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GIRL POWER

WHY WOMEN ARE BRITAIN'S
BEST BET FOR BEIJING



MAGAZINE

PLUS SLUMMY MUMMY'S DANGEROUS LIAISON ★ GILES COREN'S ROMAN HOLIDAY

Here are the new revolutionaries, with determined looks on their bifocals, turning to mildly criminal pursuits. Camouflaged in a uniform of Marks & Spencer beige, you would not know that these Dundonians are heavily armed. But secreted in their handbags and eco-satchels are weapons: trowels, forks, seed bombs, sharp secateurs and hand-held cut-throat hoes. This is the new guerrilla gardening army. Be afraid, very afraid.

The army has assembled, undercover, at the Dundee Literary Festival to hear its leader, Richard Reynolds, give a talk on guerrilla gardening. "Troops," he says, "we will fight filth with forks and flowers." He urges us to attack stealthily, by night, clearing litter and planting glorious flora on grim municipal roundabouts, traffic islands and abandoned flowerbeds in council estates.

audience of genteel, recycling folk who are keen to take the law into their own hands and feel a frisson of excitement about possibly being arrested as they plant out another Michaelmas daisy beneath an underpass.

Any neglected spot is fair game for the guerrillas. "There's a lot of orphaned land around," says Reynolds. "We're not so much kidnapping the land as fostering it."

The lecture is inspiring: the first guerrilla gardener was Liz Christy in the Bowery, New York, in 1973. She was an artist who noticed tomato plants growing in derelict lots, and children playing there, and decided to scatter seeds. Then she found a huge lot, and with a team of "green guerrillas" cleared away old fridges and rubble to create a community garden. Christy died, aged 39, but the garden is still there at the corner of Houston.

Reynolds lives in an equally unpromising place, a rented ex-council flat in a block in Elephant and Castle. One night, about 2am, he had the urge to rescue the ugly planter at the flats' entrance from

Reynolds, was it not Churchill who stated "War is the normal occupation of man." And then added "War – and gardening."

But before they rush from the room, trowels brandished aloft, Richard warns the roused Dundonians: as with any war, guerrilla gardening has not been without its casualties. Brita 1198, a landscape architect who seeded the Hogarth roundabout in Chiswick with a flower meadow, bumped her car into the one in front as she admired her handiwork. Worse, the flower field was mowed down by Transport for London. But we struggle on. If you are driving along the M60 in Lancashire and see a man waving his hand from a car window, that's Tony 830, seeding the verge with handfuls of Welsh poppy seeds. ■

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<< Richard urges us to attack by night, planting flora on grim municipal roundabouts and council estates >>

Concrete monstrosities must be greened throughout the kingdom – and the world.

For the guerrilla gardening movement has gone international since I first met Reynolds two years ago in London. I hung out with him and some of his agents on a dark night on a roundabout in a nasty part of Southwark, illegally weeding and planting on neglected council soil. Then we went to the pub. Meanwhile, the roundabout has blossomed into maturity, and since that very early day, like many guerrilla movements, Reynolds' army has gone from strength to strength, experiencing organic growth in both senses. He has been described as "Banksy with a trowel" and there are nearly 5,000 fly-by-night gardeners registered at www.guerrillagardening.org, including me.

Richard has written a book, and is now touring the country with lectures and a slide-show, consciousness-raising. But I didn't expect to find him in Dundee, with a packed

desecration. He banged in cordylines and red and white flowers in stiff rows. "Very municipal-style planting," says the self-taught gardener embarrassedly, but now he puts in acres of waving lavender on traffic islands that would make Gertrude Jekyll proud.

It turned out, when Reynolds registered the guerrilla gardening website, that there were already like-minded people across the world, just waiting to log in. In Berlin, a community had taken over wasteland, cleared it, and built an outdoor pizza oven. Meanwhile in Toronto, Posterchild 326 (the guerrillas have numbers and nicknames) was attaching mini windowboxes to lampposts – no flowerbeds needed. And in Whitechapel, there is an eccentric artist – Helen 1106 – who builds tiny fence enclosures for weeds that have grown through cracks in the tarmac.

The guerrillas are a broad church, ranging from countryfolk weeding village churchyards to the eco-warriors who dug up Parliament Square a few years ago and laid a strip of turf on the statue of Sir Winston Churchill, giving him a grass Mohican. With such inspiration, who knows how far the good burghers of Dundee may go? Indeed, says

