

MERCi Chronological.

Summer 1995: The idea.

In a smoky pub somewhere in Manchester two friends - Helen Woodcock and Chris Walsh sat chatting:

"What we need in Manchester " they said " Is a focus. A building or a place where anyone can come to find out what's happening in the city".

"Yeah, and it would have offices and workshops so people could work there".

"Everyone would be working on green or social issues - but everyone would be doing something different so there'd be loads to talk about".

"And the whole building would be eco so everyone could see the ideas working".

"Yeah and we could have a roof garden too".

"And a café".

"Yeah".

"Well, doesn't sound that difficult does it?"

"Nah".

This is the story of what's happened since then...

Summer to the winter of 1996: Getting Started.

Helen and Chris decided to start by asking what other people thought of their idea. They found out that people were very enthusiastic about the idea but that nobody had much time to put work into making it happen.

Being practical types they decided they would put the time in, and the first step was to get an office base. Chris and Helen found a little space in the basement of the Friends Meeting House. Down in this dark and cold place were a number of groups in something called the One World Centre. These groups had tried to buy their own building before but everyone involved was too busy. They were happy that MERCi was going to work on the idea full time and decided they would move into the building once it opened. At some point MERCi was chosen as a working name, with the emphasis on " working ".

Spring and Summer of 1997: Consultation

The first six months of MERCi's life was all about consultation. The workers knew that the only way they were going to be able to get the centre off the ground was if they could show active support for the idea. In order to do this they set about asking people whether they wanted a centre and if they did what would it be like. They asked individuals, activists, charities, voluntary groups, NGOs and local government.

They kept the focus on Greater Manchester and in all they consulted over 1000 people and groups. Having got everyone's ideas they then pulled it all together into a feasibility study. This encapsulated all that MERCi was meant to become. Then they got to the slightly harder question of money. Trying to work out how much they were going to need was incredibly hard. Eventually they drafted the first of many versions of MERCi's business plan. Now all they had to do was find some funders.....

Autumn 1997 : Writing Bids.

Up to this point MERCi had been running off smallish grants, people's own money and generous donations from supporters. Now it was time to go for the big money. Original estimates varied from £100,000 to nearly a million. The problem was that no-one knew how big the building needed to be, where it was going to be or even if we should build our own new building. Being practical people they were, Chris and Helen decided not to let this bother them and just start asking for money anyway. Around this time Cath Millers' job ended and, despite being offered many other paid jobs, she decided to come and work full time at MERCi. Jane Pickering, a friend of all three, was also deciding the same thing. Now there were four people in the office. In quick succession, and before the first (and historic) MERCi Christmas party, bids were made to the National Lottery, European Social Fund (ESF) and European Regional Development Fund. Now we just had to sit back and wait...

Autumn and Winter of 1998: Starting Projects.

Some good news: our ERDF bid was approved and we decided to go ahead with the project. Cathy Brookes was employed to run Building Equality (the women's construction course) and we set about finding a building to spend the £115,000 from ERDF on. Things were looking up when we found a building called Miller House. It was the right size, about 15,000 sq. ft. and in the right area, the Ancoats Urban Village. It was far enough out of town to be affordable and close enough to be accessible. Then, as the cherry on the top, a private trust confirmed a grant of £70,000! Things were definitely on the move we thought. Just to cap it a bid to the National Lottery was submitted and we began to feel quietly confident that the centre was not far from reality. Then, just before Christmas, disaster struck: someone who offered £30,000 more than we had gazumped us on Miller House! Could we go on?!!

1999 to 2001 : Purchasing Bridge-5 Mill.

After much arduous hunting and many false starts the Beswick St building was chosen from a shortlist (after consulting with members) and a mortgage was secured. MERCi moved in November 1999. Around the same time another bid to the National Lottery was rejected, but on a brighter note MERCi gained charitable status from the Charity Commission, which opened a lot more doors on the funding front.

Next MERCi set about refurbishing the building. A green construction company were located in Huddersfield and pulled in on the job. However, the most part of the refurbishment was run through a New Deal training scheme. MERCi recruited 15 lads from the East Manchester area, who were trained by three skilled craftsman to work towards an NVQ level 2 in site joinery. MERCi also ran a series of "Constructive Weekends" where volunteers came to help paint, shift, hammer and nail, and generally sort out the building.

While the construction got under way, it was time to think of funding again, since there was not enough money to do the electrics and heating, and still a 12 year mortgage to pay with no money coming in. This time MERCi was successful, and received funding from the National Lottery Community Fund (£370,000), and from the Esmee Fairbairn Trust (£100,000).

With the office floor more or less complete the buildings' first tenants moved in - a mix of voluntary groups and small green businesses.

April 2001: Bridge-5 Mill Opens.

The building work finished, the final lick of paint on the walls, ramp dug in and laid, much cleaning and dusting and it was finally time for the official opening of the building. MERCi held a launch event, which attracted over 400 people from all sectors - school children, local residents, businesses, local government employees, voluntary and community groups. It was stressful in the organising, but everyone felt very proud to be involved and show off all their hard work. We had also decided it was about time to give the building a name. A long list of suggestions was

voted on at the launch and the overall winner was Bridge 5 Mill (the building being an old mill, situated next to bridge number 5 on the Ashton Canal).

2001 to 2002: Employing Our First Staff.

Now that the main refurbishment was completed (for the time being - there are still two floors and annexes to go) it was time to focus on project work. For the first time MERCi was in the position to employ paid workers, who began work on creating a functioning centre providing the opportunities and support needed to make Manchester a more sustainable city.

Apart from the building, MERCi has always focused on three key areas: community, education and enterprise. Since the opening of the building these areas have gradually expanded to encompass several different projects and over the year MERCi began to form itself into what we call "streams".

Education.

MERCi aims to promote sustainable living through education programmes targeted at young and old alike. 2001 saw a variety of initiatives including workshops on "making every day life more sustainable", beekeeping and bike maintenance to the completion of the "You Are Here" exhibition, the re-establishment of Manchester Environmental Education Network based at Bridge 5 Mill, and the running of MERCi's third 'Building on Equality' course (a green construction course for lone parent women).

Later in 2002 MERCi became a UK Online Centre with computers for teaching IT skills.

Community.

It has always been one of MERCi's key aims to work closely with local residents. In spring and summer 2001 this work was intensified through the project "Ancoats and Miles Platting in Bloom". MERCi ran a series of workshops and events with residents to create window boxes, eco - golf courses, clear-ups and garden markets. This all culminated in August for the judging day which turned into a big community event with youth groups and residents groups enjoying the sun and flowers, and providing dancing and music.

2001 also saw the creation of a community garden in Ancoats, which involved local kids in weekly gardening sessions and turned a piece of waste land into a blooming garden after some hard work.

Enterprise.

MERCi aims to support the development of sustainable and progressive enterprises. Support is provided in a variety of ways, through advice with business plans and fundraising, to providing cheap office rent in the Bridge 5 Mill building. In July 2001 MERCi employed Joanna to work on this project, and she has been involved with the development of Manchester Bio-diesel Co-op and of Manchester Progressive Enterprise Network.

2001 to 2002: Structure and Strategy

The year 2001 was a turning point for MERCi. The project went from being one that was essentially about a building to being a functioning resource centre, and the development of the projects described above. The project went from being one run by four full time volunteers to one that employed 10 staff by summer 2002. It was time to start thinking about how all this was going to function efficiently. In January 2002 MERCi held its first strategy weekend. In a cottage in the Peak District, MERCi staff, volunteers and management committee thrashed out a five-year strategy based around the streams that MERCi has developed (community, enterprise, education). This weekend also helped to finalise MERCi's structure. From January 2002 onwards the project was clearly divided into these streams with each having an action plan and held regular meetings. MERCi plan to hold strategy weekends every January to revise and

update the overall strategy for the project, and will look into ways of involving as many people as possible in this process.

2003

This year has seen a lot positive developments for MERCi as it has juggled the competing demands of finishing the refurbishment of Bridge-5 Mill and the establishment of a number of projects. The work to refurbish the rest of the mill and also house tenants and hold conferences has often been a fraught affair but we believe it has been an essential process. We continue to learn and evolve and have been successful in securing funding from the Tudor Trust to employ a dedicated Centre Co-ordinator. This post is crucial if MERCi is to smoothly evolve into a professional and effective social-change facilitator.

MERCi has also been developing a number of 'flagship' projects working outside of Bridge-5 Mill and we hope this will be a continuing trend as we seek to work in partnership with other groups and engage more people about sustainable living. On such project is Herbie, a fruit and vegetable delivery service, which is to operate in East Manchester.

2004

2004 was a particularly busy and challenging year for MERCi. Not only did we completed the refurbishment of Bridge-5 Mill, but also had serious cash-flow problems in the summer of 2004.

However, September saw a vast improvement in staff management, financial planning and MERCi has evolved in a relatively short period of time into a more robust and professional organisation.

Having finished the final phase of the refurbishment work in September 2004, it was time to change our focus from a capital building project, into a functioning centre providing the opportunities and support needed to make Manchester a sustainable city. This has been – and still is – a long process, with many lessons to learn and decisions to make along the way. We are still a young organisation (although to some of us it may not feel like it!) with much room for growth, and although times of change are sometimes hard, they are definitely exciting too.

2005

After a rather troubled summer in 2004, MERCi has been working hard to develop into an effective and efficient charity. To this end 2005 has been an exciting and positive year so far. MERCi has recruited a new MERCi Co-ordinator and Finance Officer and has seen the growth of a number of projects including Herbie and the establishment of a Manchester Transport Network.

MERCi continues to work in a partnership with others and was proud to be involved in Manchester's Garden of Delight, Manchester Harvest and continues to support exciting projects like Powwow Eco Arts and Manchester Social Enterprise Forum.

The end of 2005 will see MERCi begin the process of fund-raising to build on all the work carried out to date and hopes 2006 will be a year within which MERCi's potential is realised.