist, did not articulate his understanding of Goethe in a conceptual way. Instead, Phil's approach was to produce pictures to contemplate – pictures to empathically move in. As always, I am in awe of Phil Forder's artistic capacity to express this idea in such beautifully intelligible drawings. Watching Phil create his blackboard drawings and see them come to life remains a treasured memory, and I feel honoured to have worked alongside him as a colleague.

Simon Reakes, MSc
Head of Publishing
Senior Researcher

¹ Wäre nicht das Auge sonnenhaft, / Die Sonne könnte es nie erblicken;
/ Läge nicht in uns des Gottes eigne Kraft, / Wie könnte uns Göttliches
entzücken?

Some of the many blackboard drawings made by Phil





Aonghus Gordon writes:

Phil was a gifted teacher and brought warmth and grounded understanding, as well as compassion for both children, and later on the staff and students, at Coleg Plas Dwbl.

Phil was an important anchor during the last few years at Coleg Plas Dwbl and was a figure of continuity, with great insight, social awareness and good humour. Along with the team at Coleg Plas Dwbl, Phil contributed to the recent successful Estyn and CIW inspections.

One of his more recent significant contributions was as a colleague to Vicki Reakes, working on the Teaching in Specialist Steiner Garden Schools course, where again he brought an abundance of insight into Rudolf Steiner's spiritual ideas regarding human development and teaching methods to class teachers from across the Trust's schools.

The Trust will miss Phil's dynamic contribution, warmth, insights and commitment to the vision and method of Ruskin Mill Trust.

Paul Garnault writes:

Phil was a friend of mine. I am glad to say that. He was a friend to many. He knew me before I knew him. But he kept that quiet. He was gentle but also goading at the same time and we enjoyed a similar sense of humour. I really encountered Phil when I sat in on one of his art lessons. He was an amazing teacher. I wish he could have done more. It is rare to encounter teaching at his level. He wasn't just teaching, he was working with colour energies directly with each student. He knew it was working by the loudness of the silence.

We had a shared love of the neolithic and old stones and cromlechs and of Celtic saints and mythos. We both also came from humble beginnings and would share a laugh at the machinations that swirled around us. We also laughed about our own paranoia and survival techniques. I loved his art and carving and sought to promote it. I do miss Phil and his sideways look at the world. He was a connoisseur of people and ridiculousness in general, a true artist. I miss our regular chats, and I miss him.

One episode that comes to mind, typical of Phil, was he and I off in search of Merlin's Beard, a rare bearded lichen *Usnea subfloridana*. We found the tree with it, in a field full of young bulls. Phil assured me the bulls were fine – until they started dancing around us! Phil was over the fence with the agility of a pole-vaulter, whilst I scrabbled over a wire fence. We laughed for an hour.

The last time I went to see him in hospital he was entertaining the doctors and nurses and dreaming of the future.

At the end of my visit he said to me how much he had got from watching my plays in the past. I had not realised he had seen so many. This was our last exchange. I knew it then. I hear his voice still, in certain situations, which means he is still around – looking for rare plants in risky places.

Laura Wallwork writes:

Perhaps it was his retirement from HMP service at Parc Prison that allowed Phil to come back to Plas Dwbl Farm? As he, at some level, is a guardian of the task of this place. Over the years, both staff and students gained something from his attentions. Phil focused on meaningful occupations and operations, and both the people and the place felt the benefit.



The Michaelmas Stone at Plas Dwbl, 2024 festival

Coleg Plas Dwbl is fortunate to have an enlivened Spirit of Place, and Phil was one of a few characters who have brought the Genius Loci to a better understanding. Although this was often through stories, and more stories, Phil also presented art and sculpture that he had created, and fossils and artefacts that he had unearthed. All of this was of importance to Phil, and he imparted this – he imparted that things were significant.

But how did he bring so many treasures to light? Phil had an 'eye' – a phenomenon in itself – where he would glance along the path that he walked, only to make a discovery!

Something rare or exceptional, a 'happening' in the natural world. And this would be on most days! Phil's phone gallery was full of the photographic substantiation of this. We understand that this went further afield than Plas Dwbl farm, of course, and



College sign painted by Phil in 2023

goes to explain why he had a consummate collection of fossils and artefacts. Objects of wonder seemed to find him – or else he created them, like his series of hand axes, for example!

From bryophytes to orchids to fungi, Phil illuminated the rarities at Coleg Plas Dwbl – these were like sculptures in the natural world. We can appreciate his awe and wonder as stages of Goethean enquiry. When comforted by the workings of biodynamic farming, there is a nourishment in the imperceptible, but Phil met the magic of the college as quite perceptible, and tangible. It was the social realm that he worked in, and Phil fully lived for this work. His sense of empathy was very developed, and this was actually a great ability: he had an enthusiasm for a subject, and it would just so happen to be *your* subject.

It is of growing importance and relevance that the festivals of the year are evented, and that the Archangels are called. Phil marked the festivals at the college with insistence and design, and in a way that the college community is able to continue with the rhythm, going into the future.

He was very much our link to our past – he was able to illuminate the living lives of the ladies of Plas Dwbl and the founding community that he got to know. He said that all of this history needed research, and he elaborated on Barbara Saunders Davies, especially. This was marked, recently, by a visit by John Paull (from Tasmania), who shook Phil's hand at his home in Cardiff. Through Phil's hand-holding of Barbara, who had shaken the hand of Ehrenfried Pfeiffer, we shake hands with Rudolf Steiner.

Apparently Phil thought that the unretiring bluebells that thickly outline the meadows are one of the seven wonders of Plas Dwbl. We would say that Phil himself was one of the wonders of Plas Dwbl! As a cheeky, jovial human, really living his life-path, engrossed in spiritual and physical pedagogical work to help others, to his last day.

Vicki Reakes writes:

Phil was a courageous, creative, intelligent man with a vibrant spirit. If you ever had the pleasure of meeting him, you would know him to be a warm, straight talking and intuitive human being with a wonderfully wicked sense of humour and a kind nature.

Phil and I worked together for many years, first as Trustees of Ruskin Mill Trust, and then co-leading the design, development and initiation of the Teaching in Specialist Steiner Garden Schools (TSSGS) Development Programme.

In every moment working with Phil I could not have wished for a more supportive, wise, loyal and task focussed colleague. His gentle but courageous and respectful style of leadership invited authentic collaboration and encouraged others to step into their strengths.

Phil preferred to invest his time and energy in cultivating direct connection – with land, people, creative tasks, ideas – and was committed to Ruskin Mill Trust, doing what he could to uphold the Trust's charitable objectives. He did not shy away from taking a stance in protecting the ideals he held dear.

This quote from Steiner deeply resonated with Phil:

(...) perceive the significance of the fact that we are effective in the world not only through what we do, but above all through who we are. (Adapted from *The Study of Man*, GA 293, Lecture I, 21 August 1919, Stuttgart)

Phil approached life with fearlessness and determination right up until the end. In the months before he died we talked at great length about legacy and how his work would live on in the practice of all those who learnt from him and loved his work.

I miss Phil's friendship and colleagueship greatly as I continue the work we began together on the Teaching for Specialist Steiner Garden Schools Development Programme – though because of the quality and strength of his inspirational work he does not feel far away.

Phil profoundly impacted many lives, including my own, and I feel blessed to have known such a truly exceptional individual.

Chloe Hindmarsh writes:

This issue of the Journal includes an account of John Paull and Vivian Griffith's biodynamic journey around Britain. But there was a third person who contributed to this story, and while it has been told, has left this earth to their next destination. The third

person of significance is Phil Forder, whose countless hours and dedication to UK biodynamic historical records, and interpersonal exchanges, has provided key parts of the route map for researchers' activity. In his time employed by Ruskin Mill Trust, Phil dedicated himself to the historical narrative of early biodynamics and the people involved in this. Dr John Paull remarked during this time that Phil must be the 'world expert on the Sunfield index cards,' acknowledging the depth to which Phil would work on deciphering these to share with others who are interested in the roots of UK biodynamics.

On 6 July 2024, John, Phil and Vivian met at Insole Court in Cardiff, where Phil shared his thoughts on biodynamics in Wales and the five ladies of Plas Dwbl. Barbara Saunders-Davies was one of these key people, being a teacher on the Waldorf Teacher training course that he attended. Phil described her as open and warm, born in 1907 and who had identified herself humorously to Phil as the 'oldest card-holding anthroposophist in Britain.' They shared much humour and values in their working life and friendship.

Phil explained how the five women were instrumental in developing the site and school from Michaelmas in the 1980s. Phil was a kindergarten teacher and involved in the Responsive Earth Trust that developed on site. He spoke of the enterprise and charity developed at Plas Dwbl and how personality-driven this had become, up to the



"Titi (nickname) can play too, yes, and your little grasshopper wants to help as well, please."

present day where Ruskin Mill became involved and further transformed the site, securing its legacy.

Phil talked of having been recently visited at home by ex-pupils from his teaching at Plas Dwbl. While sharing this, we discussed how Steiner's insight on planting seeds and ideas with children rarely came to educators in fruition for them to see. It was heart-warming to hear Phil share the details of this visit, and what it meant to him and his work from that time, which fundamentally shaped his way of working thereafter. This could be a reference to Steiner's comments on education and morality, from the talk given on "Moral and Physical Education" in the Hague in 1923 (Steiner, 1923) if anyone is interested in researching this further.

Phil talked of the privilege of working in Waldorf education in the kindergarten and also reflected affectionately on his career teaching art to young offenders for 20 years in a large prison. During this time, he developed a course with offenders called "The Art of Living", which he described as "how to live your life". He estimated that he worked with 200+ men through this course which he saw the effects of, right through until Covid times. Much of this work drew on the philosophical foundations learned at his time at Plas Dwbl.

Phil talked about his retirement as lasting two weeks before arriving at Ruskin Mill. In his own words, Phil said that he felt he had 'come home,' as soon as he met Aonghus and the work for Ruskin Mill Trust.

Everything he did, he did fastidiously and with love. Reflecting on his own background and education, he connected threads between his own upbringing in London, the work in the prison service, Waldorf education and his work with Ruskin Mill including the Teaching in Specialist Steiner Schools programme with Vicki Reakes.

He was keen that Barbara's reminiscences of Ehrenfried Pfeiffer were acknowledged, two key people in the development of early biodynamic agriculture. Phil was the executor of her estate, inheriting numerous pieces of documentation and correspondence relating to biodynamics, having many letters translated from French and other languages. During our meeting he was keen to share examples of this such as the postcard on the left depicting a grasshopper, and how this held meaning to the historical consciousness of Plas Dwbl, those who worked there and the philosophical foundations



Phil with his hand-carved sculptural motifs

on which it lay. This has been recently translated by Lisi Briggs as "Titi (nickname) can play too, yes, and your little grasshopper wants to help as well, please."

Grasshoppers featured regularly in the correspondence shared from Barbara Saunders-Davies reminiscences to Phil, as well as around the site. Phil enjoyed engaging with the wildlife on site, as part of the whole picture of Plas Dwbl and their significance in the biodynamic landscape.

Phil was a true researcher, and an inspiration both pedagogically and in the gentle and considered way he could engage in important conversations about meaningful topics such as life, philosophy and the purpose of education. He is already greatly missed, and we celebrated Phil's life at a memorial in December 2024.

Laurence Cox writes:

I was only lucky enough to meet Phil twice, in his final years, but I was struck by his dedication to a deep understanding of the past: in the hand axes he had physically crafted himself, taking days for one made out of Preseli bluestone, to learn the qualities of the materials – and when he mentioned that he had visited every dolmen in Wales to sketch them, whether they were in the hills, across boggy fields far from a road or in the middle of a roundabout. Below I have compiled some elements of his life which have been recorded publicly in various ways.

Phil Forder was born in Suffolk and grew up as one of six children on a council estate in Harlow,

Essex, in a strict Catholic family. (He later told the story of his crossed wires talking to one of the more aristocratic members of the Plas Dwbl community, who had grown up on a very different kind of estate.) Phil began to train to be a priest but abandoned this after three months, subsequently hitching to Afghanistan before talking his way into art college in Carmarthen; he would later hitch to Kashmir. Living in a caravan, he worked in a wholefood shop.

Becoming a father, Phil saw the need for a different kind of education for his child and was one of the pioneers at Nant-y-Cwm Steiner school, initially as kindergarten assistant, before training as a Waldorf teacher. After eight years he wanted to move on and heard of a job as art teacher at Wales' largest prison, Parc Prison in Bridgend. Here he worked for over two decades in a variety of roles, including as art teacher, equalities manager, community inclusion manager and arts and community lead.

"Phil stories" abound here too: he organised the "Hay in the Parc" festival, bringing writers from the world's biggest book festival at Hay to Wales' biggest prison annually for nearly a decade. As part of the festival, he supported Roma and Traveller prisoners to compile a collection of their own stories as a book, *On Road*. During the pandemic he organised the distribution of art materials to prison residents who had been taking part in art programmes so that they could carry on their work in isolation.

After Phil came out as gay in his fifties, the prison governor tasked him with raising the profile of the prison's LGBT+ community; he talked to prison staff and to prisoners, leading to the publication of several books of stories, with titles such as *Inside and Out*, as well as setting up the UK's first gay prisoner football team, intensive mentoring and support and many other initiatives that contributed to Parc becoming one of the UK's safest prisons for LGBT+ prisoners. Phil's 2015-16 commendation by the Butler Trust includes many very moving tributes to this work. Phil was a Stonewall Cymru role model for 2020, was on Pride Cymru's Pinc List, and was shortlisted for a National Diversity Award for his LGBT+ work in prisons.

With Peter Oram, he also wrote *The Midnight Trail: a Christmas Story* and *The Encircled Cross: Tales of the Saints of Pembrokeshire and the Gower*, as well as illustrating many of Peter's books. He also produced a calendar of Welsh crosses.

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