



**IMPROVING MENTAL &
PHYSICAL WELL-BEING
IN THE ARMED FORCES
COMMUNITY THROUGH
RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH
WILD SPACES.**

Belisama's Retreat CIC

*Annual Report July 2019 – June
2020*

**Registered in England and Wales
number: 11427261**





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Belisama's top camp

Introduction

Belisama's Retreat is the brainchild of British Army Veteran, J P Marriott who commuted his Army pension to buy the Retreat:

"I got the idea after talking to a former colleague battling with PTSD after serving in Iraq. Escaping into the woods gave him respite from his symptoms and it was working for me too. So I thought: I have to share the woods with other Veterans and give them somewhere to escape to, set up a basha and get back to basics"

MISSION STATEMENT

IMPROVING MENTAL & PHYSICAL WELL-BEING IN THE ARMED FORCES COMMUNITY THROUGH RE-ENGAGEMENT WITH WILD SPACES.

From there the ideas came flooding in: Woodland management, permaculture, wilderness skills training, ways of working in partnership with the community and becoming financially self-sufficient.



Hobbitses Village

Belisama's spans four acres of secluded woodland on the banks of the river Ribble near Preston, Lancashire.

From a top meadow the woodland of beech, ash, hawthorn, horse chestnut, hazel and birch descends to the river's edge via a series of re-entrants and ridges interspersed with small plateaus. The Retreat is home for diverse fauna including

deer, otter, badger, game birds and wildfowl and the adjacent river Ribble sustains healthy levels of s healthy levels of Chub, Barbel, Dace, Grayling & Salmon.

It is a place for Veterans. A place where they can escape the pressures of the modern world. A place where their own values stand. A place they have made their own.

"We have total faith in Belisama's Retreat. This place works and we know that there are Veterans who are alive today because this place has saved them. This is our reward."

Thank you for your support,

JP Marriot
Founder & Director

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Steve Robinson
Director

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Research

There are estimated to be 2.5 million Military Veterans in the UK and they form a socioeconomically disadvantaged group. Historically ignored, Veterans returning to civilian life can feel alienated, lacking the sense of belonging, the camaraderie and focus that military service gives.

Often suffering from the mental and physical traumas of war, Veterans¹:

- Are 11% more likely to suffer from a long-term illness that limits activity.
- are 4% more likely to suffer from depression.
- those suffering from PTSD are 4% more likely to be convicted of a violent offence.
- are 13% more likely to be unemployed.
- are twice as likely to misuse alcohol.
- have been found to be over-represented in the most severe and enduring types of homelessness.

47% OF THE VETERANS WE SURVEYED CONSIDER THEIR MENTAL WELL-BEING TO BE POOR OR VERY POOR

92% OF PEOPLE WHO VISIT BELISAMA'S RETREAT FEEL THAT THEIR VISIT(S) PRODUCE A SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT IN THEIR MENTAL WELL-BEING.

Little more than lip service is paid to supporting Veterans in need and although there is little in the way of official statistics, the realisation is mounting that the issue of Veteran's mental health is of epic proportions. The burden of support falls upon not for profit organisations and Belisama's Retreat addresses this clearly defined area of need.

As part of our research into the demand for Belisama's Retreat we are conducting an anonymous survey to gain a better understanding of mental and physical well-being amongst the UK population and the specific issues that Veterans face.



GIVE A VETERAN A SLEEPING BAG, BASHA AND A FIRE AND THEY ARE SELF-SUFFICIENT, FEEL IN CONTROL. IF YOU'RE A VETERAN YOURSELF, YOU'LL GET THAT.

We asked respondents, on a scale of 1 (low) to 5 (high), how they rated their mental well-being and split the results into three groups: Civilians, Veterans and serving UK Military personnel.

57% of the Veterans who have visited Belisama's Retreat, 47% of all Veterans and 49% of serving personnel consider their mental well-being to be low in contrast to 29% in Civilians².

Ecotherapy is clinically proven to assist mental health recovery³ and at Belisama's we employ it to offer respite, space to breathe, re-engagement with wild spaces and an opportunity for Veterans to re-gain their emotional resilience and self-esteem. Belisama's Retreat employs a clearly defined mechanism to produce positive outcomes:

Pioneering activities based around a woodland "Harbour area" where both Veterans and the general public can learn or rediscover the core skills of campcraft, woodcraft and wilderness living; positive involvement of Veterans and other user groups in improving the environment through land management and conservation; the company of like-minded individuals. Sharing of experiences and self-exploration around the focal point of the campfire; Engagement with nature, fresh air and space.

92% of people who visit Belisama's Retreat feel that their visit(s) produce a significant improvement in their mental well-being.



Swedish log fire

¹ Trajectory, the Futures Partnership – Veterans in the UK: Issues Facing the ex-service community

² [Belisama's Retreat CIC, Mental well-being survey](#)

³ [Mind – Nature and Mental Health](#)



- 84% of the people we asked felt that being outdoors reduced stress
- 66% felt it helped with their anxiety
- 27% said it helped reduce panic attacks
- 55% used outdoor spaces to control anger
- 74% felt it helped them overcome depression.

Summary July 2019 - June 2020



**IN JUNE 2020 BELISAMA'S
WERE AWARDED A
CERTIFICATE OF
COMMENDATION BY THE
LORD LIEUTENANT OF
LANCASHIRE**

To more individuals and organisations than we could shake a stick at, those who have supported Belisama's over the last year: Thank you. An ever-growing legion of Belisama's Veterans are being helped.

It has been a rollercoaster of a year! The highs being growing visitor numbers, substantial grant funding and community recognition. The lows: Epic flooding and COVID-19.


We are accustomed to the river Belisama washing bits away now and then but in early February 2020, she upped the ante, reaching an historic high of 6.5 metres. The entire main camp was washed away: tables, benches, tarps, camp nets, pots and pans, our tool store (and most of our tools), half a log cabin, (generously donated by Dunster House Ltd), all our fishing gear, tents, JP and Steve's favourite shot glasses and Brody's favourite bone. All gone. "Big Dave", the giant ash tree, weighing tens of tonnes and felled by JP was moved 15 feet in-land. The water was lapping around the guy ropes of our new parachute shelter and composting toilet but thankfully, rose no further. Both artefacts proved invaluable during the coming months.



**A HUGE THANK-YOU TO THE
"WELL OILED" MOTORCYCLE
CLUB FOR RAISING £3,500 FOR
BELISAMA'S RETREAT**



In March, we were on the verge of launching a programme of workshops, day trips and expeditions. We had bookings for over 100 paying customers, public presences planned at the Royal Lancashire Show, the UK Bushcraft show 2020 and numerous smaller networking events and a series of presentations to JobCentre Plus staff. Then came COVID-19. We made the decision to reach out to homeless Veterans who had no shelter or food and nowhere to isolate. Three veterans sought refuge at the Retreat for periods during the epidemic until late May when two were re-homed by Wigan Armed Forces HQ and the Lancashire Covenant group.



**“BELISAMA’S RETREAT IS
A SANITY SANCTUARY. I’M
A DIFFERENT PERSON
AFTER I’VE VISITED”**

Tony, Royal Air Force Veteran

Case Studies

John, Royal Regiment of Artillery



**“IT WAS JUST SUCH A
FANTASTIC PLACE!**

**A COUPLE OF MONTHS
DOWN THE LINE OF
BEING SOBER I
RELAPSED AND WAS
KICKED OUT OF MY
HOME. ALL I COULD
THINK WAS THAT I HAD
TO GET TO BELISAMA’S
RETREAT.**

John, Royal Regiment of Artillery

John first visited the Retreat in 2018 with a drug and alcohol rehabilitation group from Yorkshire. A few months later he found himself homeless and in crisis and the only place he wanted to be was Belisama's. But he didn't know where it was, only that it was near Preston so that's where he went. It took him three days to find us!

We picked him up, took him to the Retreat, gave him security and company and asked what he wanted to achieve? John is an immensely proud Veteran, has always worked and found accepting help difficult but accepted that he needed a period of respite before moving forward.



I SPENT THREE DAYS IN PRESTON TRYING TO FIND IT, STAYED IN A HOTEL FOR ONE NIGHT JUST SO I COULD SHOWER AND WHEN I GOT THERE, SPENT A FEW WEEKS LIVING IN THE WOODS."

John, Royal Regiment of Artillery

John asked us to refer him to other Veterans groups. Within 24 hours of contacting Wigan Armed Forces HQ they had housed him, registered him with a GP's surgery, dentist, JobCentre and referred him to mental health support services. Their intervention was rapid and effective. A textbook example of what should happen when a Veteran is in crisis.

John paid return visits to Belisama's over the next few months and we were

delighted to see his well-being lift: He engaged with counselling, re-built his relationship with his children, started work and got his teeth fixed. We wish him all the best.

Mick, Corps of Royal Engineers

Lockdown was a bad time for Bosnia Veteran, Mick. Clinically diagnosed with PTSD, his marriage had broken down and he too found himself homeless.

Mick was referred to Belisama's by the Veteran's charity, Never Surrender. Amid lockdown, we succeeded in getting Mick to Belisama's, made sure he had the basics and settled him in for respite.

After helping him decide upon his recovery path, we referred Mick to the Lancashire Armed Forces Covenant Hub who re-homed him with the help of Creating Change Housing Management and engaged



"WHEN I GOT TO BELISAMA'S I WAS A MESS. I HAD SPLIT UP WITH MY WIFE AND WAS DRINKING HEAVILY. JP PICKED ME UP, TOOK ME DOWN TO THE RETREAT AND GOT ME SETTLED IN.

WITHIN MINUTES I WAS HAVING A BREW NEXT TO THE FIRE AND JUST AFTER WAS LEARNING ARCHERY. WITHIN A WEEK I WAS IN ACCOMMODATION IN PRESTON AND WAS GETTING HELP FOR MY ALCOHOL CONSUMPTION

Mick, Corps of Royal Engineers



him with mental health support from Icarus and Red Rose Recovery.

I STILL GO TO THE RETREAT AS OFTEN AS I CAN AND FIND THE PEACE AND QUIET EXTREMELY BENEFICIAL FOR MY PTSD. I GO WALKING WITH BELISAMA'S NOMADS AND AM STARTING TO SEE LIGHT AT THE END OF THE TUNNEL."

Mick, Corps of Royal Engineers

He has identified his triggers, curbed his drinking and his mental and physical well-being is greatly improved.

Mick continues to engage with Belisama's and has become a much-valued volunteer and team member.

Daz, Parachute Regiment

I FELL ON HARD TIMES TRYING TO HELP OTHERS BUT FAILING TO LOOK AFTER MYSELF. AT THE BEGINNING OF LOCKDOWN, I HAD THE GOOD FORTUNE TO BE REFERRED TO BELISAMA'S.

IT WAS MY FOREST HOME DURING COVID-19 AND FELT MORE LIKE A FAMILY (A GROUP OF PEOPLES FROM A COMMON STOCK) THAN JUST A PLACE TO STAY. THEY LIFTED ME, OPENED DOORS TO UNDERSTANDING & A PATH TO REPAIR.

Daz, Parachute Regiment

When the COVID-19 lockdown started, Daz was homeless and without a place to isolate in safety and so, we offered him sanctuary at the Retreat.

He arrived with what possessions he had, we supplied sleeping and washing kit, food and shelter. His boots were falling apart but within 5 minutes of a social media call-out, another Veteran generously donated £100 to buy Daz a new pair. During his stay we received numerous donations of food, clothes and other equipment from all corners of the community.



Daz is remarkably self-sufficient and quickly settled into our wilderness way of life for two months. In fact, we don't believe he ever wanted to leave! Whilst at Belisama's he put a tremendous effort into helping: Digging drainage ditches, getting our solar panels wired up, improving the water supply and adding hot water to our alfresco shower.

All good things must come to an end and Daz decided it was time to take on the world again. He was re-homed by Wigan Armed Forces HQ in June 2020.

I WAS WELCOMED, OPEN-ARMED, WITH EMPATHY & UNDERSTANDING. BELISAMA'S PROVIDE INCLUSION ONLY FOUND IN THE ARMED FORCES BROTHERHOOD.

Daz, Parachute Regiment

Activities



Veterans exploring a remote forest in Cumbria

The Retreat has been well attended by both individuals and organised groups with activities including bushcraft, paddling, wilderness cooking, archery, angling, photography, nature watching and the ever-popular axe and Spetznaz shovel throwing! During the reporting period we achieved 777 day visits.



During the summer and Autumn of 2019, the Retreat delivered a flagship programme in collaboration with Wigan Armed Forces HQ. Veterans from the Wigan area visited weekly to learn bushcraft skills and enjoy the tranquil surroundings.

Since the easing of COVID-19 restrictions we have also been running weekly trips to remote forest areas in South Cumbria which have been well received. These trips offer the opportunity to learn bushcraft skills and wildlife tracking whilst getting some cardiovascular exercise.

Our wildlife cameras continue to provide entertainment on social media, badgers, otters, deer, wildfowl, foxes and mink all feature regularly with the badger family especially, taking on soap opera status.



Development

A top camp, close to the road and more accessible to less physically able visitors, has been established with a dry shelter, fire, benches and a decking veranda that gives a bird's eye view of the Retreat.

Down on the flood plain a series of drainage ditches have been dug to drain a boggy area of ground, close to the river but on slightly higher ground where we have erected a 12 metre parachute shelter (fig 2) for use as a communal area and woodland classroom.

Further east along the riverside, extensive groundworks have revealed a freshwater spring which, after proper treatment, has become our primary water source. In the same area a deer fence is under construction to protect agriculture.

Since the great flood we have been reconsidered our shelter strategy. A series of temporary shelters are springing up on the steep ground above the flood plain. These entail much more digging to make level ground but will not flood. This new hamlet has been dubbed the "Hobbitses village".



De-barking logs prior to charring to dry them out for use as load bearing columns

BIOCHAR IS UNDER INVESTIGATION AS A VIABLE APPROACH FOR CARBON SEQUESTRATION, AS IT HAS THE POTENTIAL TO HELP MITIGATE GLOBAL WARMING

Off-grid Utilities

We have also been developing our off-grid utilities including a composting toilet, two solar cells for charging phones and power banks and a 50-gallon water wood-fired water heater that feeds an alfresco shower.




Biodiversity

Coppicing of Ash saplings has been undertaken at various locations, allowing light to hit the forest floor and encouraging dormant ground plants to appear once more. Species of plants hitherto unseen are popping up all over.

The coppiced wood provides excellent material to produce biochar, charcoal produced from plant matter and stored in the soil as a means of removing carbon dioxide from the atmosphere and a valuable commercial resource.

Several hundred Willow saplings have been planted on the riverside to help reduce erosion, act as a windbreak and provide a habitat for waterfowl and Kingfishers. Dead and unstable trees have been felled to permit the safe use of several large areas of woodland.



**INSTALLED IN PARTNERSHIP
WITH LOCAL BUSINESS,
RAINWATER COLLECTION
TANKS AND MICRO-TURBINES
WILL PROVIDE RUNNING
WATER AND HYDRO-ELECTRIC
POWER**

Referrals

During the year we have taken referrals from the following organisations:



Aiming to improve the delivery of the Armed Forces Covenant by working with local authorities across Lancashire, ensuring the covenant is both understood and honoured.



The UK's leading charity for veterans' mental health.



Supporting vulnerable veterans and veterans who have been arrested and enter Police Custody.



Providing advice and guidance for Armed Forces Serving Personnel, Veterans and their families within Wigan Borough regarding health and well-being, welfare, education, housing, employment and social inclusion.



To aid in the recovery and rehabilitation of those affected by military operations by providing opportunities through Motorsport and the Automotive Industry.



Jobcentre Plus is the part of the Department for Work and Pensions which delivers working-age support service in the United Kingdom.



The RAF's leading welfare charity with a proud tradition of looking after its own. Supporting all serving and former members of the RAF as well as their partners and dependent children.



Immediate care, assessment and rehabilitation for Military veterans, uniformed services and their families



Providing Veterans and their families with help and support around mental health and well-being.



East Lancashire based Armed Forces charity supporting those who have served in any of the branches of the armed forces, emergency services and their families.

As well as...

Chorley Veterans
Dig In North West CIO
Halton Veterans
Leyland Veterans Café
Preston Recovery Unit, Fulwood Barracks

Blackpool & Fylde Veterans
MESH



Community Engagement



Several Scouting groups helped with building projects at the Retreat in return for learning bushcraft skills.



Brookfield School Preston DofE Group made regular visits to Belisama's to help build a deer fence from natural materials.



We are collaborating with John Moore's University (Liverpool) on several research projects:

- 1) Attitudes toward climate change
- 2) Carbon monoxide and its effect on physical and mental well-being
- 3) Architecture and primitive structure methods
- 4) Forest Art



Preston based company Fern Innovation are conducting an aerial site survey as a precursor to the installation of a micro-turbine in the river and rainwater collection tanks with the intention of providing hydro-electric power. The latter will also provide running water.



Myerscough College and Belisama's Retreat have collaborated on a new initiative to provide resettlement training & work experience for Veterans looking for a career outdoors. The new initiative, "Adult Skills Training for Forces Veterans" from Myerscough College is aimed at supporting the Armed Forces Community and the College's commitment to the Armed Forces Covenant.



LCC's Children & Families Outreach Service visit the retreat regularly with clients.

Belisama's are discussing the use of the Retreat with Lancashire County Council as a location for forest schools as well as the potential for other woodland areas to be utilised as community retreats.



The best Butchers in Lancashire

Support



A grant of £9800 from the National Lottery Community fund.



A grant of £70,000 (over two years) from the Armed Forces Covenant Fund Trust "Positive Pathways programme".



Press



Belisama's Retreat has featured in newspaper articles in the Lancashire Telegraph, Lancashire Evening Post and the Big Issue and is to be featured in a new book "For The Love Of Trees" by published Scottish Author, Vicky Allan.

Director's JP Marriot and Steve Robinson met with HRH the Duke of Kent at his visit to the Leyland Veteran's Café and in June 2020, the Retreat was awarded a Certificate of Commendation by the Lord Lieutenant of Lancashire, Lord Shuttleworth.

The Retreat has an established digital presence in the form of our regularly updated website and social media channels featuring a mix of news, wildlife trailcam footage, events promotional videos.

<https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/15809341.army-veteran-needs-new-recruits-at-retreat-to-help-soldiers-battling-ptsd/>

<https://www.bigissuenorth.com/news/2020/03/bushcraft-for-vets/>

<https://www.lancashire.gov.uk/media/916131/afc-news-issue-2-april-2020.pdf>

<https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/18238040.veterans-woodland-retreat-preston-thriving-70k-funding/>



<https://www.lancashiretelegraph.co.uk/news/18601250.ex-soldier-helping-army-veterans-back-feet-burnley/>

https://www.nwrfca.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/2020_Order_of_the_Day_Lancashire-1.pdf

Financial Statement

Sales	£2,910
Grant awards	£48,233
Donations	£3,825
Total income	£54,968
Administrative Expenses	£35,568
Balance	£19,400

During the last twelve months we have received grants from the National Lottery Community Fund (£9,984) and the Armed Forces Covenant Fund's "Positive Pathways" Programme (£70,000 over two years).

In addition, we have received community donations from the "Well Oiled" Motorcycle Club who raised £3,500 for us at their "Saddle up and Sup" event in March and kind donations of building materials, food and equipment from several private individuals. This generosity and faith in Belisama's have helped a great number of Veterans in need. Thank you.

COVID-19 restrictions impacted heavily on commercial activities with fundraising and marketing events including the UK Bushcraft Show 2020, the Royal Lancashire Show and various Armed Forces day events being cancelled or, postponed as were our programme of wilderness skills courses for which we had bookings in excess of 100 customers.

Contact us

Whether you are part of the armed forces community or not you are welcome to get involved. To find out more about volunteering take a look at:

<https://belisamasretreat.org>

<https://www.facebook.com/Belisamasretreat/>

https://www.instagram.com/belisama_retreat/

To make a cash donation please visit: <https://belisamasretreat.org/donate-to-belisamas-retreat/>



APPENDICES

Services, Corps and Regiments

During the year we have been visited by Veterans and serving personnel from the following units:

Adjutant General Corps
Argyll and Sutherland
Highlanders
Army Catering Corps
Army Physical Training
Corps
Cheshire Regiment
Coldstream Guards
Corps of Royal Engineers
Duke of Lancaster's
Regiment
Grenadier Guards
Intelligence Corps
Kings Own Scottish
Borderers

Kings Regiment
19/21st Lancers
Light Infantry
Mercian Regiment
Parachute Regiment
Prince of Wales's Own
Regiment of Yorkshire
The Rifles
Queens Lancashire Regiment
Royal Air Force
Royal Logistics Corp
Royal Army Ordnance
Corps

Royal Corps of Signals
Royal Corps of Transport
Royal Dragoon Guards
Royal Electrical & Mechanical
Engineers
Royal Green Jackets
Royal Marines
Royal Military Police
Royal Navy
Royal Regiment of Artillery
Royal Regiment of Fusiliers
Scots Guards
Special Air Service
Women's Royal Army Corps
The Yorkshire Regiment

Acknowledgements

Our gratitude goes out to the following people and organisations that have donated money, materials or their time to help Belisama's do what we do.

Alan Lord
Andrew Powell
Andrew Woodhead
Andy Clough
Ann Louise Robson
Barbara Ashall
Bernadette McDade
Mr G Bullock
Celia Hynes
Denise Robinson
Dr Alison Backen
Dr Ariel Edesess
Dr Ken & Mrs Jean Backen
Dr PJ & Mrs PH Robinson
Helen Nolan
Ian Barber
John Cordingley
John Dickens

Ian Mc
Ian Robertson
Jane Robinson
Laura Ingham
Louisa Poulton
Louise Fairfield
Lindsay Melia
Michael Loughran
Neil Adams
Pamela Miron
Paul Headen
Paul White
Roger Dix
Steven Pates
Tenene Chambers
Tony Whiston
Ruth Shaw

Fern Innovation
Forestry Commission
GQ Signs Ltd
Huntley's of Salmesbury
Lancashire Armed Forces
Covenant HubLeyland Scout
group
M66 Car Sales Ltd
Mission Motorsport
Myerscough College
Natural England
North East Bushcraft Group
103 Regiment, Royal Artillery
Ribble & District Angling
Club
Rick T Outdoor Adventures
Well-Oiled MCC
Wigan Armed Forces HQ



Jonathan Greenwood
Julie Conolly
Kath Giles
Keith Fallon

Bowland Mountain Rescue
Team
Chorley Scout group
Crafted Knife Co

Workplace Safety Group
Veterans Live