



When visitors arrived for the first time, they were often surprised that there was no gate at the entrance, no precise definition of where Trigonos started and stopped. The second thing that may have struck them (it certainly struck me every time I turned the corner to walk down the drive from our home in the village) was that their immediate 'view' was of a rather scrubby car park that is not very inviting and that two Gwynedd Council brown plastic bins were the first objects to greet you!



None of this was intended to be unwelcoming, it was just the way it was and perhaps it suggested that things at Trigonos were not done for show. It also had its 'up' side, because when for the first time you turned left beyond the car park and moved into the landscape – or opened your bedroom curtains or came into the dining room in the morning, if you have arrived at night – and saw the view across the lake towards the Snowdon ridge for the first time, then suddenly you just knew why you had come.

And, of course, everyone's reason for why they had come was entirely unique to them.

There was something about the transition from 'seeing' to 'being' that seemed to impact both visitors (immediately) and work colleagues (over time). Perhaps a growing sense that how and who we are matters as much as what we do. Or, more accurately, that how we do what we do is a manifestation of who we are, so who we are is worth paying some attention to. Beginning to pay closer attention to ourselves, to each other and to our surroundings could be the hallmark of what happened when you were at Trigonos.

The three of us founders<sup>1</sup> (perhaps 'finders' would be a more appropriate term) gravitated to very different things in our relationship to the place – epitomised by the immediate action we each spontaneously took in the awesome first moments after the formalities of purchase had been completed. Richard cleared the gutters that were clogged with leaves and debris from the 2-years of emptiness and Judy planted a tiny African violet at entrance to the (bramble-ridden) walled garden. My first act was to put

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<sup>1</sup> Judy Harris, Richard Grover & Ros Tennyson

up a picture (a batik version of the *Old Trinity* by the Russian icon painter, Andrei Rublev, a depiction of the three angels who visited Abraham) in, what we knew would be, but was not yet, the library. For me, that image and that room were the spiritual heart of Trigonos and it does makes me sad to think that will change – even though I generally warmly welcome change, fully understand its necessity and am perfectly willing to let things go.



In more practical terms, my contribution to Trigonos manifested most obviously through my interest in the indoor spaces – specifically the imagery (pictures, prints, posters and hangings) and its importance in defining the different bedrooms and public spaces. It was the images, together with the relationship between objects (preferably asymmetrical rather than symmetrical) and the colour combinations that gave each room both tone and personality. Differentiation helped to ensure that each part of Trigonos was individualised rather than institutionalised. That, combined with attention to detail (candles and colourful napkins on the dining room tables, for example) and the sense of nature brought into the different spaces – whether through the views from each of the windows or the little vases of flowers on the bedroom tables.

Trigonos provided the backdrop for looking both inwards and outwards. It was valued because it was a space simply to be rather than to be something specific. This was an observation often made by group leaders whose groups seemed to find it very easy to make the place their own during their stay.

Were there particular values that underpinned what we did in our time as directors? And if so, what were they?

We did, in our many pre-Trigonos conversations, spend some time exploring our respective priorities, ideas and aspirations and these tended to align around the concept of ‘three-some-ness’ – which may or may not have been influenced by the fact that there were three of us!

Inspired by a particularly beautiful image of the Celtic Triskele on an old piece of ironwork, we were taken with the depiction of three elements flowing interdependently out from and back to the centre. A continuous process of movement between the whole and its parts.

We agreed that the three-fold nature of this shape and seemed to closely echo our thinking about three-some-ness... and how a factor of three would always be stronger

than a factor of two (with its tendency towards polarisation and thus potential for conflict).

As Judy pointed out early on, the great thing about a triangle is that it remains sturdy no matter which way you turn it. So slowly we came to the name 'Trigonos' (a *3-sided figure* in Greek) and very shortly after that we stumbled across a modern stained glass version of the triskele (see below) in a shop window. It is less delicate and rhythmical than the traditional versions, but perhaps was more suitable being modern and forward-looking in terms of its style and bright colouring – none of us wanted to get caught in the past.



So suddenly we had both a name and a logo even before we found the place or, more accurately, before the place found us.

The reason the triskele appealed so much was our hope for a project that would connect several aspects and not be too one-dimensional in character. We explored this as a new version of 'liberty, equality and fraternity': the first being about the **importance of individuality** and the opportunity to become whatever one is able to become; the second being about **fairness, inclusion and tolerance** and what we can build out of what makes us different with the third being about **supporting each other** by the exchange of products and services.

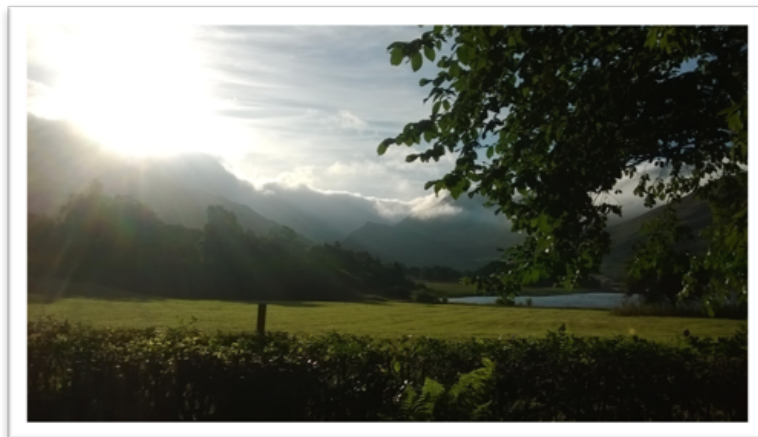
Another way of putting it might be getting the balance right between the realm of the **personal, rights and economics** – in the societal terms this can be characterised as the non-profit, government and business sectors.

All this is quite high-minded and we did not subsequently dwell on it much. In fact, we always found it quite hard to articulate our thinking in ways that convinced or engaged our colleagues, visitors and well-wishers. As directors, we always carried our values and beliefs quite lightly but that does not mean they were not of fundamental importance to what we did.

The reality of how we carried Trigonos over the 24+ years was perhaps rather less cerebral, although equally hard to convey. It may be best characterised as learning to trust and build from our own and each other's judgment and intuition. Four examples of this spring to mind:

- **Being prepared to say 'no'** – whether to an early request to provide a youth club for the youngsters in the village or to guests offering to help with the washing up (typically women of a certain age who seem to find it hard not to be 'useful') or to

- being written up / promoted as an 'Anthroposophical institution' – even though the saying 'no' made us appear difficult or even obstinate, this demonstrates a certain clarity and confidence about what we felt would be sustainable and what wouldn't
- **Working around the things that could have undermined our tri-partite relationship** (for example, sensitive issues to do with our children) – not quite the same as avoidance, more a case of letting things work through over time rather than emphasising them or risking setting our respective positions in concrete by too much forensic investigation
  - **Recognising and respecting the unique contribution we each made** because of who we are that makes us different – for example, a key role for me as the 'choleric' of the trio was to be quick and impatient to move forwards compared to the other two who were both more thoughtful and, perhaps, a bit too cautious (but then that's the choleric's view!). Finding the balance between decisiveness / direction and tentativeness / emergence was always a strong component of the way we have worked together
  - **Arriving at ways forward when the time is right** – letting all key decisions emerge rather than be pushed. We tried, for example, some years ago to make 'succession plans' for Trigonos (working out possible responses to eight future scenarios) but quickly abandoned the process, which is just as well, since none of those we envisaged came close to what is evolving at the time of writing.



We tried to avoid Trigonos getting stuck – by constantly striving to be open to change and to accepting that some aspects needed to become more important for a time and then recede thereby giving space for other aspects to come forward and take precedence.

A primary aim was to be self-sufficient financially – which, whilst it was hard to achieve year after year, gave an extraordinary level of freedom. Operating as a non-profit company is quite different from being a registered charity (though the aims and drivers are similar) since charitable organisations that are dependent on grants and donations means they have to be accountable to their external trustees and to donors. We (because we were also the Board of Directors) made all the decisions and were accountable just to each other and to our colleagues.

Trigonos operated as a new model of mission-driven business and it gave many of those who visited ideas for making changes or creating new initiatives in their own organisational settings (sometimes far beyond the UK). It is worthy of note that in 2003

Trigonos was the birthplace of what has now become a globally recognised programme of work to train people to 'broker' partnerships between governments, business and non-profit organisations for sustainable and inclusive development (that threefold approach, again).<sup>2</sup> Over the years, this programme alone brought many people from all across the globe to Trigonos (someone from New Caledonia, an island in the Pacific Ocean, had a 36-hour journey!) creating, for a brief few days, a mini United Nations in the tiny village of Nantlle.

This is tangible evidence of the reach and influence Trigonos has had and may continue to have – albeit in new ways. It was never a place for a closed group operating in isolation from the world's great challenges but a place in which it was possible to accept the challenges and build the energy, imagination and confidence that things can be better.



What is waiting around the corner to be explored? What will it take for the next generation of those who carry Trigonos to have the confidence and imagination to continue to evolve it as an on-going experiment and not a pre-conceived solution?

I will watch from a distance with optimism and interest.

Ros Tennyson  
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<sup>2</sup> [www.partnershipbrokers.org](http://www.partnershipbrokers.org) for more information