

# THE BIG ISSUE



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## Earthed *clean living*

You imagine the Royal Institution's venerable lecture theatre has probably witnessed a few scientific bun-fights in its time, what with it being the oldest independent research body in the world. So the ghosts of scientists past must have been chuckling at the sight of a Boeing PR man being taken to task by a roomful of elderly but committed environmental activists last week.

I'm not sure Boeing Bill had been prepared for his audience that evening. They were the Tony Benns of this world – clever, terribly well-spoken and left-wing in the most old-school sense of the word. Meanwhile, Bill turned out to be a rather jowly chap with a strong American accent, so as far as the assembled sock-and-sandal wearers were concerned, he might as well have turned up wearing a George Bush Halloween mask.

It didn't help that he insisted on talking a lot (in a jokey, 'how d'ya like that then, folks!' way about how 'airplanes' are actually much more efficient than cars in terms of kilos of CO2 per passenger, how the airline industry was only

**"The man from Boeing might as well have turned up wearing a George Bush Halloween mask"**

responsible for two per cent of total global emissions and how Boeing was working 'really hard' to develop biofuels ('Boo, evil!' you could see the crowd thinking).

Question time was something to behold. First a man in trainers (the only person under sixty and without a posh accent) accused Boeing of putting out deckchairs on the titanic. Then an elderly gent grabbed the mike and informed Bill that his talk about 'the future' was pointless: we are facing Armageddon. To add to the somewhat hysterical atmosphere, the microphone wasn't working properly and people faded in an out like drowning sailors Mayday-ing for help.

An old lady in a moth-eaten fur hat launched into a rambling and heavily Russian-accented account of the possible dangers of supersonic resonance. I left the lecture theatre with the words '20 billion dollar refinery' ringing in my ears. It was the best night out I've had in ages. The Royal Institution: it's the new pub.

Emma Rubach

## If I Was King For A Day... *by Richard Reynolds, guerrilla gardener*

Last week at 9.30pm, I was on a round-about in south London when three police cars pulled up alongside and I was threatened with arrest. They told me to put down my tools and leave immediately. My fellow guerrilla gardeners and I had only just finished weeding and had more work to do to transform a scrappy corner of public land into a floral border. "But you don't have permission," they said. I implored them to see sense but they didn't. "It's criminal damage, put down your tools or we're taking you in!"

During my four years of guerrilla gardening the police have questioned me on several occasions. I have even been a suspected car bomber, but every time the law have tolerated my activity and let me get on. We retreated, but returned later to finish the battle uninterrupted. The flowers are still blooming, and no one from the police or the council has yet

'repaired' our "criminal damage".

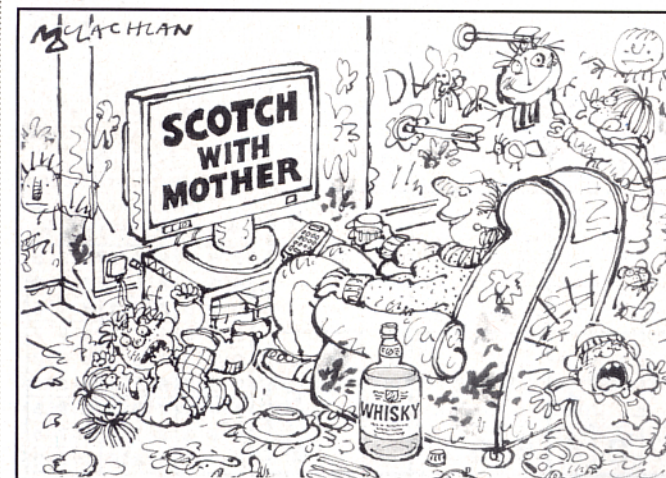
Guerrilla gardening is the illicit cultivation of someone else's land. I know gardeners who cannot resist tidying up their neighbour's unsightly mess, but these are horticultural incursions on private land. My guerrilla gardening transforms neglected public land into beautiful spaces. Were I King for the day, I would rectify this being classed as 'guerrilla' activity. We should not be threatened with arrest for improving our local community.

The war can be won. I have a verbal agreement from a councillor to garden the beds outside my tower block. I made my claim for legitimacy after successfully guerrilla gardening the neglected shrubbery, and with some neighbours' help, got Southwark Council to refund each flat for three years' worth of fraudulent 'grounds maintenance charges'. This transition from guerrilla to legitimate

community gardener is rare in the UK, but in other parts of the world guerrilla gardening has inspired the authorities.

In New York, the network of over 600 community gardens owes a lot to the pioneering work of the Green Guerrillas in the 1970s. Regime change is not just the issue in Britain. Most of the public are passive about public space and switched off to the pleasure of gardening in public. They expect it to be done for them and moan when it isn't. Perhaps it's easier for me to see the landscape differently because my castle already extends well beyond my high-rise tower. I live in London's Elephant & Castle. And because I am a guerrilla gardener my elderly neighbour Joan now calls me "King Of The Castle".

*On Guerrilla Gardening (Bloomsbury, £14.99) by Richard Reynolds is out May 5*  
[www.guerrillagardening.org](http://www.guerrillagardening.org)



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