

# Guerilla gardeners

**T**HEY usually arrive at night, creeping out of the darkness with their forks and spades when the authorities are least likely to spot them. Come dawn, though, their calling card is there for all to see as yet another neglected public eyesore is transformed into something fresh, tidy and bursting with new life.

And now, less than a mile from Parliament itself, London's Guerilla Gardeners have struck again. Overnight, without permission from the local council, let alone a health and safety inspection, the guerillas have dug up a large and thoroughly depressing traffic island and turned it into a thing of beauty.

The sweet wrappers, crisp packets and chaotic old weeds which surrounded a few old cabbage palms have made way for fresh young lavender bushes peppered with the occasional cistus, photinia and hellebore.

The earth has been given a thorough digging and passers-by are delighted with the new addition to the local streetscape.

And so they should be. It hasn't cost them a penny. And if it had been left to the local authorities, who are supposed to look after this sort of thing, the residents would still be walking past rubbish and weeds every day.

'We're not into red tape and attending endless council meetings. We just get out here and do our bit,' says Richard Reynolds, 28, the unassuming founder of the Guerilla Gardeners.

'I know that what we're doing is probably illegal, but no one has stopped us so far. The public have been very encouraging, the police leave us alone and we haven't had any trouble from the bureaucrats — yet.'

He is adamant that he is not a 'do-gooder' or an 'eco-warrior'. A vicar's son from Devon, the Oxford graduate-turned-advertising trainee simply hopes to persuade more people to brighten up their surroundings.

'We're all ordinary people but just look at what ordinary people can do when they get together — like Dig For Victory in World War II.'

The green-fingered guerilla movement started in 2004 when Richard decided he was going to do something about a barren and long-forgotten garden outside the huge South London tower block where he has a flat.

No one else, least of all the council, had paid any attention to it for at least a decade, so Richard weeded it, planted it, watered it and kept an eye on it. Then he found that other people wanted to help.

So, last year, he and the other volunteers set about sprucing up forlorn public patches all over his bit of South London.

**S**UDDENLY, a section of the Elephant and Castle burst into bloom. Overnight, a hitherto dead wall or bus stop would start sprouting leaves. People of all ages, backgrounds and expertise would join in with a trowel or a watering can.

Over a few nights, St George's Circus, a dismal intersection of six roads, was enlivened with rosemary bushes and primulas.

With each new project, word would spread and more names would sign up to Richard's website — guerillagardening.org — some offering their time, others a few quid.

Now, these comrades-in-trowels have just completed their greatest feat to date — this hefty intersection on Westminster Bridge Road.

It took 17 of them £200 and two nights, working into the early hours of the morning. With



Picture: COLIN DAVEY

Meet the green-fingered warriors who raid weed-ridden wastelands at night to turn them into gardens of glory

Dig for victory: Richard Reynolds, left, with his team at their new-look traffic island in Westminster

## HOW I SEE IT



by Robert Hardman

a consignment of extra plants, I have lured some of them back in daylight to talk me through their handiwork. And they have plenty of admirers.

'I just want to thank you for cheering us all up,' says a shivering Elaine Andrews, a librarian who has left her office to express her appreciation.

Drivers honk horns and stick their thumbs up. I dare say that if you have to spend much of your week inhaling carbon monoxide at this junction, then this will make your journey a little more bearable.

'I read about the guerillas in the local paper and I just think it's a wonderful way of encouraging people to think about their community,' says Camilla Morris, 28, a gardening-mad designer from Kensington.

Richard insists there is no hierarchy and everyone mucks in. 'Gardening can often be quite a solitary pursuit, with people toiling alone at the back of their house, but this is a very sociable way of doing it,' he says.

'We had one lady of 66 down here, a couple of Australians came all the way from Slough and another couple spent all night here before going on to get a holiday flight at dawn.'

His vicar father, Michael, is 'supportive', but Richard says his passion for gardening was instilled in him by his mother, Janet. 'She often sends cuttings and advice from Devon.'

The guerilla tactics are carefully thought through. A site is chosen only when it is clear it has been neglected for a long time. Richard checks what is growing and a rendezvous time is put on his website. And after a hard night's weeding, he takes all the debris away in his car.

Every project needs plenty of loving care and attention after-

wards, too. This isn't some TV makeover show.

'We did a project in North London some time ago and I went up last night to check on it, water it and stick some leaflets through local letterboxes asking people to do the same. We've got to get local people involved if this is going to last.'

Richard already has his sights on the next door traffic island. We are on the boundary of two boroughs here and no one seems to know who should really be looking after what.

The truth is a triumph of bureaucratic gibberish. It turns out that the traffic island which has just been transformed by the guerillas belongs to Transport for London while the other, dishevelled island next to it belongs to Lambeth Council.

All of a sudden, a chap from Transport for London's property arm turns up — but he has not come for a quarrel. He is rather pleased. 'You've done a good job,' he tells Richard. 'We were going to replant this eventually, but you've done it now.'

**H**E OFFERS to add the guerillas' new plants to his maintenance schedule, but admits that his budget allows for only one visit every three months.

Richard is polite but underwhelmed. 'Once a quarter is a bit of a joke really, so I'll just come back and keep an eye on it.'

It all strikes me as a wonderfully British act of gentle, philanthropic rebellion, although Richard points out there have been cases of guerilla gardening in Los Angeles and Canada.

There are now some 200 supporters registered on Richard's website and he is keen to encourage similar nocturnal planting raids on neglected public areas all over Britain.

With any luck, this magnificent little outfit will also embarrass idle local authorities across the country into doing the jobs for which we pay our ever-increasing council tax.

I call Lambeth Council to find out what it plans to do about the other traffic island. 'We will see what we can do to make it attractive,' says a spokesman.

Don't hold your breath. I bet the guerillas sort it out first.