

The History of Moor Green Allotments

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1. The origins of the word 'allotments'

The name 'allotments' comes from the days when the landless village dole was 'allotted.' This was collectively a small, compact block of land divided into individual rented plots of five acres to a quarter acre or less. Fuel could be gathered, cows pastured, or vegetables and bread-corn grown. Allotments then are linked to the stigma of charity and the economic motive.¹

2. The Early History of Moor Green Allotments

To date no primary evidence has indicated the exact date when this site was first developed, but it is believed that there have been allotment gardens on the Moor Green site since at least the interwar period, probably developed privately in response to concerns about unemployment and poverty. The allotments occupied land once owned by the Taylor, Russell and Ryland families (Tithe Map 1841) and later Mrs Partridge's Trust, W.F. Taylor and J.C. Holder (1880s). Approximately thirty four acres was let to the Allotments Committee by landowners. The Moor Green Farm site, 10.5 acres, was held on an annual tenancy of £3 per acre from 1929.² In 1931, The Russell Road sites, 29.3 acres in all and previously held on an annual tenancy agreement at £60

¹University of Birmingham, Special Collections, Cadbury Library (UB/SC/CL), BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, *'The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban Land Use,'* reprinted from 'Geography' Vol 60, Part 3, July 1975 pp, 169-183, p.170.

² UB/SC/CL, Box 9, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case Study of Birmingham*, 20th International Leisure Gardeners' Conference, Birmingham, September 1976, produced by Leisure Gardens Research Unit, Department of Geography, University of Birmingham.

per annum, were obtained from the Ideal Benefit Society.³ Another hint is the involvement of Rev Charles Edward Thomas Whitfield. The Minutes Book of the site for 1933-1942, the only twentieth century document surviving, shows he was the chairperson of the allotment site (See web article 2: 'The Moor Green Minutes Book, 1933-1942'). He lived at 123 Sandford Road, Moseley, and talks about his allotment in 1925 and he was a well-known advocate of allotments locally and nationally during the 1920s and beyond (See web article 3: 'Rev Charles Edward Thomas Whitfield' for details).



'Allotments for the Unemployed,' *Birmingham Gazette*, March 1935.⁴

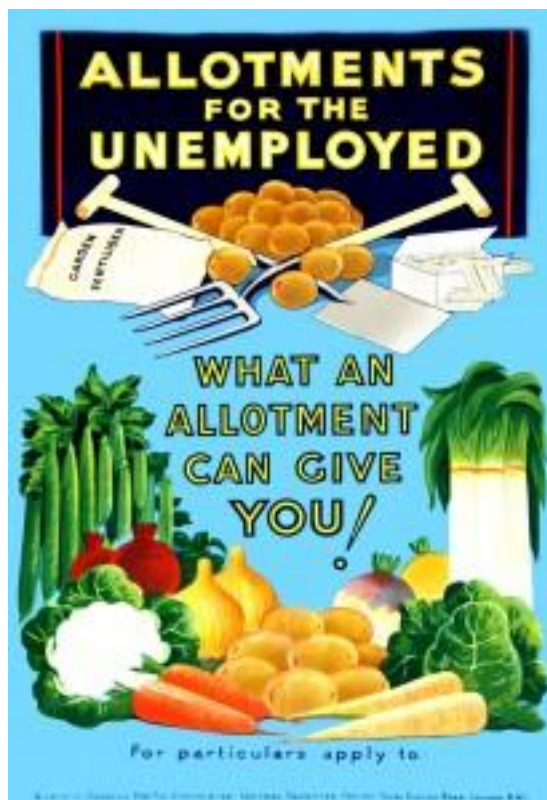
The *Birmingham Allotments for the Unemployed Committee* was formed at the City Council's Allotment Committee Meeting in January 1932 to help 1000 unemployed men obtain and cultivate allotments.⁵ Moor Green is mentioned as one of the sites where plots would be allocated to the unemployed,

³ UB/SC/CL, Box 9, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case Study of Birmingham*.

⁴ Library of Birmingham (LB), MS 396/2, National Council of Social Service, Midlands Office, Press Cuttings, *The Value of Occupational Centres*, *Evening Standard* 22/11/1936.

⁵ <https://www.theironroom.wordpress.com>

suggesting it was well established by then. The Committee raised money for those who had not had allotments previously to have an allotment rent free for the first six months together with a free set of tools and enough seeds to cultivate the plot. After six months they were offered three seed collections containing sixteen varieties of vegetables, four stones of potatoes and fertilisers sufficient for a 300 square yard plot for the small cost of 6/6. Spades and forks were 2d., and an instruction book cost 1d. An area Administrator under the supervision of the *Central Friends Allotments Scheme* in London administered the 'Allotments for the Unemployed.' The administrator coordinated orders of seed collections and fertiliser and horticultural societies or groups working with the scheme. Each society was given paperwork and collection cards. The area administrator for Birmingham was William Northey. He wrote that in 1934, 1028 unemployed men used the scheme with forty six allotment and horticultural societies distributing 988 seed collections, 3728 stones of potatoes, 730 bags of lime, 123 spades, 156 forks and 280 instruction books.⁶

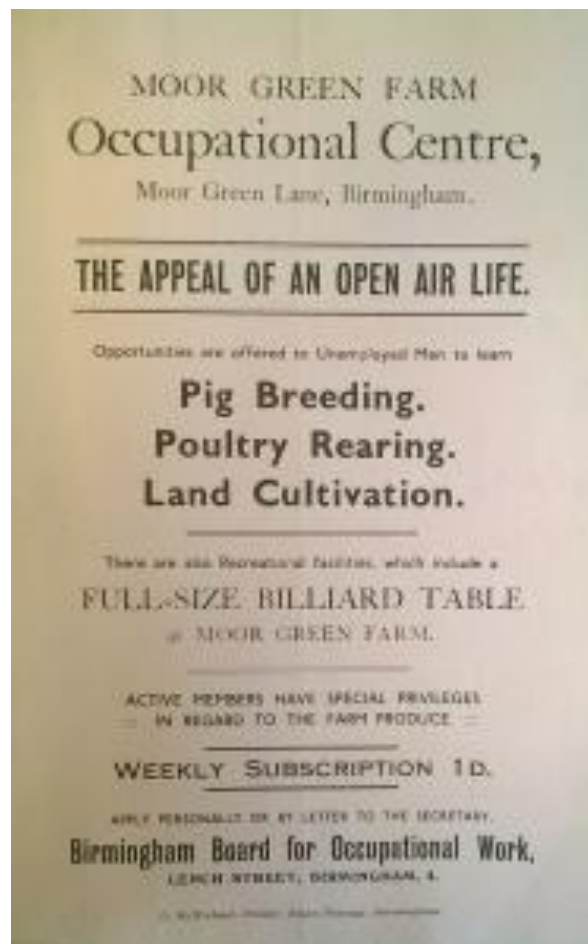


Allotments for the Unemployed Advert.⁷

⁶<https://www.theironroom.wordpress.com>

⁷www.allotmentresources.org

During the 1930s a number of non-denominational, non-political occupational centres were established in Birmingham to help the unemployed. Between 1932 and 1934, *Moor Green Farm* was an Occupational Centre where unemployed men could learn about 'pig breeding, poultry rearing and land cultivation.' Unemployment in the inter-war years was not as high as elsewhere, but had risen from 51 361 in 1921 to 6 000 in 1931. The Friends Unemployment Committee of Warwickshire North visited Moor Green Lane Unemployment Allotment Scheme and were impressed by the positive effects such schemes had.⁸ The Prince of Wales visited *Moor Green Farm* Occupational Centre in 1934 when in Birmingham to lay the foundation stone for the Birmingham University Medical School, accompanied by the then Lord Mayor, Horace Edward Goodby.



Advertisement for Moor Green Farm Occupational Centre, 1932-1934.⁹

⁸ <https://www.theironroom.wordpress.com>

⁹LB, MS 3927 St. Mary's and Duddesdon Occupational Centre Committee Minutes, 1932-1934; [www.https://theironroomwordpress.com](https://theironroomwordpress.com)

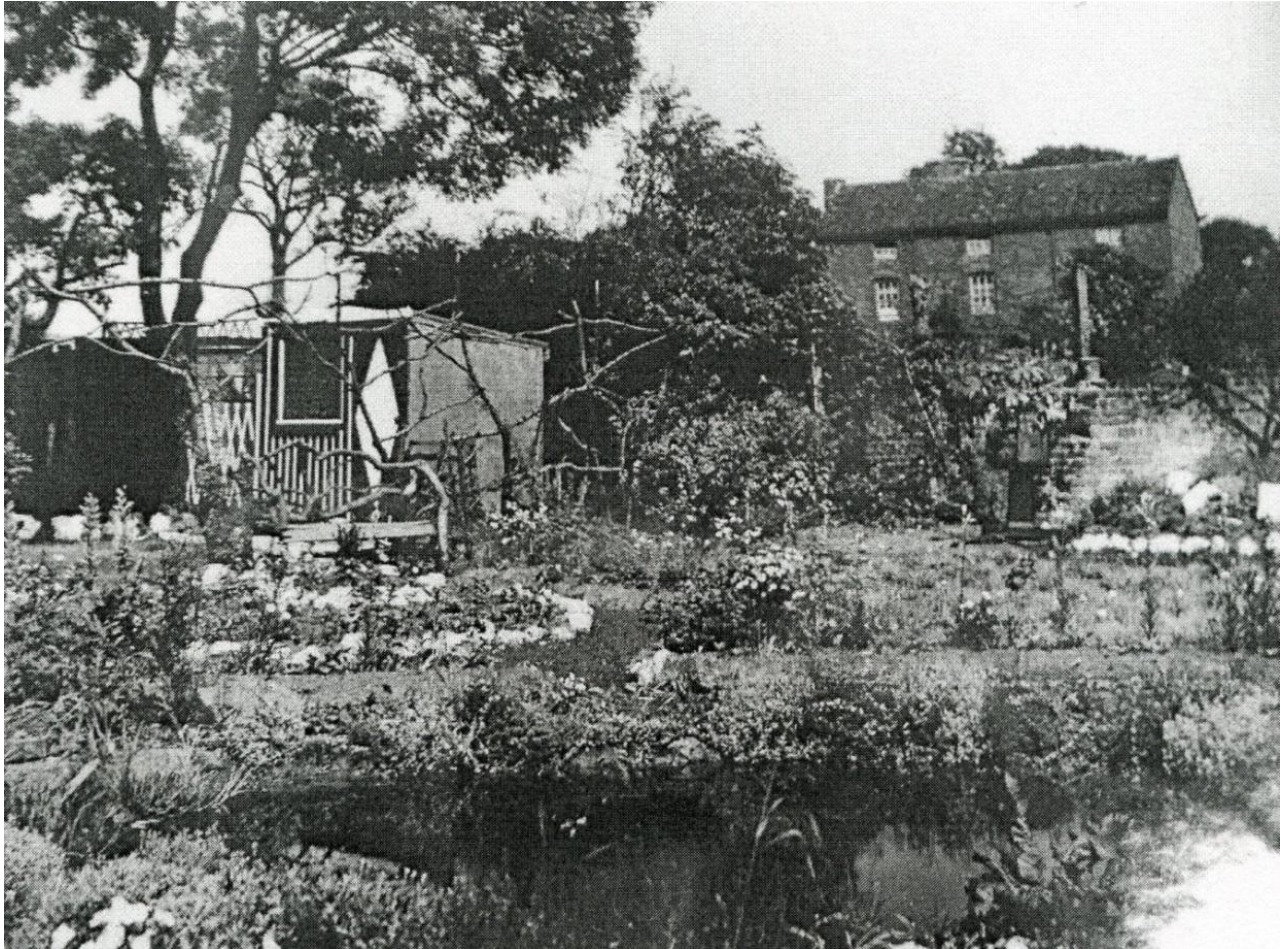


The Prince of Wales Visiting Moor Green Farm Occupational Centre, 1934.¹⁰

In 1938, the Parks Committee negotiated with the Taylor Settled Estates to buy about 70 acres of land at *Moor Green Farm* (See web article 2: 'The Moor Green Minutes Book, 1933-1942'). 59.5 acres was scheduled as open space under Birmingham (South) Town Planning Scheme and 10.5 acres was for the Allotments Committee for permanent allotments purposes. The site included *Moor Green Farmhouse* and buildings and three cottages and gardens, together with about eight acres of woodland. The owners were prepared to accept £150 per acre, with the sale subject to the existing tenancies, the Corporation erecting and maintain fencing along the boundaries of the land adjoining the vendor's other property and paying the vendor's solicitor and surveyor charges. At the time, approximately 34.129 acres of the area scheduled for open space were already let to the Allotments Committee by the owners and the committee desired to continue their tenancy of this area on terms to be arranged. The cost of acquiring the site was £10,500 plus legal and

¹⁰ Moseley Society History Group Archives (MSHGA).

surveyors' charges and stamp duty amounting to £294, making a total cost of £10,794.¹¹



Moor Green Allotments, 1933.¹²

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.

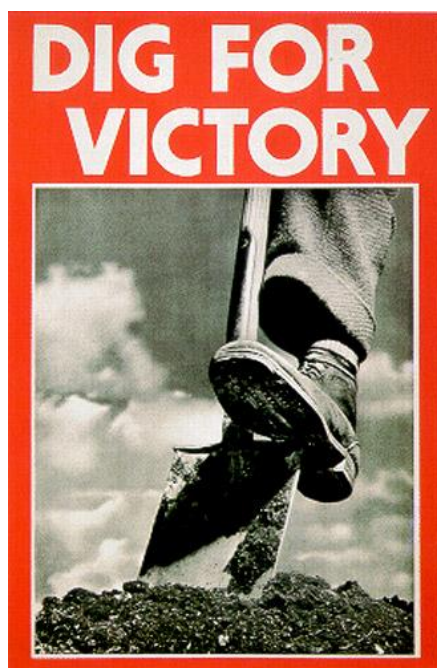
¹¹ LB, BCC/1/CA/1/1/1-5, Council Meeting Minutes, July 28, 1938.

¹² LB, WK/M6/49; [www.https://theironroomwordpress.com](https://theironroomwordpress.com)

3. Moor Green Allotments and the WWII Years, 1939-1945

The Minutes Book for 1933-1942 gives fascinating insights into the impact of WWII on local allotments. (See web article 2: 'The Moor Green Minutes Book, 1933-1942').

In December 1943, Certificates of Merit awarded by the Ministry of Agriculture were presented by Birmingham's Lord Mayor to winning allotment holders.¹³ At this meeting, Rev Whitfield, President of the Birmingham Allotments Council (Chairman of Moor Green and District Allotments Association)(See web article 3: 'Rev Charles Edward Thomas Whitfield'), said the certificates represented 'hard work, determination, skill and patience.' The Lord Mayor warned against the excessive use of artificial fertilizer and urged greater use of the compost heap 'so that the heart of the soil can be maintained.' In a telegram to the winners of Certificates of Merit, the Minister of Agriculture congratulated the allotment holders 'not only on their individual efforts, but also on their collective contribution to Birmingham's war-time larder.' During the war many families would have been sustained by the produce grown at Moor Green in the "*Dig for Victory*" campaign.



¹³The Birmingham Post, Report of a Meeting to present Certificates of Merit, Monday 13 December 1943, www.historicbritishnewspapers.com

4. Post WWII and Moor Green Allotments

Council policy was to retain as many as possible of the war-time allotments as permanent sites and no immediate loss of plots appears to have occurred at the Moor Green site. In 1949, an ex-WD Hut was erected at the site.¹⁴

Birmingham City Council was very interested in modernising its own allotment provision. In 1953 ornamental entrance gates were erected at Russell Road Allotments, designed by the City Architect to commemorate the coronation of Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth. A chestnut fence was replaced by an entrance conforming to the surrounding property in what was described as 'a good class residential road.' All the brickwork was in selected facing bricks and consisted of a 9" wall, 1'9" high with artificial stone coping. Pillars 2'9" x 1'8" and 5'9" high were surmounted by artificial stone coping. The railings were wrought iron standing 3'0" high above the wall and in square vertical bars. The pair of gates was 12'0" wide x 5'0" high. The total cost was £455. Officials visited to inspect the new gate.



The New Gate, Russell Road Allotments, 1953.¹⁵

¹⁴Planning Department papers, 03394000.

¹⁵LB, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/5, Russell Road Allotments.



The Inspection of Russell Road Allotment Gates by the Allotments Committee with Chairman Councillor E.W. Horton, 1953.¹⁶

In 1956 a further 4.5 acres was added to the Moor Green site at a cost of £675 and some improvements took place, including, in 1959, the erection of a store shed and a New Depot for maintenance purposes and, in 1965, a toilet block.¹⁷

5. The Thorpe Initiative and Moor Green and Russell Road sites

In 1965 the government set up a Committee of Inquiry into Allotments chaired by Professor Harry Thorpe of Birmingham University and in 1969 Professor Thorpe and the Committee produced a report highlighting the poor state of allotments and made recommendations about how the situation could be

¹⁶ LB, Russell Road Allotments, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/5, Allotments Album, p.11.

¹⁷ Planning Department Papers 18839000: Letter from Allotments Department stating there was no objection raised by Public Works Committee about erection of a store shed at Moor Green Farm, a 1989 letter which summarised the planning history of the allotments and a 1965 letter of approval given for a toilet block on this site (Russell Road).

improved by developing leisure gardens. Thorpe recommended that 'every leisure gardener should be strongly and repeatedly urged, both by his association and by his local authority, to make his plot attractive by incorporating flowers or flowering shrubs at strategic points within and around the plot, especially where plots met a main pathway through the site.' However, these recommendations were not always welcomed by plot holders who preferred vegetables to flowers.

Neat, respectable landscaping with clipped lawns, hedges and uniform rows of vegetables were also part of Thorpe's vision for the 'Leisure Garden' of the future. 'Where such land already exists, or is provided in the future, one would expect both the local authority and the plot holder to set high standards in the design, appearance, cultivation and upkeep of Leisure Garden sites so that they form attractive features of the townscape,' he stated. This view was presented to the allotment movement as a series of features associated with the 'New Image' and covered good design and beauty, as well as productivity, amenity, respectability, the raising of high-quality flowers, fruit and vegetables. Also included was the provision of facilities for the family expressed in neat little summerhouses where husband, wife and children could enjoy a meal together and in the availability of a 'fine' community centre where the whole gardening fraternity could meet for lectures, dances, a Harvest Festival or for a Christmas Party for senior citizens.¹⁸

After the publication of the Thorpe Report in 1969, the Leisure Gardens Research Unit at Birmingham University received an immediate request from Birmingham Council, the largest British allotments authority, to re-design the Russell Road/Moor Green Farm sites.

At the time, the Russell Road sites had a landscaped entrance, a short tarmacked road, a timber Association hut and stores, a brick-built toilet block

¹⁸UB/SC/CL, Moor Green, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/5, Thorpe, H., (1975), 'The Homely Allotment: from rural dole to urban amenity,' *Geography*, Vol. 60, No.3, pp169-183.

and only a very limited water supply. The Moor Green site had a brick and timber community centre and separate store facilities, a toilet block and a very limited water supply. In 1969, an attempt to create a leisure garden site on this land designed jointly by members of the Thorpe Inquiry and the Birmingham Parks Department was then so far ahead of its time that it was unable to overcome political opposition in certain quarters for some considerable time.¹⁹

By 1971 the principles underlying leisure garden provision were more widely accepted. The Moor Green Site was reduced to 13 acres in 1971, while the Russell Road sites had been reduced to 27.8 acres in 1963, with both areas of land vacated being surrendered for open space purposes. Both sites were managed by independent Allotment Associations.²⁰ In 1971, a scheme costing £97,000 over 3 years was suggested for 35 acres of the Russell Road/ Moor Green sites to relay the sites to leisure garden standards. Members of the Moor Green plots were prepared to vacate their plots so that work could begin, but considerable opposition came from some Russell Road tenants backed by a local councillor. Management of the site had recently changed several times and many tenants had little confidence in their committees, the latest of which had been formed to oppose the modernisation scheme. This policy was opposed to the national and regional societies as well as the City Council and so the management of the Russell Road Association was taken over by the Department for the duration of the improvement schemes. Only six plot holders refused to cooperate in moving from the site for three months and notices to quit were issued to Russell Road tenants. Along with Moor Green, the sites could be cleared in two phases. Moor Green was developed first as they had vacated their plots first.²¹

In 1972, a combined layout was proposed for Russell Road and Moor Green Farm Allotment Sites.²² The plan contained details about roads, arrangements of plots around landscaped island sites with parking and a site to be made

¹⁹UB/SC/CL, Moor Green, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/5, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case Study of Birmingham*, p.58.

²⁰UB/SC/CL, Moor Green, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/5, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case Study of Birmingham*, p.58.

²¹UB/SC/CL, Moor Green, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/5, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case Study of Birmingham*, p.58.

²²Planning Department Papers: Letters from Parks and Small Holdings & Allotments Department and Maps, 1972.

available for a community centre. Approval was recommended and given and also for a new pavilion, bar, toilets and stores building.²³

In 1973 the first phase of 30 new plots, toilets, store buildings and community centre, roads and extensive water supply was completed at a cost of £41,000. The total cost for the whole area was revised to £128,500. Management of the whole site combined under the name *Moor Green Leisure Gardens* was granted to 'Moseley and District Allotments Holders Association' who had previously managed 'Moor Green Farm' for many years. By 1975, despite resistance by plot-holders and tenants to the proposed modernisation, Birmingham was becoming 'the allotment capital of Britain.' 'The Leisure Garden' model was being developed at Russell Road/ Moor Green Farm in line with the vision Thorpe had outlined in his 1969 Report. In 1975, Moor Green Allotments was one of the largest allotment sites in the city, one of the most highly occupied (c. 97%) in the city and some plots had been in the same family for a considerable period.²⁴

The full redevelopment scheme provided 232 plots with tarmacked roads and pathways, parking, lockers and an extended water system. 28 plots were provided near the Russell Road entrance with individual cedar-wood summerhouses. 5 acres adjoining Cannon Hill were grassed down as a reserve against future need to increase plot numbers. The whole of the newly laid site was to be known as the 'Forward' site, this being the City Motto. Moor Green got a mention in a House of Lords debate on Allotments in 1976 as an example of the new vision for allotments.²⁵ 'What is now needed to meet this recreational trend is legislative provision, backed by good design,' speakers agreed. Harry Thorpe was in the audience listening to the debate.

²³ Planning Department Papers, 1989 Letter summarising the planning history of the allotments.

²⁴ UB/SC/CL, Moor Green, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/5, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case study of Birmingham*.

²⁵ HL Deb 17 March 1976, vol.369 cc226-63 226, HL Deb 17 March 1976 vol. 369 cc226-63 [226](#), [HANSARD 1803-2005](#) → [1970s](#) → [1976](#) → [March 1976](#) → [17 March 1976](#) → [Lords Sitting](#)



Princess Alice planting a tree at Moor Green Allotments, 1976.²⁶

In 1976, the 20th International Conference and Exhibition of that year visited Moor Green Farm where there were displays of flowers and lawns and manicured vegetables. The new site was officially opened by her Royal Highness, the Princess Alice on Wednesday 8th September, 1976 during the International Congress and Princess Alice planted a tree.²⁷

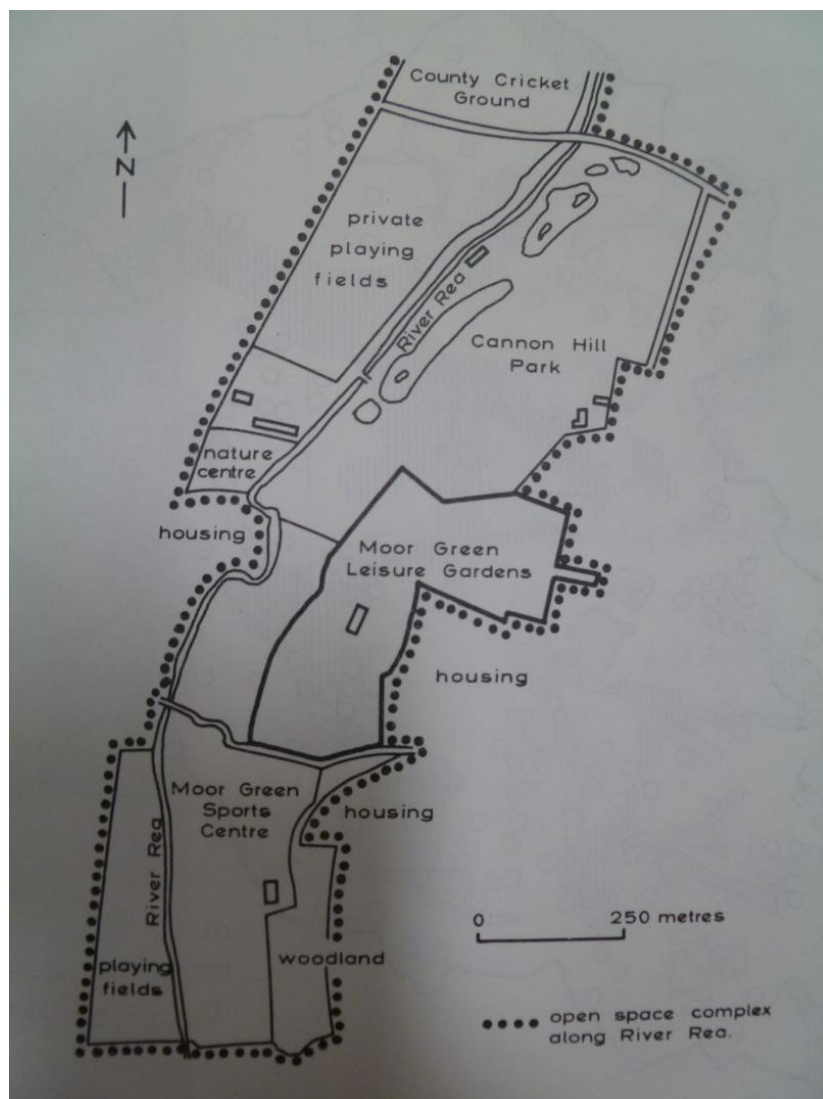
Professor Thorpe's Vision for 'Leisure Gardens,' A Display at the 20th International Leisure Gardeners' Congress, Birmingham, 1976.²⁸



²⁶ BL, Moor Green, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/6.

²⁷ UB/SC/CL, Moor Green, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/5, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case Study of Birmingham*, pp.59-61.

²⁸ UB/SC/CL, Moor Green, Recreation and Community Services, Box 17/5, Thorpe, Harry, *'The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban Land Use.'*



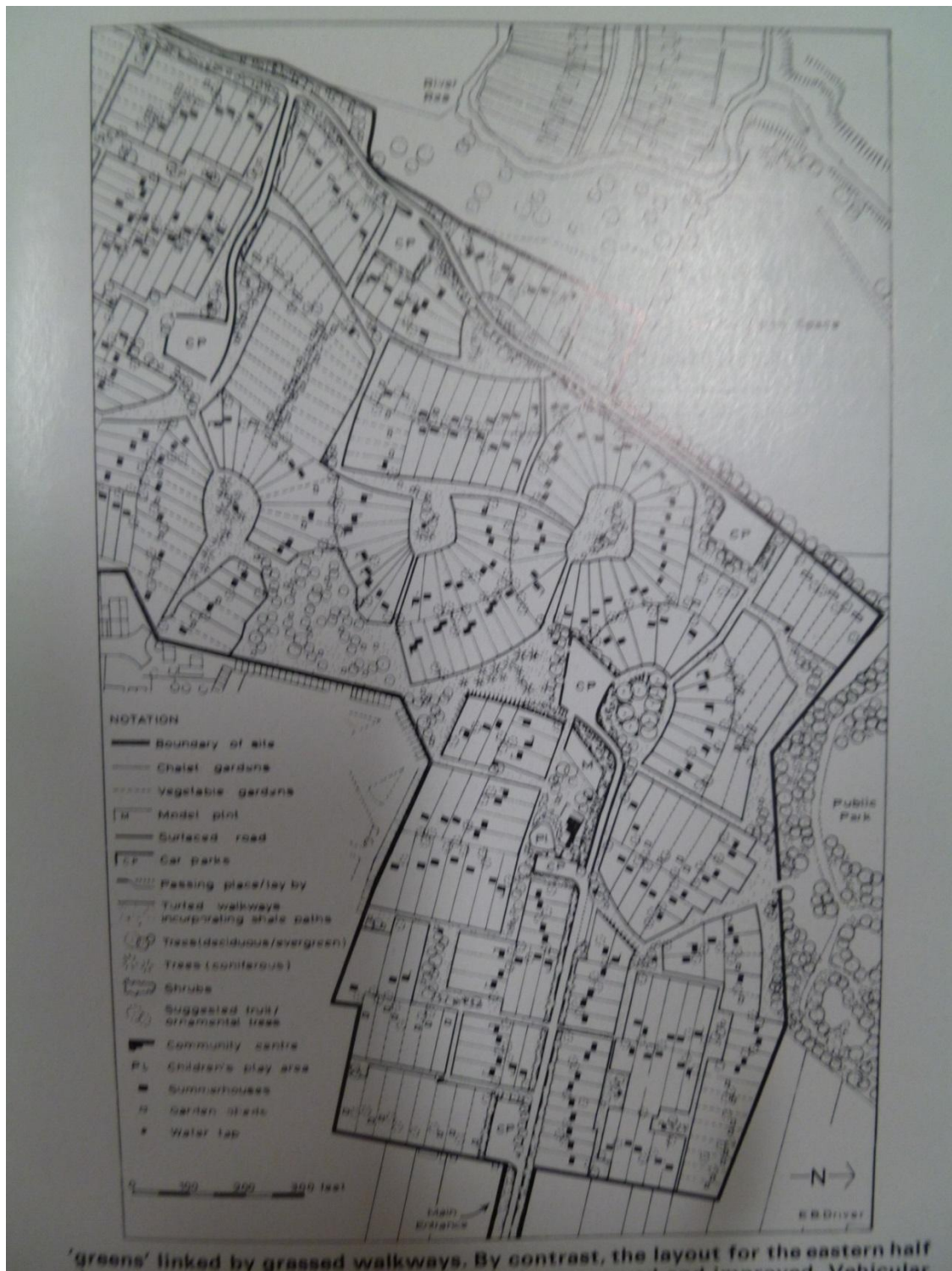
Open Space Complex along the River Rea, 1973.²⁹

²⁹UB/SC/CL, Box 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'National Allotments and gardens Society Annual Conference, Llandudno, 13-15 June, 1973, Address, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' pp.5-8.



Aerial Photograph Moor Green/Russell Road Leisure Gardens, 1976.³⁰

³⁰<https://www.theironroom.wordpress.com>



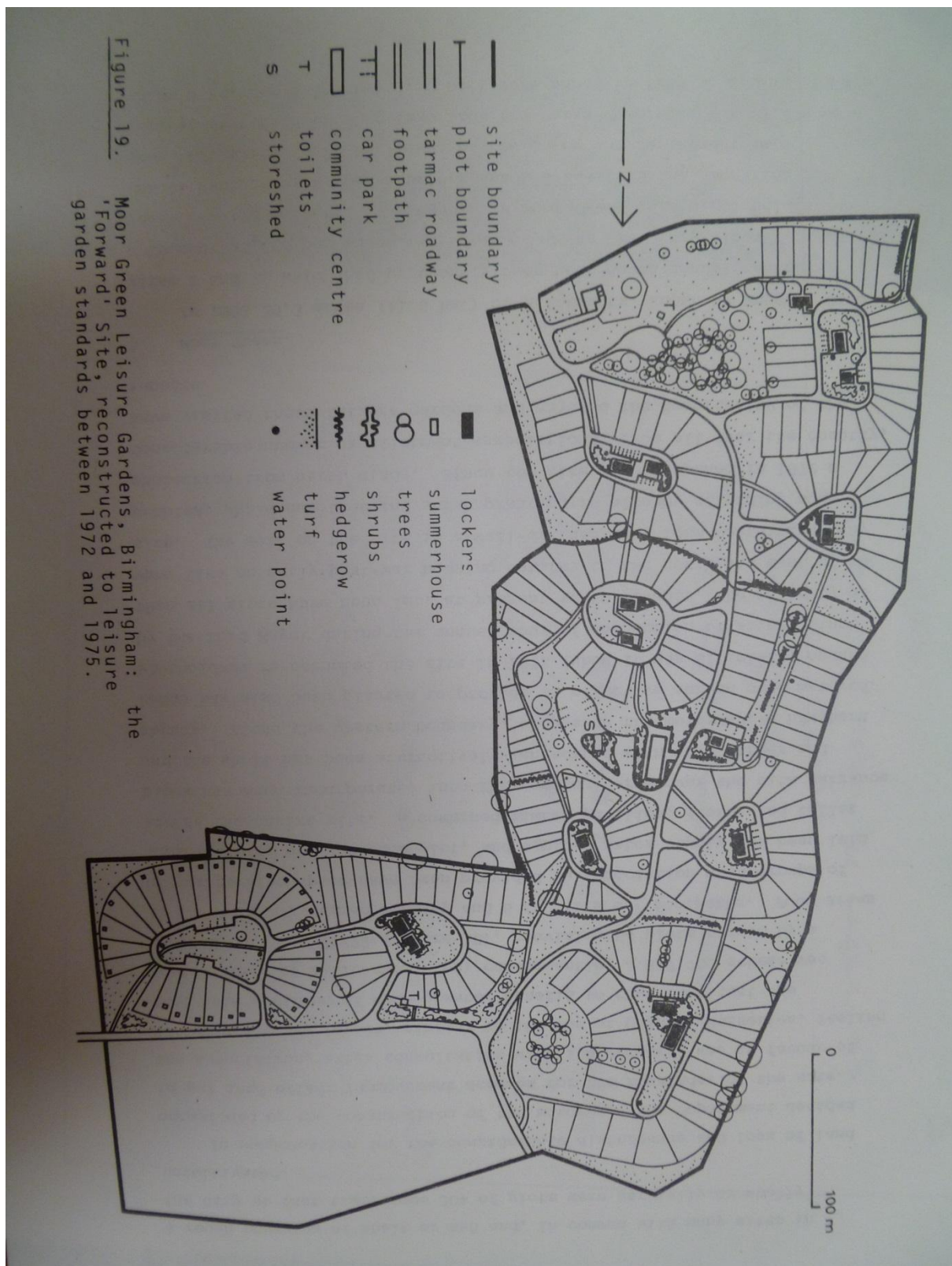
Plan: Moor Green Leisure Gardens, 1972-1975.³¹

³¹Thorpe, Harry, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' Address, National Allotments and Gardens Society Annual Conference Llandudno 13-15 June, 1973.



Plan: Moor Green Leisure Gardens, 1972-1975.³²

³²Thorpe, Harry, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' Address, National Allotments and Gardens Society Annual Conference Llandudno 13-15 June, 1973.



Plan: Moor Green Leisure Gardens, 1972-1975.³³

³³Thorpe, Harry, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' Address, National Allotments and Gardens Society Annual Conference Llandudno 13-15 June, 1973.

Professor Harry Thorpe wrote in 1975, 'Since the [1969] Report was published, the City of Birmingham has responded magnificently to the need to face-lift old sites and establish entirely new sites of a very high standard. The re-fashioned Russell Road/Moor Green Farm site which is now nearing completion, will be, together with the already completed Bordesley Green site in the same city, in the forefront of Leisure Garden design in this country.'³⁴ The Moor Green Site was an example of a site linked with a park (Cannon Hill Park) where the possibility of linking the two with pedestrian walkways was considered.³⁵ A Leisure Gardens Store Shed was erected in 1977.³⁶

The newly refurbished Moor Green Allotments become a prototype for many others.

See also web articles 6 and 7: 'The Development of Allotments in Birmingham' and 'The National Allotment Scene' for more details on University of Birmingham Professor Harry Thorpe, the Government Committee of Inquiry into allotments which he led, the Report of the Committee and the impact on allotments.

6. Moor Green Allotments in the 1980s.

Moor Green Allotments did come under threat, though. In 1982, there was a strong interest by a Housing Association, the Birmingham Jewish Housing Association Limited, to build Sheltered Housing in Russell Road and over the next two years this progressed through Council committees with various outcomes. The Assistant Planning Officer opposed the development of '...a site that was laid out several years ago as one of the earliest leisure gardens sites' being developed for residential purposes. The Economic Development Committee considered some of the land had considerable potential for residential development, because it was a parcel of land not then used for

³⁴ Thorpe, H. (1975) The Homely Allotment: from rural dole to urban amenity. *Geography*, Vol. 60, No.3, pp169-183

³⁵ *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case Study of Birmingham.*

³⁶ Planning Department Papers: Job Details and 1989 Letter summarising the planning history of the allotments.

allotments and held for possible extension of that site or for addition to Cannon Hill Park. This committee asked the Leisure Services Committee to consider declaring the site surplus to requirements and authorise it to seek the necessary consents to dispose of the land to the Jewish Housing Trust.³⁷

In March 1983, the agenda of the Economic Development Committee (Item 5) declared 6.2 acres land at the rear of 40-48 Russell Road surplus to requirements. The following month Resolution 6460 to the Leisure Services Committee recorded the very strong interest by Trident Housing Association and the Jewish Housing Trust to build sheltered accommodation and recommended that the land be declared surplus by the Leisure Services Committee especially if it was not being used as allotments. The Leisure Services Committee opposed the resolution, sending it forward to the Finance and Management Committee. In June 1983, the Finance and Management Committee Report of Chief Executive noted the views of the Birmingham and District Allotments Council:

- (a) The land had not been used as allotments, because they had never been marked out and services had not been provided.
- (b) The loss would mean access from Russell Road would be gone
- (c) There was sufficient demand to warrant retention as allotments
- (d) Publicity was needed and purposeful management

In view of these comments Leisure Services Committee resolved not to declare the land surplus to requirements.³⁸ The plans received newspaper attention with articles titled 'Controversial Plan to Build Sheltered Accommodation.'

In 1984, this area was again under threat, when a Camping and Caravan Site was proposed. This was successfully rebuffed and finally, in 2000, a Centenary Woodland area was developed. Moor Green Allotments has continued to develop into the very successful site it is today.

Janet Berry

³⁷Planning Department papers.

³⁸Planning Department papers.