

The History of Moor Green Allotments



To celebrate the 40th anniversary
September 2016

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THE MOSELEY SOCIETY

moseley-society.org.uk/local-history

moorgreenallotments.co.uk



Painting courtesy of a current plot holder at Moor Green

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Moor Green Allotments. Photo courtesy of a current plot holder.

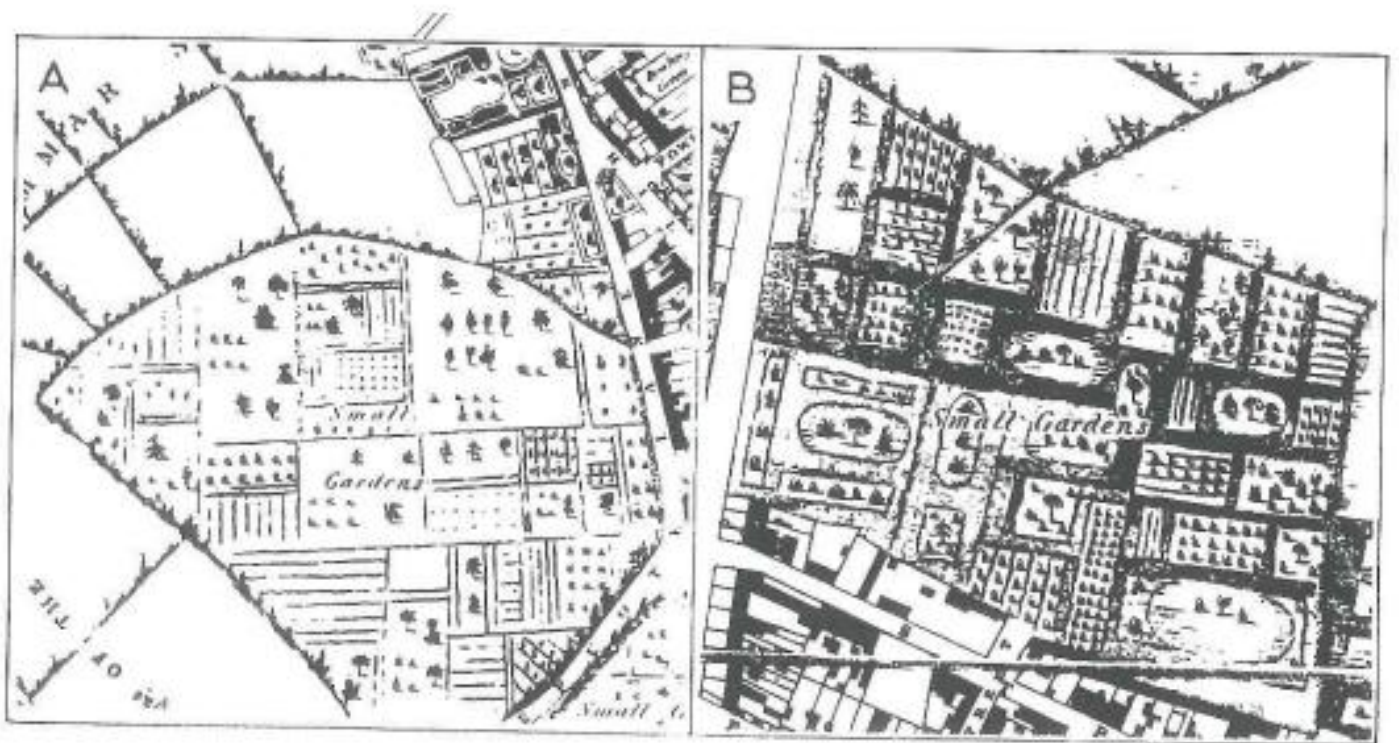
The origins of allotments in Birmingham

Many people assume that allotments began in the 1800s, with the campaign to provide rural agricultural labourers with an area for cultivation. Allotments were seen as a way to stop these men relying on poor law relief and curbing unrest as mechanisation was introduced and wages fell. 300, 000 allotments had been created by the end of the 19th century, but did little to stem migration to urban areas.

In fact rural to urban migration had already created another precursor to the modern allotment almost 100 years before. From 1700 there was increased demand for housing, but also for gardens, in growing industrial towns. Small gardens were created on the edge of the built up area, although many were short-lived as land was re-used for building. By 1765 they were known as 'Guinea Gardens' in Birmingham due to their annual rent of one guinea, a large sum compared to average wages at the time. The gardens were tended by middle class families and used for growing flowers as often as vegetables—seen as a form of recreation as well as a source of fresh food. There were 'guinea gardens' across the city, reaching their peak in the 1820-30s, before pressure from development started reducing the number. Sadly only 3 of these early sites had survived, albeit as allotments, by 1977.

However it was not just the middle class hobbyist who wanted a garden in the city, there were also poorer workers who needed to supplement the family diet with home grown food. This meant that allotments based on the rural model also became a feature of the Birmingham landscape, in fact existing alongside 'guinea gardens' for at least fifty years. According to Professor Harry Thorpe 'the two concepts were so different in character and clientele that neither seems to have exerted much influence on the other.'

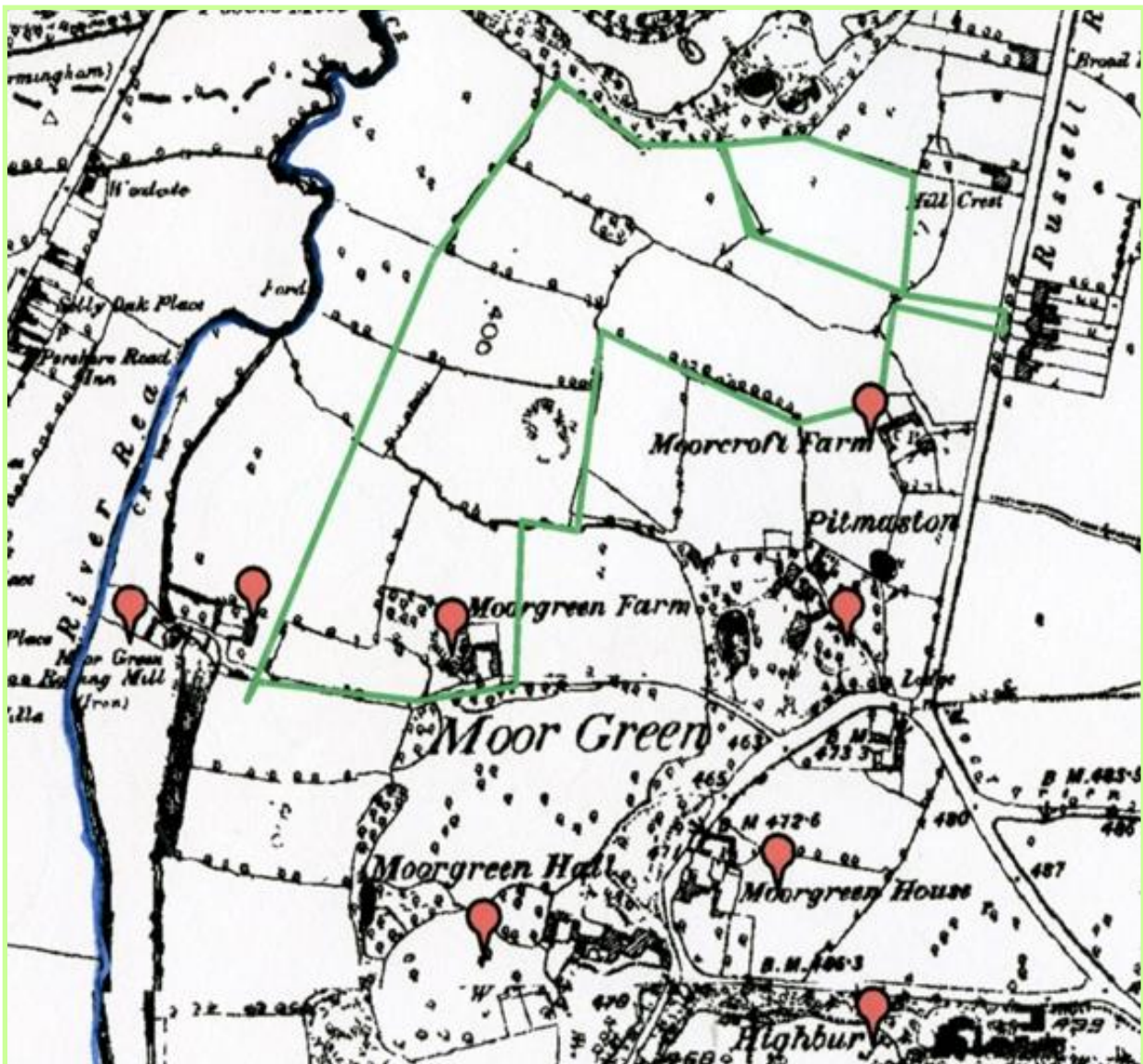
In 1890 there were 14 allotment sites in Birmingham, but growth was rapid with 41 sites by 1903. Most of these early sites were privately owned, and they were often seen as a way of gaining income from otherwise low value land which was awaiting development.



Guinea gardens in Birmingham 1824-5 from survey by J. Pigott Smith

Moor Green in the 19th century

In 1841 when the Tithe Map was drawn, Moor Green was a rural area of scattered farms and cottages on land owned by the Taylor, Russell and Ryland families. By the 1880s the land was owned by Mrs Partridge's Trust, W.F.Taylor and J.C. Holder. Wealthy, important businessmen built homes there, along with some middle-class incomers. There are several named buildings shown on the map of Moor Green from the 1890s and each has a fascinating history, full details of which can be found on the website.



Moor Green in the 1890s. Sites of interest are marked in red and the outline of the future allotment site is shown in green.

Moor Green Farm, Moorcroft Farm and ***Cottage Farm*** were the homes of tenant farmers, farm labourers and a bailiff during the 19th century. Sadly all three properties were demolished during the 20th century.



Moorcroft Farm. Photograph of an oil painting courtesy of Geoffrey Collett, a descendent of George Edward Collett who lived there in 1890.

Moor Green Lane itself remained largely rural with few houses. *The Firs* was built about 1886, *Heatherdene* in 1891 and *Englefield* around 1898.

Moor Green Forge or ***Farmons Mill***, was first recorded in 1597. By the 1800s this was a blade mill and later operated as a rolling mill until about 1880.

Pitmaston House was built in 1870 on the site previously occupied by *Moor Green Cottage* and was owned by the wealthy Holder family, millers, brewers and distillers. The house was rebuilt in the early 1930s in a neo-Classical style as headquarters for the *Ideal Benefit Society*, Grade II listed in 2003 and sold to the Church of Scientology in 2007.

John Holder Bart. was an important local figure, he was Deputy Lord Lieutenant and High Sheriff of Worcestershire, and was also a JP for Birmingham and Worcestershire.



The Holders were miniature railway enthusiasts and built a 10¼ inch gauge track around the grounds of the house in 1898.

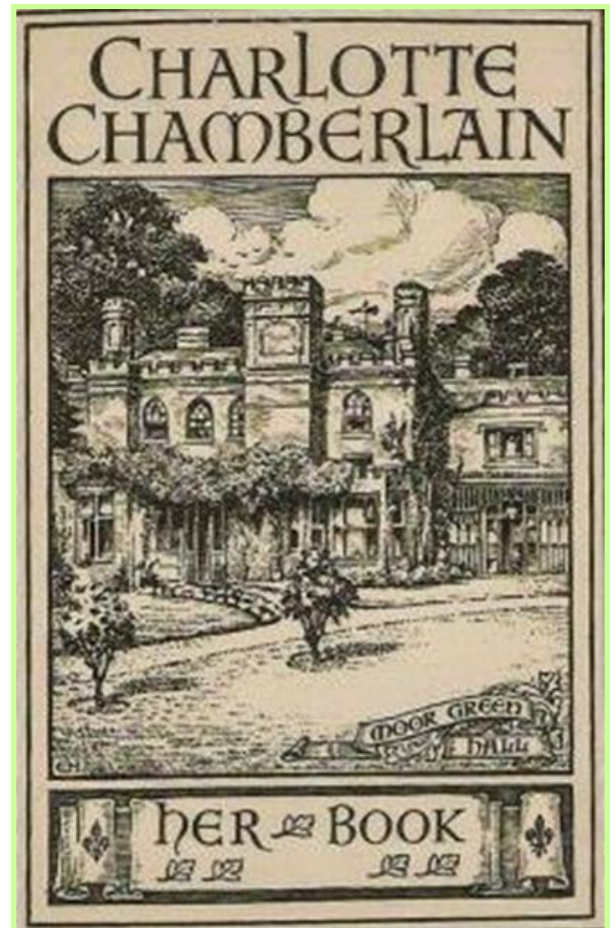
Highbury was built in 1878 for Joseph Chamberlain, who lived there with his family until his death in 1914.

Highbury was noted for its electric lighting, conservatories & orchid house.



Moor Green Hall, a gothic crenelated building, was the home of Arthur Chamberlain, Joseph Chamberlain's brother. The Red Cross used the house during WWI as a military hospital. It was demolished in the 1920s.

Moor Green House was the home of Sir John Holder's son and used during WWI as a hostel for Belgian refugees and then as a military hospital. The house was replaced in 1920 by the Britannic Assurance office block, which was later converted into luxury flats.



Moor Green Hall



Belgian
refugees at
Moor Green
House

WWI and post-war allotment provision

At the beginning of the 20th century, new government legislation and high demand for urban allotments encouraged local authorities to improve allotment provision. Birmingham was notable for its commitment, with 2,361 plots by 1912.



'Short of sugar, short of spuds'
WWI postcard (Library of Birmingham)

Birmingham continued to lead the way during WWI, with 20,000 plots. Many war-time allotments were created on requisitioned land and in public spaces including Cannon Hill Park. After the war most of the allotments were quickly returned to their previous uses, despite continuing rationing.

However, unlike some local authorities, Birmingham did purchase several hundred acres of land in order to retain allotment sites.

In the post-war period the economic importance of allotments continued to be high, firstly for returning war veterans including those with life changing injuries, needing time to get back on their feet. Many found gardening to be therapeutic for the mind and beneficial to their health as well as helping support their families.

The same would be found by many unemployed men in the 1920s and 1930s who were provided with assistance to start an allotment through the Society of Friends 'Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed' scheme. The scheme gave small grants for renting an allotment and supplied seeds, tools and fertilisers at a reduced price. The allotments helped keep plot holders fit for a time when work was available. The men were also allowed to sell up to 3 shillings worth of produce a week without losing unemployment benefit.



Show winning
produce grown
with seeds
supplied by SOF
scheme
Birmingham
Gazette March
26 1935
(Library of
Birmingham)

The 'roots' of Moor Green Allotments

There have been allotment gardens on the Moor Green site since at least the interwar period, probably developed privately in response to demand for plots from those on low incomes and especially the unemployed.



Unemployed men digging an allotment, 1930s.

Approximately 34 acres was let to the Allotments Committee by landowners. In 1931, the 29.3 acre Russell Road sites were obtained from the Ideal Benefit Society.

In 1932, Moor Green Allotments was nominated by *The Birmingham Allotments for the Unemployed Committee* (part of BCC Allotment Committee) in a scheme to help 1000 unemployed men obtain and cultivate allotments, during a brief period of government support for the program begun by the Society of Friends.

These 'Allotments for the Unemployed' were supervised by William Northey of the London Friends' Allotments Scheme. By 1932 the SOF had helped 61,200 applicants across the country.



Between 1932 and 1934, *Moor Green Farm* was an Occupational Centre where unemployed men could learn about 'pig breeding, poultry rearing and land cultivation.'

The Prince of Wales visited in 1934 when in Birmingham to lay the foundation stone for the Birmingham University Medical School.



In 1938, the Parks Committee negotiated with the Taylor Settled Estates to buy about 70 acres of land at *Moor Green Farm*, including Moor Green Farmhouse and buildings and three cottages and gardens, together with about 8 acres of woodland. The tenancies already let to the Allotments Committee by the landowners were continued as allotments.



Moor Green Allotments, 1933.

In 1939, the 10.5 acres of land at Moor Green held on an annual tenancy of £3 per acre by the Parks Department from 1929 was bought by the Allotments Department.

In 1959 a further 4.5 acres was added.

WWII and Dig for Victory

The lessons learned during WWI and as a result of the SOF scheme, put both the British government and public in a stronger position to meet the challenges of food provision during WWII. At the start of the war there were 740,000 allotments in England and Wales, by 1943 there were 1.75 million, created on every available piece of land.

Horticultural education played an important role in helping everyone 'Dig for Victory' and demonstration plots were set up in parks across Birmingham.



Demonstration
allotment, part of 105
acres cultivated by
the Parks Committee.

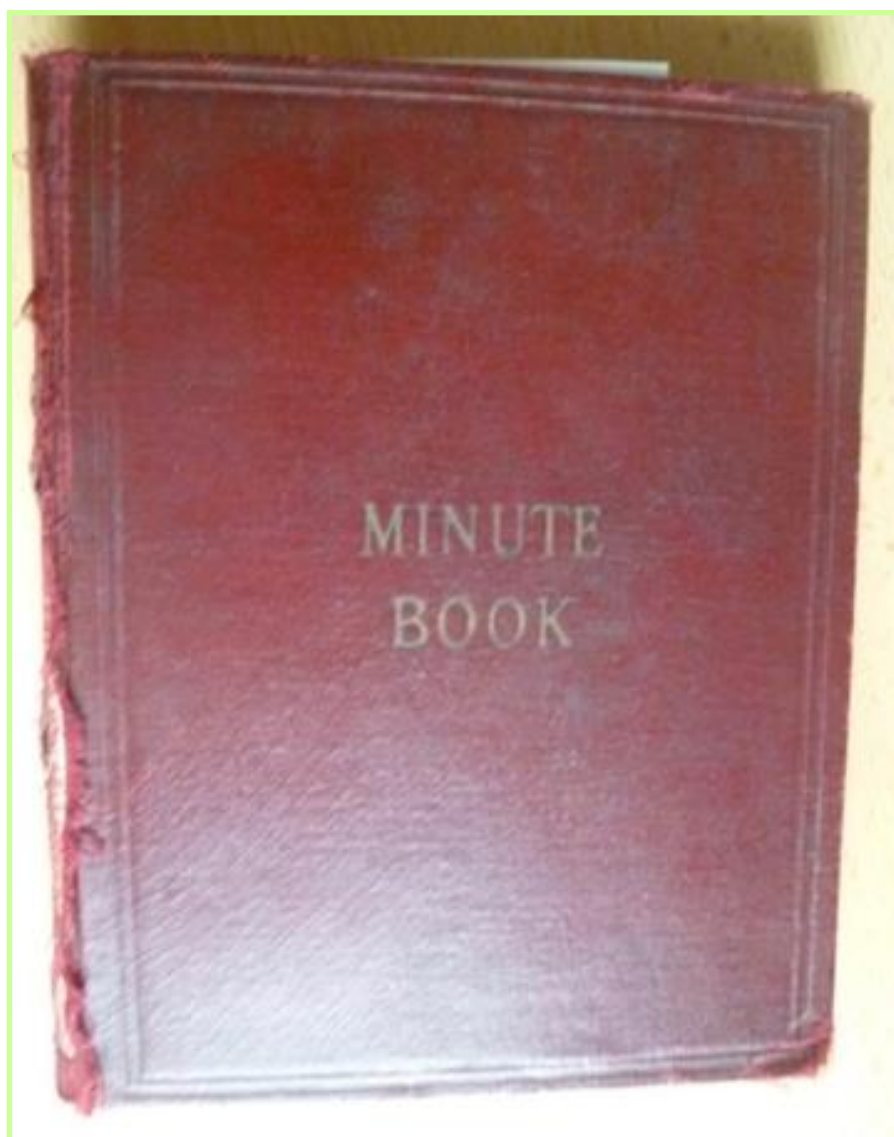
Evening dispatch 14th
February 1941

(Library of
Birmingham)

After the war, rationing of certain foodstuffs continued until 1954, so the importance of allotments remained high. Sadly once again, many temporary allotments had to be quickly relinquished, especially as land was needed for new infrastructure, homes and schools.

Moseley and District Allotments Association Minute Book 1933-1942

The only surviving twentieth-century Minute Book affords a range of fascinating insights. The Association was run by a committee and its chairman was the Rev. C. Whitfield (1935-1946) who lived at 123, Sandford Road, Moseley, where he ran a school. Rev Whitfield was a significant presence in the Allotments Movement as President of the Birmingham and District Allotments Council and the Allotments Advisory Committee and a member of the National Executive of the Allotments Association.



The committee was a conscientious group of men, its composition hardly changing over the period. They met more or less monthly and had an Annual General Meeting yearly. The Association had an excellent reputation in the City Council for good work for the unemployed and the allotment movement generally and representatives were co-opted on *The Allotments Committee of Birmingham City Council*.

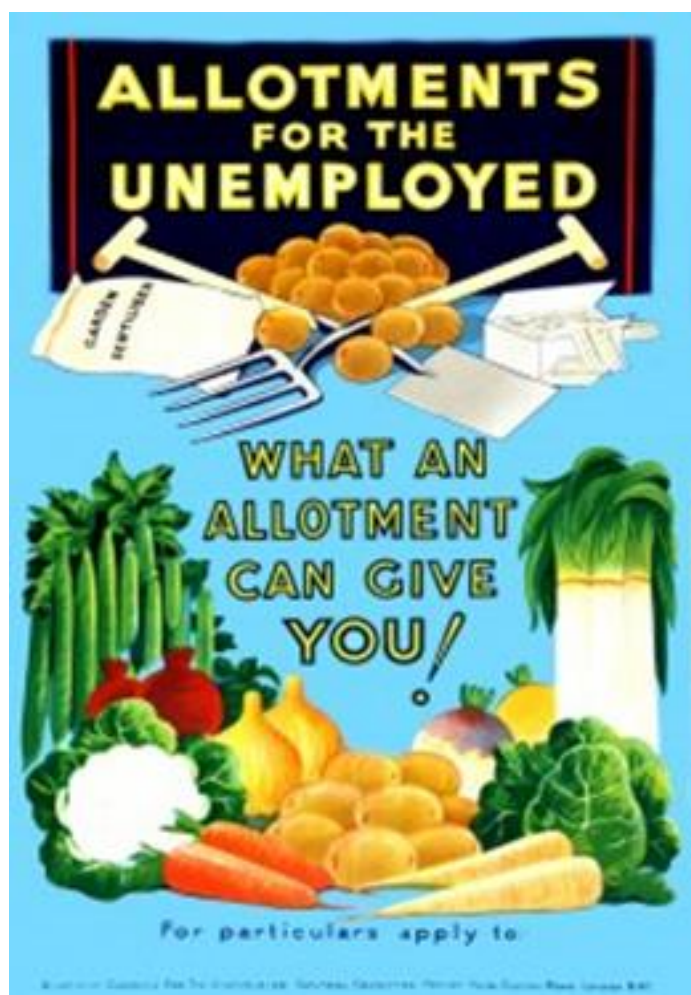


Trees in
Moor Green
Lane 1934

Birmingham City Allotments Department helped with unpaid rents, ashes for roadways, burst taps, cutting down weeds and trees, cutting and laying hedges and clearing ditches. The Association supported the National Allotments Society and National Conferences were attended by Rev C Whitfield. The Committee had connections to Pitmaston Allotments, Tenbury Road Allotments and the Selly Oak Site, but an attempt to acquire Billesley Lane Allotments failed.

In June 1936 the tenancy of *Moor Green Farm* buildings was accepted and the decision was made to form a club which replaced 'the Hut' or 'HQ' as the meeting place. In July 1937 the Club became a licensed club 'in a modest way' with Rev Whitfield insisting that 'Our good reputation must be maintained.' The Club was limited to male members and *Ansell's Ales* only were served.

Members paid 2/6 per year. Club Opening hours in 1937 were Monday to Friday, 6 to 9.30 p.m., Saturdays, 12 to 2 p.m., 6 to 9.30 p.m., and Sundays and Good Fridays, 12 to 2 p.m., and 6.30 to 9.30 p.m.

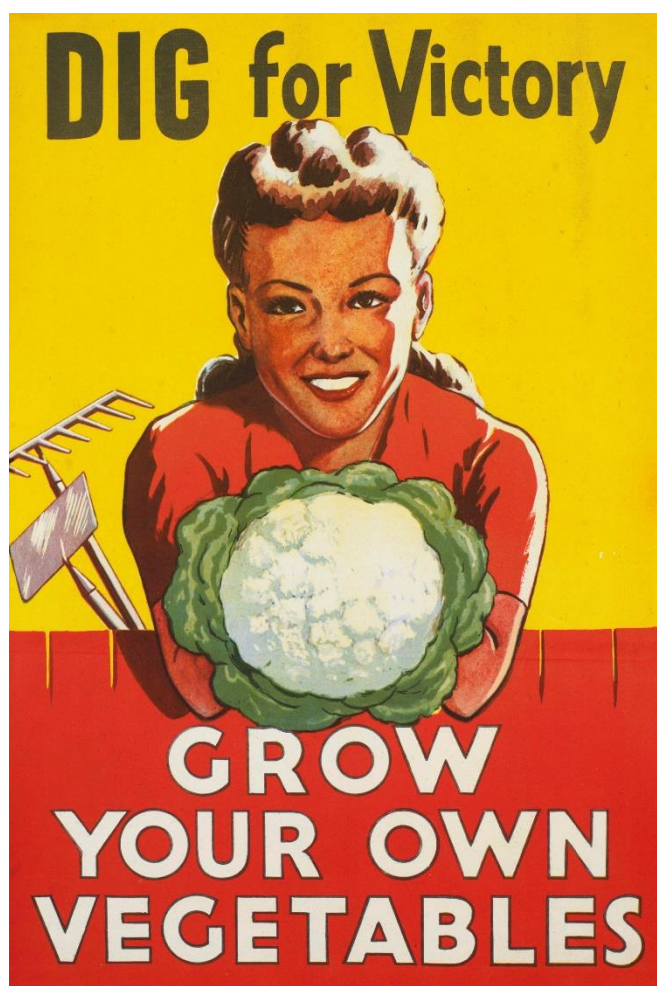


The Association made seeds, plants and seed potatoes available to plot-holders from The Society of Friends Scheme set up in 1932 and from Bournville and the American Scheme of 1941. Moor Green became responsible for the latter in 1942 with the Secretary acting as distributing Agent for this district and dealing with more than one third of the available supply.

The Association also made fertilisers available to plot-holders, including Veg-U-Mus,' produced by *Birmingham City Salvage Department*, Blood and Bone, Ashes, and Lime from 'The Land Fertility Scheme.'

Every year some plot-holders went to Avoncroft Training Centre and lectures were regularly arranged at the Club.

There are few references to women in these Minutes. The only entry describes a Mrs Bailey in 1941. Her 'unfortunate circumstances' received sympathy, but a formal date was fixed for 14 August 'by which date cultivation must be well in hand and rent paid.' Notices to quit were sent out and Mrs Bailey's tenancy terminated with 20/- returned to her. The only other mention was the thanks accorded to the ladies following the 1935 Committee Supper!



Any contribution of women to the 'Dig for Victory' Campaign somehow escaped mention in the minutes book...

A number of problems beset the committee, including getting rents paid on time or at all, under-cultivation, untidy plots and vacant plots caused by a bad season, more men in work and slum clearance, as well as the legality of selling surplus fruit and vegetables, road and path maintenance, anti-social behaviour, particularly breaking into huts and stealing and trespassing. However, in 1936, Moor Green came second in an inspection of all allotments in Birmingham.

Animal incursions onto the allotments were a particular problem. Pigs were straying in from the farm in 1934, but cattle were the greatest problem. They strayed over the stream from the farm despite the barbed wire, a fence and a gate. Rabbits too caused havoc!



A modern 'animal incursion' at Moor Green, although much less problematic!
Photo courtesy of a current plot holder.

On the other hand, there were produce shows with prizes, prizes for the best-kept plots, free Gardening Calendars, Tripe and Ham and Beef Suppers, 'Fun and Darts' Competitions, Award of Merit Competitions, visits to film shows and visits to and from other allotments and groups, including Moseley Toc H.



The Association gave to Charity, including plot-holders who were sick or bombed out of their homes, widows of plot-holders, The Society of Friends, The Police Sports, Selly Oak Hospital and The Hospital Fund and in 1942 a Benevolent Fund was set up.

WWII impacted on Moor Green allotments. The Rev Whitfield and Messrs Angus, Ballinger and Dornay were bombed out of their homes and accorded a 'Vote of Sympathy.'

Mr S. Evans was praised for his prompt action in dealing with an incendiary bomb which pierced the roof of the club room in 1940.

Moor Green had a lucky escape, thanks to Mr Evans.

Other parts of Moseley weren't so fortunate, like these houses on the Moseley Road.
(Birmingham Mail)

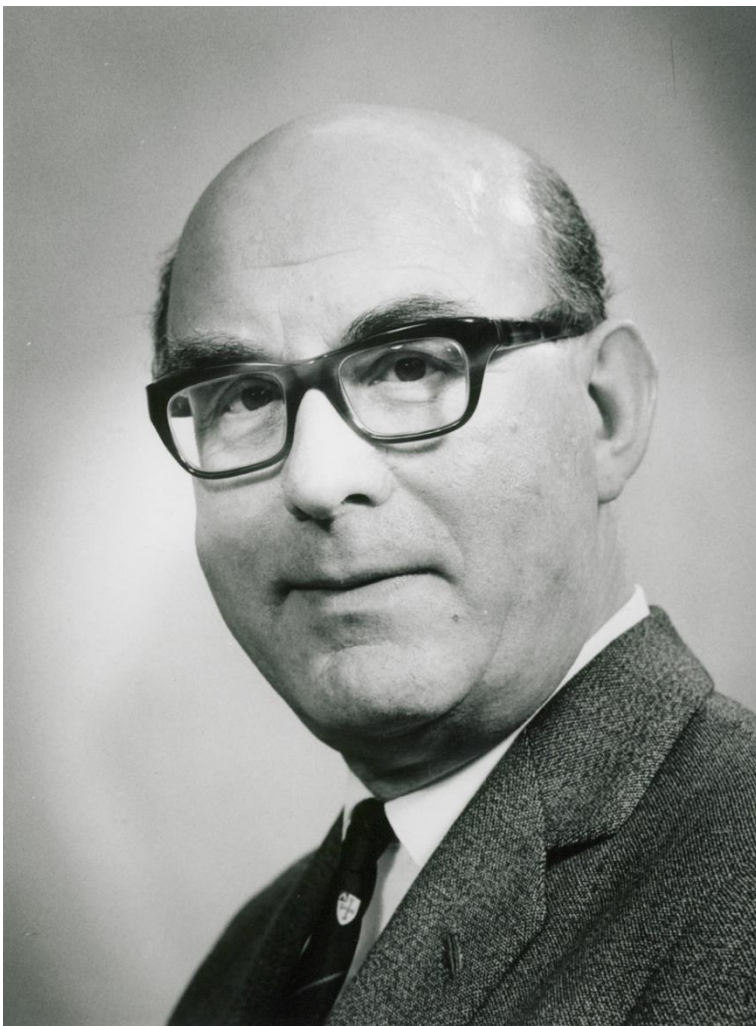


The 'Dig for Victory' campaign was launched by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1940 to help combat food shortages in Britain and Rationing began in the same year. Many enlisted in the 'Allotment Army' and maximum cultivation was the key message during the war years. The Association 'had to make the best arrangements under the difficult circumstances.' The Secretary appealed for the Association to let more plots 'in view of the need for greater food production in the National Crisis.' In 1941 the meadow was pegged out, ploughed and laid out.

During 1941 and 1942, there was concern at the possible rationing of *Ansell's*. The basic beer ration was 27 gallons, but, though 36 gallons was to be sent for the present, it was 'strongly emphasised that this was totally inadequate.'

Post-war allotments

During the 1960s and 1970s, the pressure to develop allotment land continued, at a time when numbers of plot holders were also declining. In 1965 there were 10,931 plots in Birmingham but many were described in *The Sunday Mercury* as 'quite definitely idle'. Part of the problem was fear that sites would be imminently lost to development, making even those who still wanted an allotment feel dispirited. Nationally there was a lot of pressure to reuse allotment land, and some resentment of the privileged position of plot holders, who paid low rents for otherwise valuable land.



The decision of what to do with allotment land was a hard one, and so a Committee of inquiry into allotments was appointed in 1965, led by Harry Thorpe, who was head of Geography at the University of Birmingham.

Professor Harry Thorpe
(Library of Birmingham)

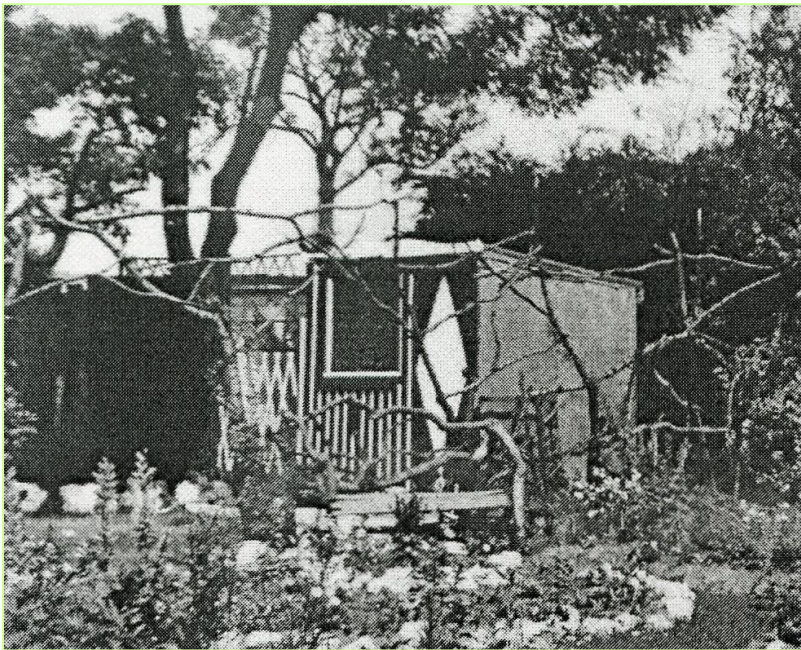
The Thorpe Report

The Thorpe Report began in 1965 and was published in 1969, totalling nearly 500 pages and making 54 major recommendations about allotment improvement.

One feature of the report was results from a national questionnaire, which showed that for most plot holders recreational motivation was now greater than economic need to 'grow your own'. For the first time since 'guinea gardens' the focus for allotments was now gardening as a hobby. This made sense at a time when rationing had ended, unemployment fell and the nation prospered. Many of Thorpe's recommendations were to accommodate this change of emphasis, following the continental model of 'leisure gardens' which would encourage a high standard of maintenance, with good amenities including toilets, pavilions and fully landscaped grounds. He believed in making plots easily available to those who did not otherwise have access to outside space, such as flat-dwellers, and in providing grants for pensioners to remove financial barriers. Thorpe also believed security of tenure was essential to the survival of the movement. He wanted to see the existing legislation replaced with a single act, improving protection against redevelopment. Sadly by the time the Thorpe report was complete there was little political will to make changes.

Leisure Gardening at Moor Green

There was also some resistance to Thorpe's ideas from plot holders themselves. For example the 6,000 remaining plot holders in Birmingham were soundly opposed to relinquishing their individual sheds which Thorpe had described as 'ramshackle huts'.



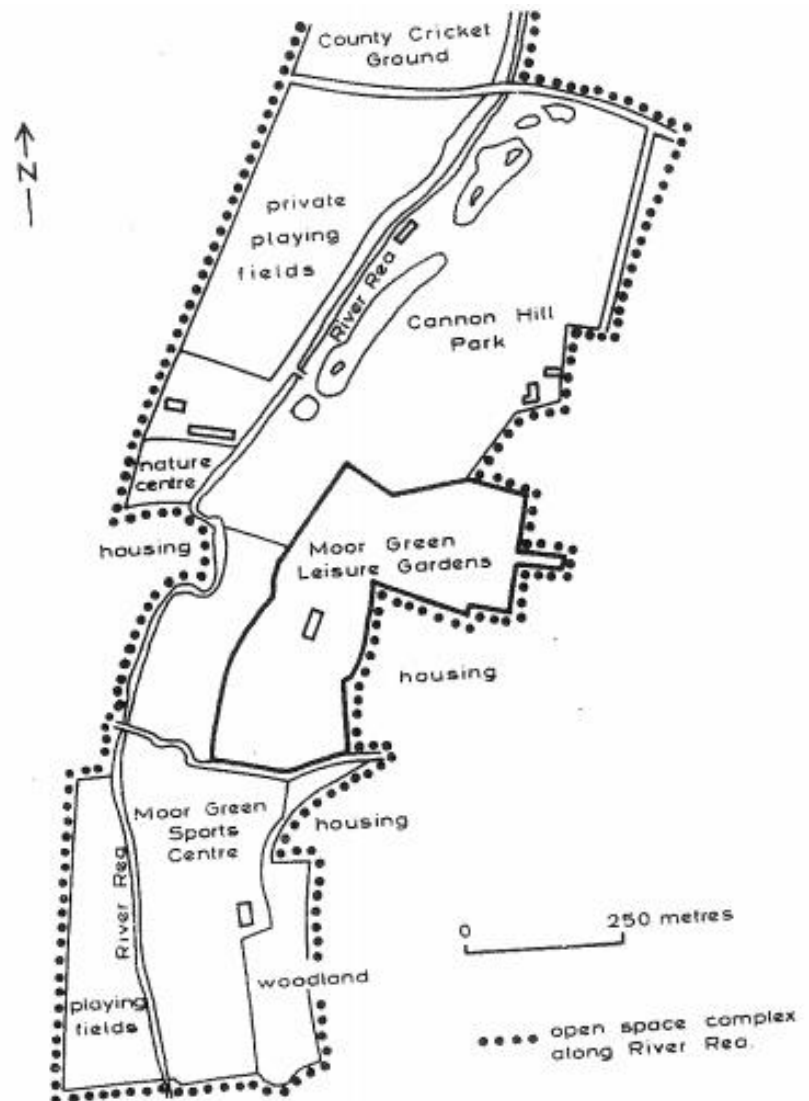
A 'Ramshackle' shed at Moor Green in 1933
—it's successors did not impress Prof. Thorpe

Thorpe was however not deterred from continuing his research and created a Leisure Gardens research unit within the school of Geography. They began a report about rationalisation of urban allotment systems,

using Birmingham as a case study, this work continued until his death in 1977. At that time, Birmingham was the largest autonomous allotments authority in Britain with 9,000 plots, making the city an ideal testing ground. As well as gathering city wide data a number of model sites were created, to show the advantages of leisure gardening, one of these sites was Moor Green. In fact Moor Green was suggested as the first leisure garden site in 1969, but the redevelopment plan was initially rejected.

However in 1971, after the Quinton Nurseries site had been landscaped, another proposal for the Moor Green Farm and Russell Road sites was accepted. The combined site was thereafter known as Moor Green and managed by the Moseley and District Allotment Holders Association.

One of the reasons the Moor Green site was considered ideal was the location—both the commanding views across the Rea valley, and the position as part of a larger complex of other open spaces used for recreation.



Location of Moor Green within 'open space complex' along River Rea (Thorpe et al. 1977)



The view from Moor Green. Photo courtesy of current plot holder.

Before work was carried out, both sites had a hut or community centre and stores, a toilet block and a limited water supply. The plan was to completely re-lay both sites to meet leisure garden standards. Work began by creating new toilets, store buildings and community centre with car park to the rear, tarmac roads and by extending the water supply to the whole site. The 232 plots were laid out in a series of small groups facing a central planted and turfed area.

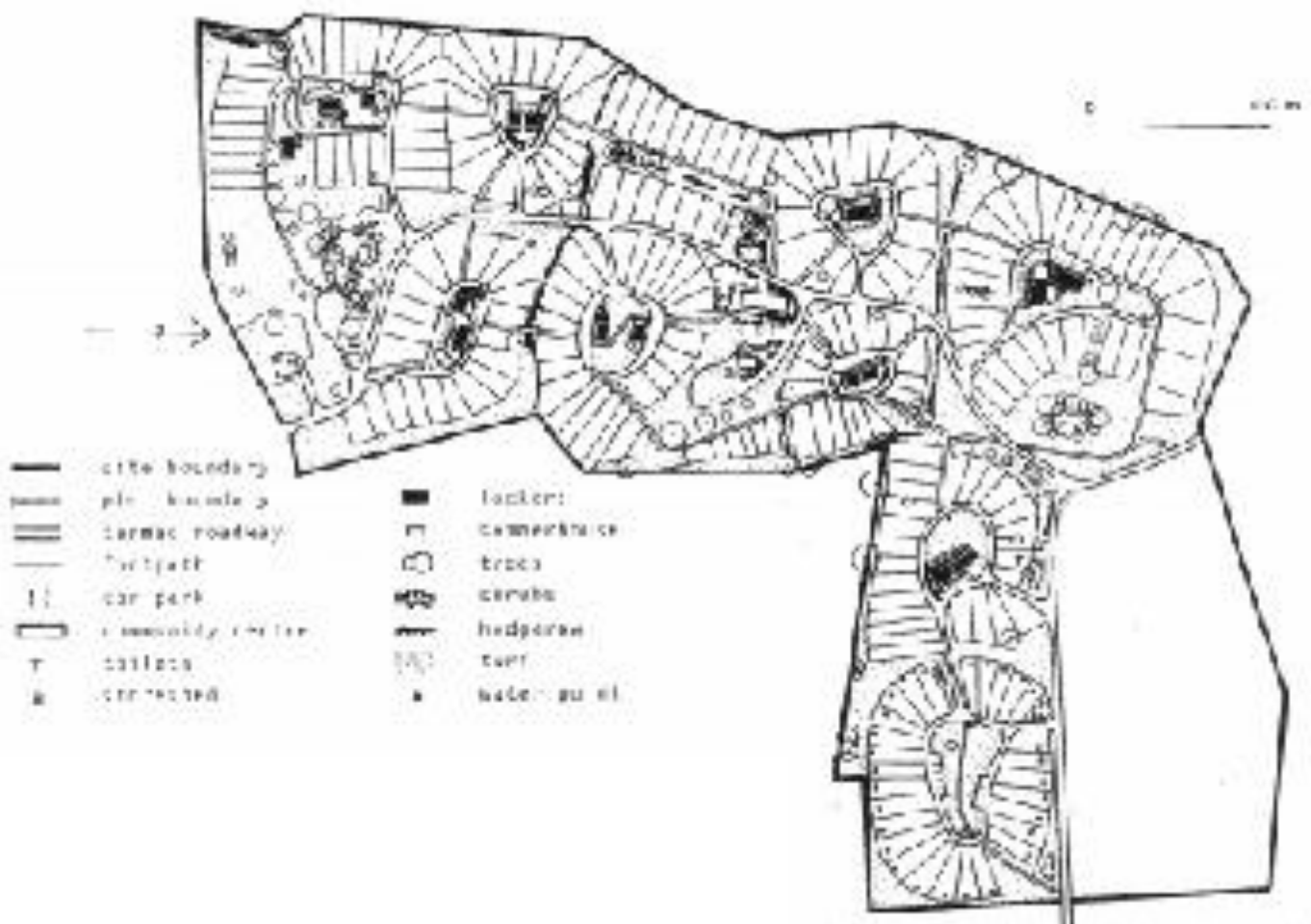


Aerial photo of the leisure gardens in 1976. Outline of the site has been added in green.

The 28 plots by the Russell Road entrance were provided with individual summerhouses, and all other plots with a locker in shared blocks.



There was extensive amenity planting near the community centre and 5 acres close to Cannon Hill Park were grassed and set aside for future need to increase the number of plots. The total cost of the modernisation programme was £128,500. The redevelopment site was to be managed by Moseley and District Allotment Holders Association Limited.



The new site was opened by HRH Princess Alice on Wednesday 8th September 1976, during the International Leisure Gardens Congress. A tree was planted in front of the building during this ceremony.



The conference was a chance not just to discuss Leisure Gardening but also to visit the model sites and for the Research Unit to showcase their ideas to the delegates.



After Thorpe

Although Moor Green prospered during the 1970s and onwards thanks to forward thinking and investment, allotments in general were not so fortunate. Other than a slight upswing in the late 1970s, often attributed to the ‘good life effect’, but probably also related to economic downturn and increased food prices, the overall trend for allotment numbers in the later part of the 20th century was a downward spiral. More and more sites were lost to development, perpetuating a cycle where even those who wanted an allotment were discouraged by the lack of security for their plots. The rate of allotment site closures began to slow in the 1990s, but only because there were fewer sites left without statutory protection.

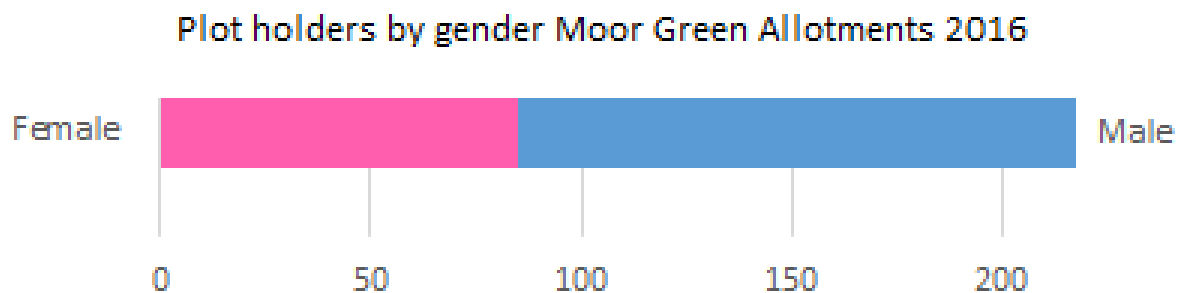
Sadly the recommendations of the Thorpe Report had been ignored, and there was little political will to change legislation and protect the remaining sites, even though a report, published in 1998, entitled *Inquiry into the Future for Allotments*, once again emphasised the benefits of allotments to modern urban life – providing fresh food, open space, educational and therapeutic benefits. Luckily for allotment lovers, those benefits were eventually discovered by the wider public as the 21st century began.

The Changing Face of Moor Green

The bright new future of allotments was based partly on an understanding of the value of allotments to the planet as part of sustainable food production, especially reducing food miles. A new generation also got started on growing their own, for a variety of reasons, some economic (especially since the 2008 recession) but also for recreation and other personal benefits.

Moor Green reflects the new face of allotment gardening with a vibrant and diverse community of plot holders. At present there are 250 plots, with 218 plot holders, with some individuals therefore cultivating more than one plot.

Gender



Of the plot holders in 2016, 133 are men and 85 are women, a much more balanced picture than is suggested by the limited number of 'ladies' mentioned in the Minute Book for 1933-1942! However we know that there were times when women were encouraged to take up allotment gardening, especially during the world wars.

In wartime, women were encouraged to do all the labour themselves. At most other times heavy work such as digging and manure spreading were done by men whilst women and children would take on lighter tasks such as weeding, watering and picking, leaving the possibility that many women who helped cultivate an allotment are 'hidden' by their husband or father being the named plot holder.

Certainly Thorpe believed this was the case when only 5.7% of named plot holders in Birmingham in 1970 were women. At that time many people erroneously believed women could not rent a plot in their own right, but increased awareness of women's rights was beginning to change that.



Age

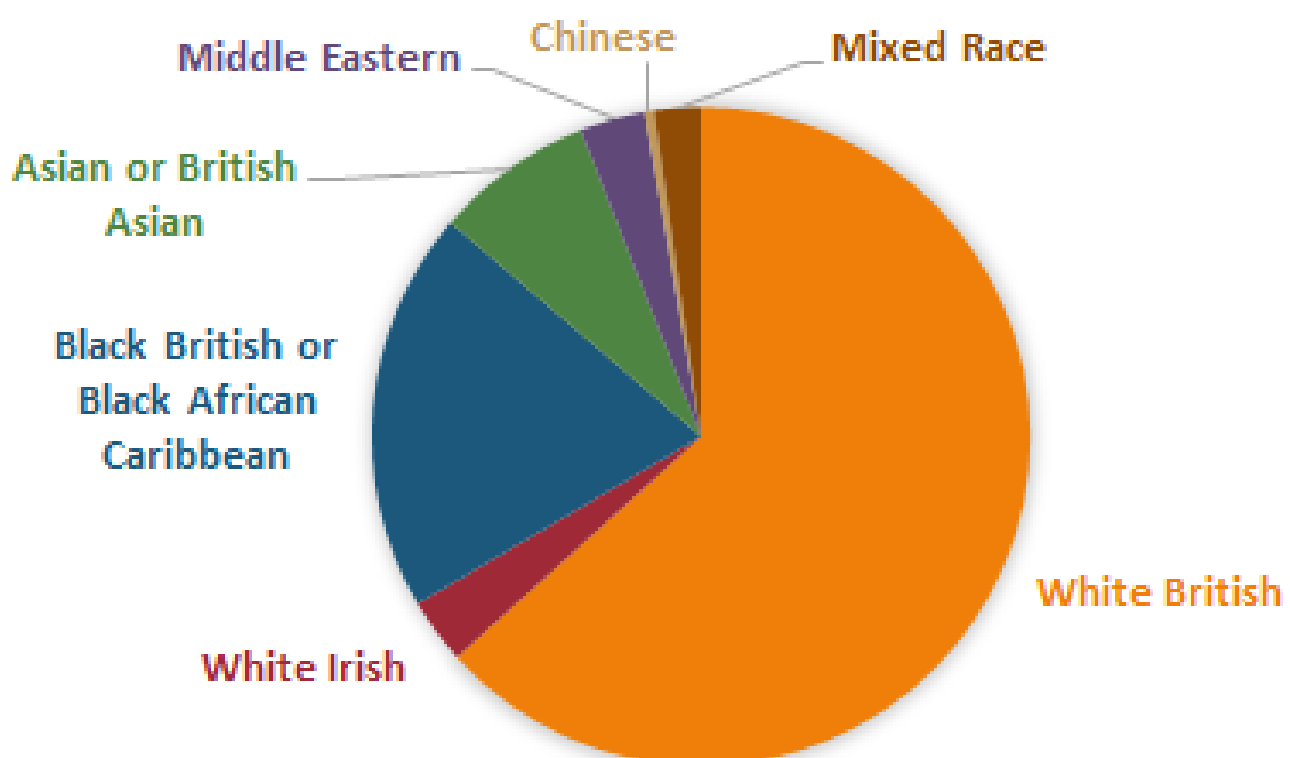
Although there is a perception that most allotment holders are retired, this is not always the case. For much of the 20th century, working age men were the main group considered to benefit from an allotment—especially those who were on a low income or unemployed. However at times when allotments are in decline, such as during the 1960s or 1990s, retired people may be by far the largest group. They are often those who have been long standing plot holders and have most leisure time.

However the renewed interest in allotment gardening among younger people is great for the long-term future, and it seems that at Moor Green plenty of gardeners are starting young, with nine families getting their children or teenagers involved! There are also school children tending communal plots, including pupils from a local school for those with special educational needs.

School children 'growing their own' is not a new phenomenon. During WWII children were encouraged to Dig for Victory, and were sometimes assigned to help absent or infirm plot holders, for instance, in Dudley 400 children tended the plots of servicemen who had been called up to fight.

Culture

In 2016, the plot holders at Moor Green come from a wide range of racial & cultural backgrounds as this chart shows.



In 1977 Thorpe found that demand for leisure gardens was much lower in areas of Birmingham occupied by a 'substantial proportion of New Commonwealth immigrants, where interest in gardening is at present very small', but this is not at all the case today, as Moor Green shows. In fact, for some, an allotment is a chance to grow favourite crops which aren't widely available in supermarkets or create a haven inspired by the places which they left behind.



Carol Moore's Jamaican inspired plot at Moor Green as seen on Gardeners' World

Community

Moor Green has several plots tended by community groups, including the Seventh Day Adventist Church and a charity working with people suffering from Mental Health issues. Research shows though that the social aspect is important to nearly all allotment holders with 92% nationally reporting making friends on their allotments site.



Allotments committee inspecting Russell Road Allotments

Sources

MaDAHAL website—moorgreenallotments.co.uk

Growing Spaces by Lesley Acton

Various papers by Harry Thorpe, Elizabeth B. Galloway and Lynda M. Evans

Allotments in War and Peace by Library of Birmingham

<http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?nojs>

Allotments in the Thorpe Era by Library of Birmingham

<http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinthethorpeera>

Allotments for the unemployed by The Iron Room

<http://theironroom.wordpress.com/2016/04/11/allotments-for-the-unemployed/>

Allotments: then and now by The Iron Room

<http://theironroom.wordpress.com/2013/01/15/allotments-then-and-now/>

Various other websites and primary sources, see Moseley Society History Group or MaDAHAL websites for full details.

moseley-society.org.uk/local-history

moorgreenallotments.co.uk

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