

The History of Moor Green Allotments

Minutes Book 1933-1942

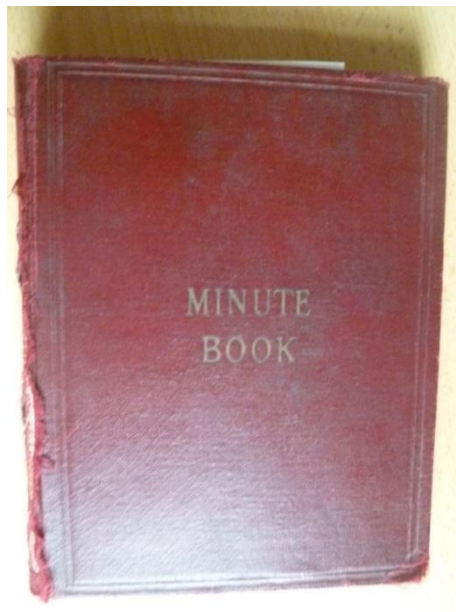
Contents:

1. Introduction
2. Meetings
3. The Committee
4. Connections with Allotment Bodies
5. The Club
6. Plots, Roadways and Paths
7. Seeds, Bulbs and Plants
8. Fertilisers
9. Training
10. Anti-Social Behaviour
11. Special Events
12. Philanthropy
13. The Impact of WWII
14. Conclusion

1. Introduction

This Minute Book is the only twentieth-century minute book that has survived. It gives fascinating insights into allotments of the period and Moor Green Allotments in particular. There is no indication that this is the first Minutes Book, which suggests there were other previous ones now lost. No documents have been located that confirm the origin of the Moor Green Allotment site, but the 1920s seems appropriate given its chairperson, Rev C Whitfield was very active in the allotment movement then and there was considerable pressure to provide allotments for unemployed men, both in the 1920s and

early 1930s. Other documentation supports a late 1920s/ early 1930s origin
(See web article 1: 'The History of Moor Green Allotments')



The Minute Book 1933-1942



Unemployed Men Digging an Allotment, 1930s.¹

¹www.theironroom.wordpress.com



'Allotments for the Unemployed,' *Birmingham Gazette*, March 1935.²

1. Meetings

This Minutes Book contains 111 reports of meetings, including 93 Committee Meetings,³ two Special Committee Meetings,⁴ nine Annual General Meetings,⁵ one Special General Meeting in 1937, six Club Committee Meetings⁶ and one Committee Meeting of the newly formed *Benevolent Club* in 1942. All these meetings had formal officers and followed formal procedures. A separate book, which has not survived, listed committee members and their attendance at meetings. Committee Meetings were held at 'The Hut' from 1933 to June 1936 and thereafter at Moor Green Farm also called 'The Farm' or 'HQ.' Annual Meetings were held at Selly Park Hotel between 1933 and 1936 and subsequently at the Clubroom, Moor Green Farm.

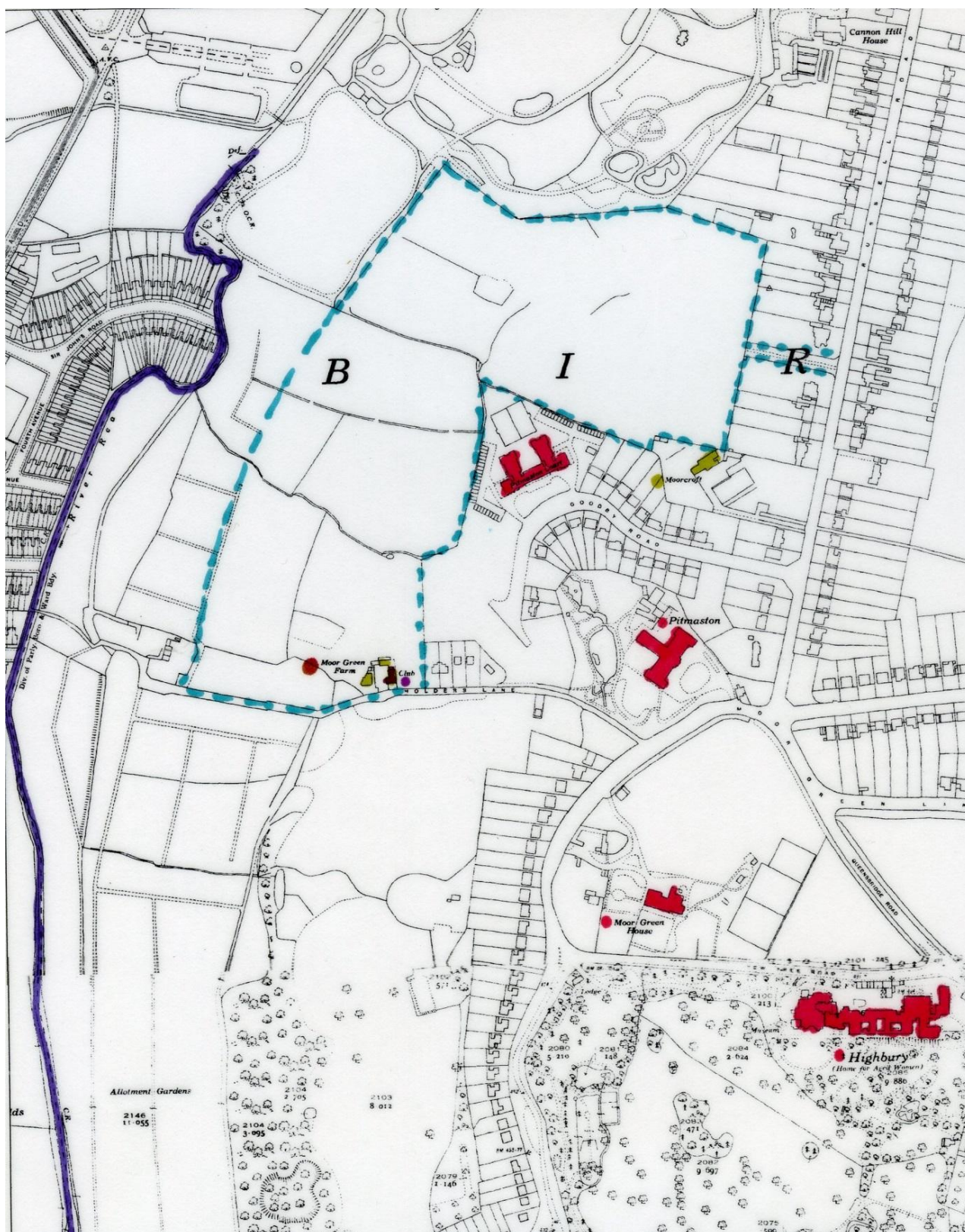
²MS 396/2, National Council of Social Service, Midlands Office, Press Cuttings, 'The Value of Occupational Centres,' *Evening Standard* 22/11/1936.

³ 7 in 1934, 11 in 1935, 1936, 1938, 1939, and 1941, 10 in 1937, 12 in 1940 and 9 in 1942.

⁴ 1937 and 1940.

⁵ between 1933 and 1941.

⁶ 3 in 1941 and 3 in 1942.



Moor Green, showing Moor Green Farm and the Club, 1930s.

2. The Committee

Officials and committee members were all male and were a very committed and long-serving group. The Rev Charles Edward Thomas Whitfield was the chairman for almost all the period of the Minute Book (See web article 3: 'Rev Charles Edward Thomas Whitfield'), his vice-chairman was Mr Millington and in their absence, Mr T Wood, who was also Treasurer until 1941, led the meetings. Mr Groutage became chairman in 1941 when Rev Whitfield was evacuated because of bomb damage to his home. Mr Cecil was secretary throughout the period. Mr Young was Assistant Secretary until 1941 when he became Treasurer after Mr Wood was evacuated because his home too had been bombed. Mr Copson then became Vice-Chairman. There were also voluntary 'day groundsmen, 'including Mr Brooks, Mr Rawlins, Mr J Wilbraham and Mr Degg.

Some committee officers received honoraria for their efforts. For example, in 1934 Mr Cecil (Secretary) received £10, Mr Young (Assistant Secretary) £5, Mr Rawlins (Groundsman) £4 and Mr Wood (Treasurer) £1. There were increases over the years to these honoraria with the secretary and his assistant receiving £15 and £10 in 1937, for example, and extra amounts were awarded for work involved in the recently opened Social Club in 1938 with Mr Cecil receiving an extra £15, Mr Young £10, Mr Goodman £5 and Mr Watts.

3. Connections with Allotment Bodies

Birmingham City Council was important in the Association's daily management and long-term development. The Superintendent of the Birmingham City

Allotments Department, Mr Harrison, attended Annual Meetings and social events. The city praised Moor Green's contribution, saying on one occasion that 'The Moseley District Association has an excellent reputation in the City Council for good work for the unemployed and the allotment movement generally.'⁷The Association was involved in the City's 'Amenities Scheme' and was bracketed third in 1937. This 'Amenities Scheme' at Moor Green Allotments focussed on improving 'The Hut.' Their connections were mostly very practical and related to unpaid rents with the City Council issuing notices to quit on those who had not paid, the supply of ashes mostly to make roadways passable, burst taps, cutting down trees, cutting and laying hedges, clearing ditches and cutting down weeds. The requests from the Association seem to have been acted on very quickly and were mostly, though not always, for free.

The Birmingham Allotments Council, to which Moor Green sent delegates, was important in the development of allotments locally. In 1938 delegates of the Birmingham Allotments Council visited Moor Green Allotments where they were given a 'plain' tea. Moor Green Delegates were involved in visits by the Birmingham Allotments Council to other sites. Mr Millington visited Pershore Agricultural Training School in 1938. In 1939, the Birmingham Allotments Council issued an appeal for support for a petition to be sent to the Lord Mayor to 'protect our gardens.' Petition forms were handed out and three guineas subscribed to 'the fighting fund.' In 1940, Birmingham Allotments Council prepared a list of instructions to officials and committee men of

⁷Annual Meeting 23 September 1933.

Allotment sites, which was adopted by the City Council who paid the costs and arranged distribution.

The national body was the National Allotments Society (NAS) which the Association subscribed to at a cost of three guineas and in 1942 at three pence per member. National and Midland Annual Conferences were important sites for discussion of major issues and a platform for influence and Rev Whitfield was very much involved. Issues raised included security of tenure, the loss of plots taken by factories etc., unsightly huts and untended plots. Rev Whitfield was praised for putting the Birmingham and national point of view. Certificates of Merit awarded by the Ministry of Agriculture were presented by Birmingham's Lord Mayor to winning allotment holders on Saturday 11 December 1943. At this meeting, Rev Whitfield, President of the Birmingham Allotments Council, said the certificates represented 'hard work, determination, skill and patience.'⁸

The Committee was responsible for other sites. There were communications with Pitmaston, a request from the tenants of the Kings Heath Allotments Association Queensbridge Road Site to be taken on in 1935 and management of Tenbury Road Allotments (passed in 1936 to Knowle Road Association). The Selly Oak Site brought numerous problems, including protection given to plot holders, fencing, ditch and standing water issues and vacant plots. Efforts to acquire Billesley Lane Allotment, though, were unsuccessful.

⁸The Birmingham Post, Monday 13 December 1943, www.onlinenewspapers.com.

4. The Club

'The Hut' was the original meeting place or HQ. The question of Moor Green Farm buildings being taken over was discussed at the March - June 1936 meetings and in June it was agreed to accept the tenancy of the Farm buildings. By July the Farm buildings were theirs and the question of any development was raised. A mass meeting was called at the Farm for 11.00 am on 23 Aug 1936, the first held at 'The Farm' instead of 'the Hut' and attended by about 70 plot-holders. In October 1936, the decision was made to form a Club as a separate organisation. The Club slowly expanded its membership and in January 1937 the committee agreed to make a start on a small pavilion adjoining the Club room. At a special meeting on Sunday 29 May 1937 a scheme for a licensed club 'in a modest way' was outlined. Rev Whitfield insisted that 'Our good reputation must be maintained.' The Club was limited to male members with a 2/6 membership including an ordinary fee of 1/3 and honorary members paying 4/-.

The Club opened on 24 July 1937. *Ansell's* Ales only was to be ordered along with various quantities of 'bottled stuff' and sundries, and 300 stiff cover rule books for those joining. By 9 Sept 1937, a new verandah was almost complete with the cost met from the sale of fruit trees, a donation of 10/6 from Rev Whitfield and two guineas from the Association. The 14 Oct 1937 Meeting reported seats had been bought for the Club and three beer taps from Messrs Ansell. Club Opening Hours in 1937 were Mon-Fri 6 to 9.30 pm, Saturdays 12 to 2 and 6 – 9.30 p.m. and Sundays and Good Fridays 12 to 2 and 6.30 to 9.30 p.m. Opening hours were increased over time and extended to Bank Holidays, but restricted for a time during WWII when rationing was feared. During WWII

visitors were restricted too except for servicemen in uniform. In 1938 a small room was opened up for an office and the building was decorated. The decision was taken to appoint a permanent steward to check visitors as well as a steward to assist in the bar with both to be paid yearly. General improvements were made subsequently, including, for example, acquiring an electric stove and a wireless along with new heating, toilets, lino flooring and bar.



5. Plots, Roadways and Paths

There is little information about plot rentals and Club subscriptions in these minutes. In 1933 at the Annual Meeting, subscriptions were reported as 1/3 for employed and 1/- unemployed, remaining the same in 1934.

Getting rents paid on time or at all was a constant problem. In 1935 the card system of easy payments and grants were appreciated, but 105 notices went out in 1937, for example, and many others in succeeding years. In 1937 the

field was surveyed to be pegged out in the future, perhaps generated by concerns about imminent war. In 1938 -1939, twenty notices for non-cultivation were issued and about 100 rents and a number of subscriptions were still outstanding. There is only one reference to a female plot-holder, a Mrs Bailey. The 'unfortunate circumstances of this lady' are referenced and a formal date fixed for 14 August 1941 '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.

There was always concern about vacant plots with the reasons given that 1936 was a bad season, more men in work and slum clearance. In 1938, there were about fifty vacant plots and the committee felt that unless intensive cultivation was operated, allotments would be affected. Some over-cultivation appears to have occurred, though. In 1940, the committee were advised that licences were needed by all sellers of vegetables, but later this was amended to licences only being required if the seller was making a living from sales. Pressures for full and greater cultivation were frequent, particularly during the latter part of the period covered by the minutes, presumably reflecting the shipping blockage related to the onset and progress of WWII. In 1941, the meadow was pegged out and ploughed for allotments. There was a move to use allotments for educational purposes. In 1938, a request was received from the Head of the Boys' Department of Hope Street School and two plots were taken over.



Moor Green Allotments, 1935.⁹

The roads and paths were clearly a problem over a long period, with ashes being sought frequently from the Council, but also from private sources as on 10 January 1935 when 2 tons were ordered at 1/- per load. There was some discussion over the period about the naming of allotment roads. The final decision was that names should only be on plates about 20x14 inches. In 1938 the issue arose again and it was agreed that main roads be lettered A,B,C,D and E.

6. Seeds, Bulbs and Plants

The Association made seeds, plants and seed potatoes available to plot-holders. 200 seed lists were supplied by Bournville, for example, in 1935. From

⁹ www.theironroomwordress.com

that year, The Society of Friends had Seed Potato and Seeds Schemes which Moor Green supported (See web articles 1 and 6: 'The History of Moor Green Allotments' and 'The Development of Allotments in Birmingham.'). In 1941, gift seeds from the America Scheme for free seeds became an option providing associations paid distribution expenses. This scheme was a reflection of American concerns about the impact on Britain of WWII. Moor Green agreed to participate. A room was set aside for storage. Moor Green actually took on responsibility for the American Seed Scheme in 1942 with the Secretary acting as distributing Agent for this district and dealing with more than one third of the supply available.



Seed potatoes were a mainstay and their availability was reported regularly at meetings. As well as those from the Friends' Scheme they were ordered from *Alexander & Brown*. 43 cwt of potatoes were ordered in July 1937. In December 1939, 70 cwt potatoes were ordered again from *Alexander & Brown*. Seeds had to be insured under the Government Scheme. In 1941, the majority of seed potatoes cost 2/2 for 14lb, with earlies 2/4 per 14lb and Catriona 2/6 per 14 lb. The association also laid in bulbs. In January 1937, 5000 gladioli bulbs

were ordered. Pea and bean sticks were also supplied by the Association from the City Council.

7. Fertilisers

Fertilisers were another item supplied to Birmingham allotments by the Council. 'Veg-U Mus,' a fertiliser produced by Birmingham City Salvage Department, was delivered on a regular basis. In 1938, one ton was ordered and in 1941, 30 ½ cwt was sold in 1/- bags. Blood and Bone was ordered often, as were ashes. The Land Fertility Scheme supplied lime. In 1939, two tons were ordered along with 200 declaration forms and in 1940 a further five tons were tipped in the yard, for example. In 1941, ten cwt of N.O.M. was delivered in 28lb bags and ten cwt in 56 lb bags under a sale or return scheme and by July new prices for N.O.M. manure were in place, 6/- for 56lb and 3/6 for 28lb (12/7/1941). A supply of PP Fertilisers and a further supply of *Plucrop* were mentioned. In 1943, 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.'¹⁰

The eradication of pests was also of concern. The Annual Meeting in October 1937 agreed to enquire about anti-slug methods and details on quantities were asked for. In 1938, four cartons of anti-slug pellets @9/-, 12 @ 1/- and 12@ 2/- were purchased and in 1940, leaflets on Club Root were distributed. Soot was a commonly used slug control method and its chief value was as a 'pest-

¹⁰Report of a Meeting to present Certificates of Merit, *The Birmingham Post*, Monday 13 December 1943, www.onlinenewspapers.com

preventer.’¹¹ The Association had supplies of soot in hand in 1938 and 1941, for example.

8. Training

Training in gardening was taken very seriously and the Association had close ties with Avoncroft, a Training Centre. ‘A further 5 men’ were sent there according to the 12 July 1934 Meeting. In 1936 the scheme operated at Stoke Prior, when parties were made up similar to those for Avoncroft and a camp was held. Afterwards, a ‘glowing account of his stay was given by Mr Goodman.’ Lectures were also arranged by the Association at the Club. Reports on J D Jones being asked to give a lecture or about his lecture appeared in many committee meetings. He was the Advisor to the City Council Allotments Department.

9. Anti-social Behaviour

There were always problems with anti-social behaviour, particularly breaking into huts and stealing. For example, several huts were broken into in 1935 and glass taken. As a special case, a grant could be made of half the cost of replacing the glass not exceeding 27/6. Mr Mortiboys was given 18/- towards broken glass. Later in 1935, Mr Thomas had his windows broken by an airgun and Stirchley Police and the headmasters at Raddlebarn and St Stephen’s Schools were contacted. He was awarded 10/- compensation by the City Council. In 1941, tired of the frequent break-ins, the City Council suggested patrols be arranged, but Mr Degg was left to ‘do his best.’

¹¹Bristow, Allen, *How to Run an Allotment*, (London: Thomas Nelson & Sons Ltd, 1941), p.66.

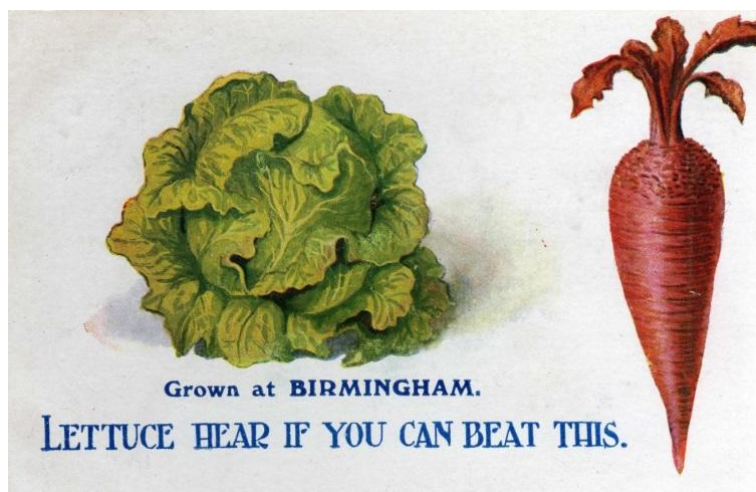
The tidiness of allotment plots was of great concern to the committee across the minutes. In June 1934, for example, a request was made for plots to be kept in good order, cultivation to be only within the pegged area and rubbish not to be thrown on walks and roads. In May 1935 there were complaints about an 'unsightly erection' at the back of a hut on the riverside which was used as latrine. The committee decided to 'take necessary steps' and this was taken down. Plots were inspected regularly and outcomes reported to the committee. Mr Smith's 1935 inspection hoped effort would be made to clean roads and improve several huts and suggested car bonnets should not be allowed to remain. However, in 1936, Moor Green came second in an inspection of all allotment sites in Birmingham.

Invasions of and trespassing on the allotments caused much dismay. Sleeping in the huts was condemned in 1934 and 1941 and the offender requested to leave and warned. Trespassing in the woods was condemned in 1934. Animals, though, were the greatest scourge. Pigs were straying in from the farm in 1934 and Major Joyce, the farm owner, was written to and he replied saying he had written to the farm and the 'nuisance had abated.' Cattle were by far the greatest problem. Cattle were reported straying over the stream on many occasions and several preventative methods were tried, including strands of barbed wire across the river, further wire fencing, a stile and a new fence. Rabbits were the particular problem in 1939 and 1942. The fence was reinforced, but repairs were needed subsequently. Permission was then given to catch rabbits providing no damage was done to gardens.

10. Special Events

There is little information about 'Shows.' There is some discussion at the 1933 Annual Meeting when some thought the emphasis should be on crop-growing, but most felt growing for show increased the quality of the produce. Prizes were suggested for the best kept plots and it was agreed that the Secretary approach Pitmaston Association about the co-ordination of a combined show. Employed and unemployed were separate in any plot prize competitions. Prizes were promised by Messrs Whitfield and Palmer. Schedules for Lewis' Show were distributed in 1935 and 1936.

Birmingham Produce Week was a special annual event. In 1940, a 'Vegetable Week' took place in the Autumn. Any vegetables were sent to Selly Park Hospital, including 8 cwt potatoes, 1 cwt turnips, $\frac{3}{4}$ cwt beet, 1 cwt swedes, 1 cwt vegetable marrows, 70 head of cabbage, 14lb parsnips, 14 lb carrots, sage, parsley and 2 sticks of celery.



Postcard.¹²

¹²Harding, Mary, B., *Comic and Novelty Postcards*, (Smethwick; Maxam Publishing, 2015).

Gardening Calendars were given out to plot-holders in the past. 100 are recorded as being ordered in 1934 and 1938.

The Association organised entertainments and social occasions. For example, a Committee Supper was organised for February 1935, 'as last year' with a 1/- charge for employed men, but no charge for the unemployed. The menu was beef, pickles, beer, bread, butter and cheese and a small quantity of cider and minerals. Nine gallons of *Ansell's* Mild Ale was on the list, so a good time was presumably had by all. They met at 7.30 pm for 7.45 pm at the Selly Oak Hotel, where there was a skittles alley and a bowling green. 'The supper was very enjoyable,' the March Committee reported and thanks were accorded to the ladies and those who had assisted with gifts and goods. There were also 'September Suppers,' 'Tripe Suppers' and 'Ham and Beef Suppers.' Darts was clearly a popular pastime. A 'Fun and Darts Competition' was planned with competitors paired up and two prizes given for the highest and lowest scores. £2 was allotted for the Darts Competition from the Sports Fund. Entrance was 6 pence. In 1940, a report of the Christmas Darts Tournament was given and a team from Selly Park Hotel had been invited to play. There were other activities too. In 1942, An Award of Merit Competition was organised and J.D. Jones was asked to judge plots. There were film shows and visits to other sites. Moseley Toc H visited Moor Green Allotments and the Chairman and Secretary visited Moseley Toc H in 1938.

11. Philanthropy

The Association involved themselves in charity. They gave frequently to the Society of Friends, the Police Sports, the Hospital Collection and the Red Cross

Fund for Allotment Holders. They made collections for sick plot-holders and following the death of plot-holders. For example, in 1941, Mr Tunstall was off work owing to an accident and he sent a letter of thanks for the collection made in his name. Mr Cook was indisposed and a collection was made for him and in 1942 there was a collection and a wreath for Mr Davies. They set up a 'Benevolent Fund' in 1942 and a small committee was formed to organise the proceedings (Messrs Rose, Angus, Stuard, Sandford and Ensor).

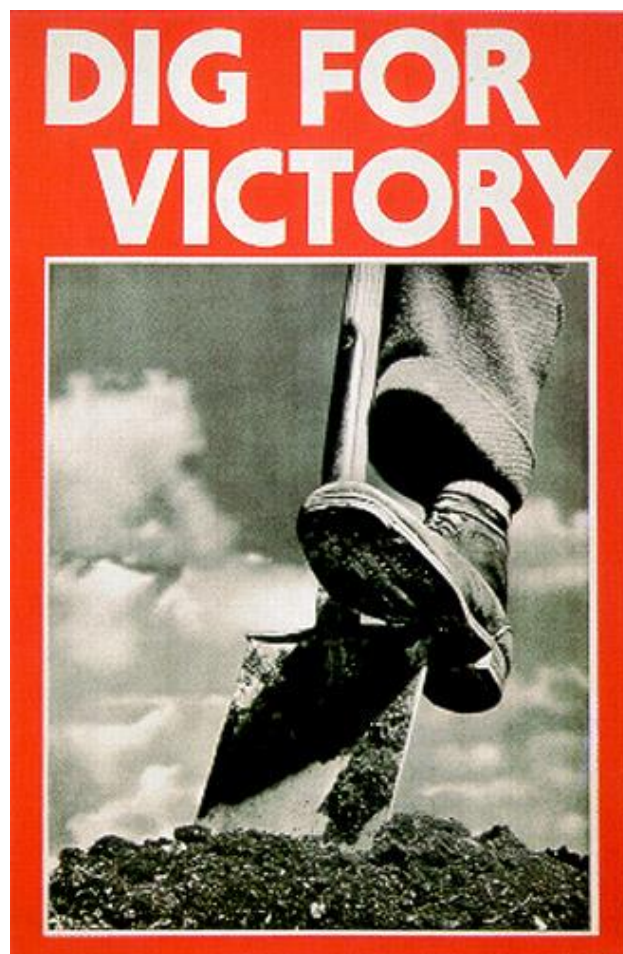
12. The Impact of WWII

Evidence of the impact of WWII seeped into the Minutes. In 1939, there were visits by ARP Wardens and a request was made that no bonfires be left alight. A sympathetic consideration was given to the cultivation of plots of men on active service. A visit by the CID in respect of IRA activities occurred in 1939.¹³ Concerns surfaced relating to steps be taken for war time emergency and it was agreed to arrange a deputation to the Ministry of Agriculture or the PM. In 1939, Rev Whitfield emphasised that a 'menace in the air,' a 'menace to our country' meant increased food production was vitally necessary. He was appealing to people to take up the vacant plots available for vegetable production.¹⁴ Committee meetings took place during the black-out and on dates near a full moon and Annual Meetings were held on Sundays, because they 'had to make the best arrangements under the difficult circumstances.' Maximum cultivation was the key message during the war years. An appeal was made for all vacant plots to be taken up and for maximum cultivation 'under the present difficult position' in 1939. Rationing was introduced on 8

¹³ Joseph McKenna led an IRA Bombing Campaign against Britain in 1939 (Book published Dec 2015). 3 explosions shook the centre of Birmingham wrecking 6 telephone boxes. In Coventry city centre on 25 August 1939, 5 were killed and 70 injured.

¹⁴ *The Birmingham Post*, Friday 24 March, 1939, www.onlinenewspapers.com

January 1940 and the 'Dig for Victory' Campaign was announced on BBC Radio on 10 September 1940 and the response was immediate. Rev Whitfield spoke of the many journeys he'd made to London and the Midlands on 'various matters concerning garden produce.' The Secretary appealed that the association let more plots 'in view of the need for greater food production in the National Crisis.'



The Association supported the war effort by investing £100 in Defence Bonds in 1940. The war came very close, with bombs falling across the area. 'A Vote of Sympathy' was accorded to Messrs Angus, Ballinger and Dornay whose homes had been bombed. In 1940 a stirrup pump was purchased and a supply of sand and water made available. A sub-committee was formed to help bombed

members. Rev Whitfield had to evacuate his home 'owing to enemy action' as did Mr Wood. Mr Groutage and Mr Young took on the roles of Chair and Treasurer. 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. Bomb damage occurred to plot 97 in 1942 and a rebate was given. In 1941 the Secretary was invited to witness the cutting of the first sod of the Hall of Memory Garden (14/12/1941). In 1942, members stood for a one minute silence for their late colleague, C Davies.

13. Conclusion

This Minute Book presents a picture of a committed, dedicated group of men who worked tirelessly to support and promote allotments and the allotment movement, locally, regionally and nationally. They involved themselves closely in the detailed daily running of the allotments, supporting plot-holders in paying their rents, enabling access to seeds, plants and fertilisers and liaising with the Allotments Department and the City Council to sort out problems such as roads and paths in poor condition. They opened and developed a Club providing social amenities for members, supported fellow plot holders in difficult times, contributed to charity, attended lectures and courses and rose to the challenges imposed by WWII. They supported other allotment sites and contributed to the Birmingham Allotment Council and national conferences.

Janet Berry

2016