

# The Development of Allotments in Birmingham

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## 1. Birmingham Guinea Gardens

A flourishing allotments system existed within the urban boundary of Birmingham from the mid-eighteenth century and immediately adjacent to the urban core as early as 1731. These 'small gardens' were on private land owned by many of the well-known local families such as Calthorpe, Gooch and Colmore. The rent of 1 guinea meant they came to be called 'Guinea Gardens.' A guinea represented at the time a considerable proportion of a man's wages. James Drake writing in 1825 claimed these small gardens promoted 'healthful exercise and rational enjoyment among families of the artisans; and, with good management, produce an ample supply of those wholesome vegetables stores, which are comparatively seldom tasted by the middling classes when they have to be purchased.' J.A. Langford writing of the period 1810-1820 said that 'the Guinea Gardens were in very large numbers'. It was a 'hobby' with the Birmingham working man and the cultivation of flowers was carried to 'great perfection by him.' These gardens then flourished, were enjoyed by middle-class families and were regarded generally as highly desirable. The peak of this provision was between 1820 and 1830 after which the sale of much private land for industrial, residential, road or railway projects associated with the now accelerating urban expansion caused the decline of the system. By 1886 only 3 such sites remained and only one continues as allotments today.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> University of Birmingham, Special Collections, Cadbury Library (UB/SC/CL), Box 9, 20<sup>th</sup> International Leisure Gardeners' Conference, Birmingham, September 1976, 'From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case Study of Birmingham,' produced by the Leisure Gardens Research Unit, Department of Geography, University of Birmingham, Part 2; 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.172; Moseley Society History Archives (MSHA), Thorpe, Harry, Galloway, Elizabeth, B., & Evans, Lynda, A., 'The

'A town ringed by blossom' described the hundreds of detached town gardens that once surrounded Birmingham. An 1828 map of Birmingham shows the town surrounded by these plots, titled 'Small Gardens,' spreading from the largely undeveloped acres of Edgbaston and Lee Bank to the countryside beyond New Town Road just outside the town. In 1750 private landowners found it profitable to lease these attractive gardens to artisans for rents as high in Birmingham as a guinea for 300 square yards.<sup>2</sup> There was a strong element of recreation in the early 'Guinea Gardens' and the raising of flowers, fruit and vegetables and this enters into the distinction between urban and rural allotments today.<sup>3</sup> A range of produce was grown including gooseberries, currants, raspberries, flowers, shrubs, vegetables and special crops like asparagus.<sup>4</sup>

Birmingham's last surviving Guinea Gardens are in Edgbaston adjacent to the lower slopes of the Birmingham Botanical Gardens and are just over a mile from the city centre. Originally called The Malthouse Meadows, The Westbourne Road Leisure Gardens were started in about 1848. Today eighty seven plots survive and have a Grade II listing. The plots look very different from today's allotments; they have hedges and doors instead of gates, are about twice the size of the average allotment and stand beside two long, straight lanes pony traps used. There are three other surviving sites with detached town gardens, one in Coventry, a very small site overlooking the racecourse in Warwick and an enormous site in Nottingham with 600 plots.

In 1883 Jesse Collings, a person closely associated with Joseph Chamberlain's reforms and particularly interested in the development of rural allotments, produced *Address on the Land Question*. Jesse believed that the flow of workers into cities and towns like Birmingham who were abandoning the land should be stemmed by providing schemes that gave better access to

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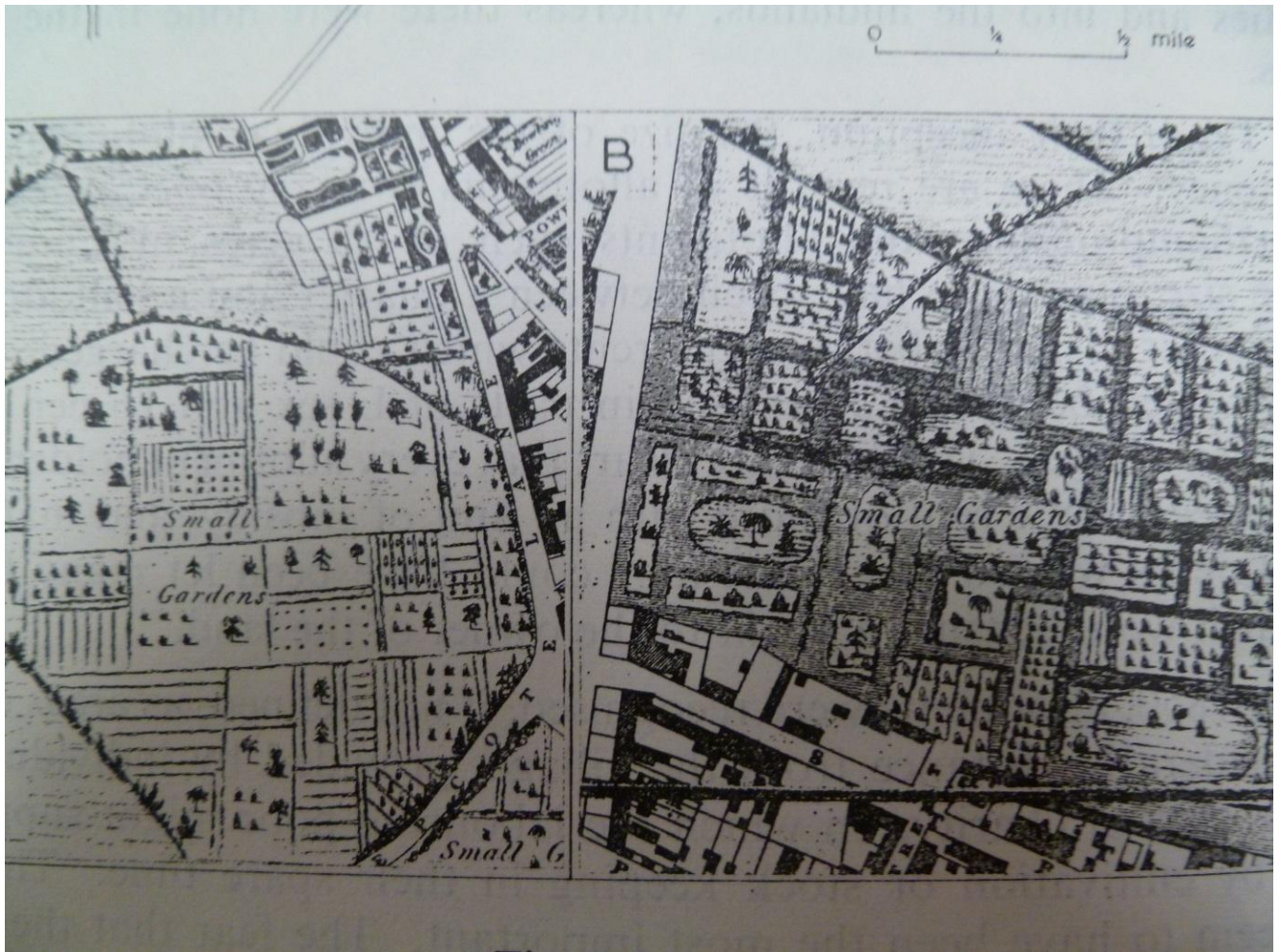
Rationalisation of Urban Allotments Systems – A Case Study of Birmingham, 1977, Department of Geography, University of Birmingham, Map Department, p.2.

<sup>2</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Leaflet/Magazine: Area /Institute of British Geographers, 1976 No. 3., 'A New Deal for Allotments; solutions to a pressing land use problem,' by Harry Thorpe, University of Birmingham, p.2.

<sup>3</sup>UB/SC/CL, Box 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'A New Deal for Allotments; solutions to a pressing land use problem,' p.2.

<sup>4</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban Land Use,' p.170.

allotments and small holdings for rural inhabitants. In the 1880s the Birmingham newspapers frequently ran articles on the 'land question' and on 29 January 1885 Jesse published a series of letters about the use of land in the *Birmingham Daily Post*.<sup>5</sup>



Birmingham Guinea Gardens, Map by J. Pigott-Smith, 1824-5.<sup>6</sup>

## 2. The First Allotment Acts and Birmingham

The first legislation compelling Local Sanitary Authorities to establish allotments where a demand was known to exist became operative. The 1887 and 1890 Allotments Acts and the 1894 Local Government Act contributed to this 'obligation.' In Birmingham this legal obligation was avoided because of a

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinthe19thcentury?nojs>, pp.2-4.

<sup>6</sup> UB/SC/CL, Box 9, National Allotments and Gardens Society Annual Conference Llandudno 13-15 June 1973 Address Harry Thorpe 'The Shape of Things to Come.'

clause stating that such provision was only 'obligatory' in circumstances where allotments could not reasonably be provided by private treaty. Thus private landowners were almost solely responsible for the provision of allotments in the nineteenth century. Between 1886 and 1890 Birmingham maps show fourteen sites were clustered around the outside of the built-up area, amounting to about 61 acres. By 1902/3 the number of sites had increased to forty one sites and 192 acres. These were all mostly still in private hands.<sup>7</sup>

In 1907 and 1908 two Small Holdings and Allotment Acts were introduced imposing on boroughs, urban districts and parishes the obligation to create allotments where none could be provided from private land. Major provision in Birmingham by the Local Authority stemmed from this. Thus by 1910 the Corporation administered more than 97 acres of land for allotments, providing 866 people with plots of about 500 square yards. Private provision, though, still dominated. In 1913, 177 private sites covering about 732 acres existed within the city boundary and the Corporation controlled 428 acres.<sup>8</sup>

### **Regulations made by the Urban District Council of Kings Norton and Northfield with respect to Allotments within the Urban District: Allotments Acts 1887-1905.<sup>9</sup>**

The town clerk reported to the General Purposes Committee that the Allotments Act 1887 stated that where there was demand for allotments the sanitary authority was to provide them.

The Regulations made by the Urban District Council of Kings Norton and Northfield document of 1909 stated that applicants had to be twenty one years or over, resident in Birmingham for at least one year and belong to the 'labouring class.' It outlined the responsibilities of the Council in organising, laying out and advertising allotments and the rights and responsibilities of

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<sup>7</sup>MSHA, Thorpe, Harry, Galloway, Elizabeth, B., & Evans, Lynda, A., 'The Rationalisation of Urban Allotments Systems – A Case Study of Birmingham, p.4.

<sup>8</sup>MSHA, Thorpe, Harry, Galloway, Elizabeth, B., & Evans, Lynda, A., 'The Rationalisation of Urban Allotments Systems – A Case Study of Birmingham, pp.4-5.

<sup>9</sup>Library of Birmingham (LB), LP30.4 238821, Regulations made by Urban District Council of Kings Norton & Northfield with respect to Allotments, 1908.

tenants. Each allotment was numbered and listed in a register as per the 1887 Act. There were application and agreement forms included. Tenants had to keep plots free from weeds, well manured and in 'a good state cultivation.' They must not be a nuisance to other plot holders or obstruct paths, must not cut trees or take away, for example, gravel. They must keep hedges trimmed, ditches cleared and fences and gates in repair, but not put up any barbed wire. Plot-holders must not be a nuisance, not sublet, not cut or prune timber or trees. There were restrictions on planting anything that grew beyond two years.

### 3. WWI

In 1916, the Defence of the Realm Act was introduced, empowering local authorities to secure as much land as could reasonably be cultivated. Within a month, more than 1 000 applications for plots had been received by Birmingham Parks Department. Over the following twelve months 630 acres were acquired, in 1918 a further 500 acres were added and in 1920/21 a peak of almost 16 000 plots over 1 600 acres was reached. In 1922, control of allotments went to the Agricultural and Smallholdings Committee and a separate Allotments Department took over responsibility for day-to-day management.<sup>10</sup>In 1917 there was serious concern to conserve and recycle materials. The City of Birmingham Refuse Disposal Department listed what they were doing in a poster, including making manure for people's gardens from the refuse of the meat and fish markets and clinker used for roads and paths.<sup>11</sup>In 1918, Birmingham wartime allotment plots covered more than 1000 acres and were divided for around 12 000 tenants.<sup>12</sup>

GW Butcher (1981) *Allotments for All* noted the 'magnificent service' of the war-time allotment-holder, whose efforts had added to the food supply when a grave shortage was imminent, reducing the potato queues and cutting the

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<sup>10</sup> Thorpe, Harry, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens*, The Twentieth International Leisure Gardeners Congress, 1976, p.9.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?>

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?nojs#>

consumption of bread.<sup>13</sup> There was, however, considerable pressure in Birmingham for the release of wartime allotments land for rebuilding and expansion schemes, but many plot-holders wanted to retain their plots in the post-war depression years and this is reflected in the 1922 Allotments Act which tried to create better conditions for plot-holders particularly with regard to security of tenure and compensation for disturbance. Birmingham City Council made 'every effort to negotiate with landowners for peacetime leases' or purchased land and some wartime temporary allotments were retained.<sup>14</sup>

#### 4. The Inter-War Years

After the end of WWI the national purpose of allotments disappeared and the 50 000 acres of land requisitioned during the war had to be given up. During the 1920s and 1930s many experienced long-term unemployment, short-time working, reduced earnings and fundamental poverty. Allotments became important sources of food, health and exercise, social interaction and psychological relief from the effects of economic depression. Stock allotments were introduced in some places entitling allotment holders to keep certain animals as well as grow vegetables.<sup>15</sup> Many sites became operative during the inter-war period to meet this need.



**Unemployed Men Digging an Allotment, 1930s.<sup>16</sup>**

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<sup>13</sup> <https://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?>

<sup>14</sup> Thorpe, Harry, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens*, The Twentieth International Leisure Gardeners Congress, 1976, p.9.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?nojs#>

<sup>16</sup> <https://www.theironroom.wordpress.com>



In 1932, The *Birmingham Allotments for the Unemployed Committee* was formed to help 1000 unemployed men obtain and cultivate allotments.<sup>17</sup> In 1935, William Northey, Area Administrator wrote a report, *How the Society of Friends' Plan Operates in Birmingham*, explaining the scheme.<sup>18</sup> He wrote that the Society of Friends had instituted a scheme three years previously whereby seeds and fertilisers could be purchased at less than cost price by easy weekly payments and the scheme had been so successful that the Friends had again raised a large sum of money for that purpose and already in Birmingham hundreds of unemployed were availing themselves of the facilities. The seed supplied were the best possible from first-class firms and consisted of three collections of vegetables, containing sixteen varieties, supplied at 1/6; another of eleven varieties at 1/- and a smaller collection for the home garden of eight varieties for 6d. Four stones of potatoes were allowed at 6d. per stone, two stones of fertiliser at 2/- and one cwt lime at 1/-. Seeds were supplied up to 1/6 in value and the purchase of any commodities was at the option of the applicant. For the total outlay of 6/6 sufficient seeds and fertiliser were provided to cultivate thoroughly a plot of land of 300 square yards. In addition a spade and fork were provided for 2/- each and an instruction booklet for 1d. OAPs, widows and others whose incomes fell within certain limits were included.<sup>19</sup> In 1934 in Birmingham, 1028 unemployed and 33 others had availed themselves of the scheme and 988 seed collections, 3728 stones of potatoes, 501 bags of fertiliser, 730 bags of lime, 123 spades, 156 forks and 280 instruction books were distributed to them by 46 allotment, horticultural, tenant or kindred societies.<sup>20</sup>

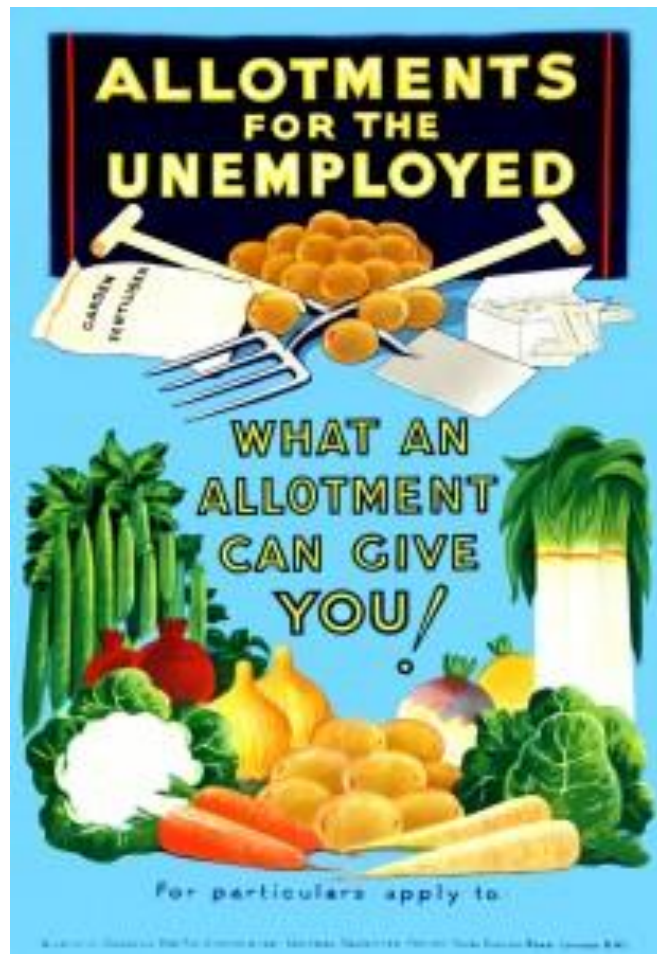
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<sup>17</sup> <https://www.theironroom.wordpress.com>

<sup>18</sup> <http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?> p.5.

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?> p.5.

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?> p.5.



The City of Birmingham *Committee, Allotments for the Unemployed* reported that since February 1934, 1650 unemployed have been placed on allotments by the Allotments Department of the City Council with rent free for 6 months. 1227 unemployed allotment holders had received financial help with their rent and a very large number have received substantial gifts of seeds and seed potatoes and tools. A good proportion of those helped were disabled ex-servicemen for whom allotments had been the only means of supplementing their pension. Plot-holders needed written consent from the council to put up any building except a tool-house or greenhouse or plant any fruit trees or bushes, strawberry plants, asparagus, rhubarb or any other market garden products which continued productive for two or more years. The scheme was described as 'one of the most important social services which have been placed in the hands of local authorities.'<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>21</sup><https://www.theironroom.wordpress.com>



## 5. The WWII Years

Before WWII Britain imported c. 55 million tonnes (3/4 of her food) by ship each year. When WWII started in 1939 shipping was attacked by the enemy submarines and warships. This resulted in food shortages. Rationing was introduced on 8 January 1940 and the *Dig for Victory* was announced on BBC radio on 10 September 1940 to help combat food shortages in Britain by promoting the planting of allotments in gardens and on public land. *Dig for Victory* was very successful. From 815 000 allotments in 1939 the number rose to 1 400 000 by 1943. Vast areas of public land were converted into allotments and nearly a million tonnes of vegetables were grown in the peak years. Food grown on allotments was an important supplement to rations. Fruit and vegetables were never rationed, but greengrocers ran out of particular items such as onions. People, normally women, had to spend many hours each week queuing at shops trying to buy non-rationed foods.

The Minutes of the Birmingham City Council Allotments Committee for 1940 show the transfer of public parkland from the Parks Committee to the Allotments Committee for the cultivation of crops and increased food production. They were taken over by the Allotments Committee under the Cultivation of Lands Allotment Order, 1939.<sup>22</sup> An article in the *Evening Dispatch*, 14 February, 1941, stated that Birmingham Council created a number of demonstration allotment plots in public parks to reinforce the message to grow more food and to promote hands-on social learning. Press reports highlighted Birmingham's history of providing parks and allotments by linking wartime allotment plots with the parliamentary law first secured by Jesse Collings making the compulsory provision of land for allotments and the founding of the Allotments Extension Association in 1882. Potatoes and oats were the main crops grown in Birmingham parks, but carrots were being grown too. Twelve parks had demonstration plots cultivated by the Parks Committee staff and the produce was given to hospitals.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup><http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?> pp.7-8.

<sup>23</sup><http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?> p.8.

Alderman T Hackett was the chairman of the City Council Allotments Committee and Mr J Dyfri Jones was Birmingham Corporation's horticultural advisor in 1943.<sup>24</sup> J. Jones gave lectures to Moor Green Allotment Association (See web article 2: 'The Moor Green Minutes Book, 1933-1942').<sup>25</sup> Between 1924 and 1943, the number of allotment plots had increased from 11,000 to more than 20,000. The Rev Whitfield, the Chairperson of Moor Green Allotments (See web articles, 'The Minutes Book 1934-42' and 'Rev Charles Edward Thomas Whitfield'), was President of the Birmingham Allotments Council in 1943.<sup>26</sup> Women and children were encouraged to *Dig for Victory* and to *Grow More Food* to support the urgency of food production while menfolk were away fighting the war. In an article from *The Birmingham Mail* (22 April 1940), Birmingham Council stressed that women and children could serve the needs of the nation and the City by tending the allotment or garden during the time of national emergency.<sup>27</sup> An article in *The Evening Dispatch* (7 April 1941) quoted Councillor AH Cooper, Chairman of Birmingham's Allotments Committee as saying that people should grow 'something useful' not 'grow pretty gardens.'<sup>28</sup>

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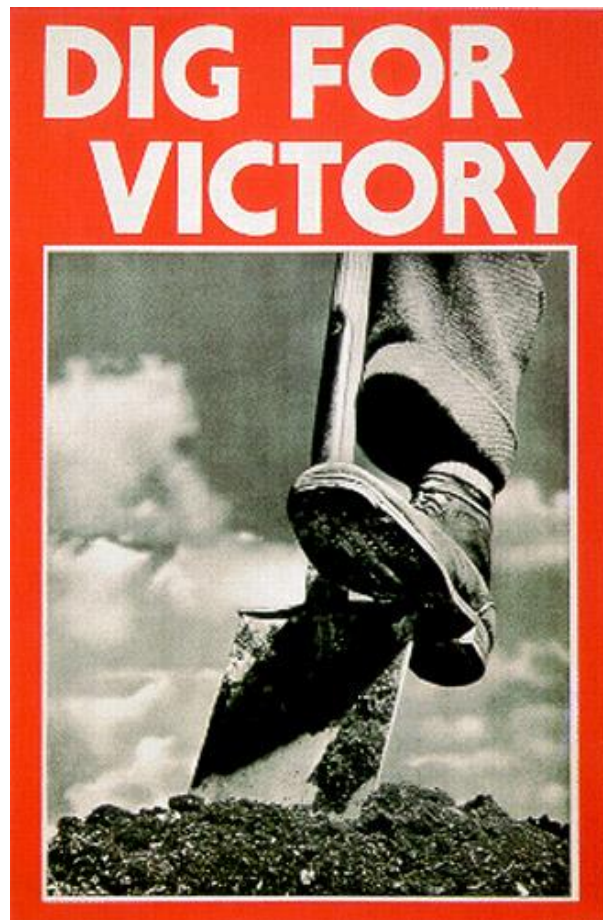
<sup>24</sup>*The Birmingham Post*, Monday 13 December, 1943, [www.britishnewspaperonline.com](http://www.britishnewspaperonline.com)

<sup>25</sup>'The Minutes Book, 1933-1942,' Moor Green and District Allotments Association.

<sup>26</sup>*The Birmingham Post*, Monday 13 December, 1943, [www.britishnewspaperonline.com](http://www.britishnewspaperonline.com)

<sup>27</sup><http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?> p.6.

<sup>28</sup><http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace?> p.7.



## 6. The 1950s, 1960s and 1970s

The return of peace and prosperity saw a sharp decline in plots and allotments because of loss of interest, house building, reconstruction and recreational purposes. By 1949, one third of the 18 000 statutory and temporary plots in Birmingham were uncultivated and a further third only partially cultivated. The Government Allotments Advisory Committee analysed the reasons for the decline in its 1950 report and its recommendations were incorporated into the 1950 Allotments Act. Concerns included security of tenure and the level of expenditure. In Birmingham considerable efforts were made to meet a suggested target for four acres of Allotment land per 1 000 population, but this proved impossible and the City accepted a provision of 1.6 acres per 1 000. 49% was Statutory, 39% Temporary and 12% Private.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>29</sup>MSHA, Thorpe, Harry, Galloway, Elizabeth, B., & Evans, Lynda, A., 'The Rationalisation of Urban Allotments Systems – A Case Study of Birmingham, p.9.

From 1942-1950 almost one fifth of the allotment land in Birmingham was relinquished, some 440 acres, much of which was temporary land requisitioned during the war, but also including about 200 acres of private allotments.<sup>30</sup>

The 1960s saw a number of research projects into the state of allotments. In 1966 50% of urban allotment sites had piped water, 63% secure gates and fencing, 23% sheds, 15% hard-surfaced all-weather paths, c.13% communal storage shed, 10% numbered plaques for each plot, 7% communal meeting hut, 7% chemical toilets and 5% a car park.<sup>31</sup>

Research in 1966<sup>32</sup> showed that:

97% of those who held a plot were male.

82% were over 40 years of age.

1 in 5 was over 65 years old.

51.5% gardened for pleasure and recreation.

17.4% wanted fresh produce of better quality that could be bought in shops.

16.7% had an allotment for economic reasons.

11% had a plot to compensate for their home garden being either non-existent or too small.

22.3% of urban plot holders were retired.

44.7% = of urban ploholders were manual workers.

30.6% of urban ploholders were in sedentary occupations or professions.

0.6% of urban ploholders were unemployed.

According to the *Sunday Mercury* of 17 October, 1965, Birmingham Corporation controlled 10 931 plots on 161 sites covering 984 acres, but there were 3000 vacant plots. In 1942 there had been 1 452 000 plots covering about 143 000 acres, whereas in 1965 there were 729 000 plots covering 78 000 acres. 116 000 were idle and many more were in a poor condition.<sup>33</sup>

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<sup>30</sup>MSHA, Thorpe, Harry, Galloway, Elizabeth, B., & Evans, Lynda, A., 'The Rationalisation of Urban Allotments Systems – A Case Study of Birmingham, p.9.

<sup>31</sup>UB/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.

<sup>32</sup>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.175.

<sup>33</sup> UB/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,' p.1.

1967 research found many reasons why people gave up their plot. For 70% this was unavoidable and due to death, old age, illness or removal from the district. The remaining 30% had varied reasons which the authorities needed to address, such as insecurity of tenure, vandalism, theft, poor soil, bad drainage, poor amenities and weed invasion from derelict plots.<sup>34</sup>

In an article in *the Birmingham Evening Mail* of 2 July 1967, Councillor John Silk, Chairman of the City Parks Committee, announced proposals for the development of allotments into 'family recreational centres.' The committee were having talks with Professor Harry Thorpe and Silk stated that, '... we should be prepared for a change which will be of advantage, not only to the allotment holders and their families, but also to the city.'<sup>35</sup>

In an article in the *Birmingham Post* of 5 November 1969, it was reported that Professor Thorpe had discovered that more than one quarter of Birmingham flat dwellers wanted a garden. At the time, Birmingham had 9000 plots covering 850 acres, both fewer than in 1965. The Thorpe committee wanted a complete 'face lift.' There were 600,000 allotments in England and Wales of which nearly 100,000 were vacant and derelict and the number of allotments had declined by 50% between 1950 and 1967. Thorpe described allotments as 'horticultural slums' and found that 58.2% of those who had been interviewed were put off by the squalid image of allotments. It was suggested that the present 21/- per annum paid for an allotment be increased to £5 and that over five years improvements to allotments would cost about £38 per plot.<sup>36</sup>

In 1969, the 'Thorpe Report' was published and presented to parliament in October.<sup>37</sup> The Social Science Research Council agreed to sponsor the continuation of this work under the direction of Professor Harry Thorpe, Chairman of the Inquiry, who was from The Geography Department, University

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<sup>34</sup>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.176-177.

<sup>35</sup>[www.onlinenewspapers.com](http://www.onlinenewspapers.com)

<sup>36</sup>[www.onlinenewspapers.com](http://www.onlinenewspapers.com)

<sup>37</sup>Report of the Department Committee of Inquiry into Allotments (H.M.S.O. Cmnd.4166).

of Birmingham. The project was entitled *The Rationalisation of an Urban Allotments System; A Case Study of Birmingham*. It was based in the Allotments Research Unit, Department of Geography at the University of Birmingham. The object was to examine the existing allotment system within a large urban area, Birmingham, and to devise a rational plan for the future development of such a system in the light of the Report. The project was based on an appraisal of the largest allotments system in this country within a broad physical, social, economic and planning context, an analysis of the suitability of existing sites for recreational gardening and the formulation of a policy for a secure leisure gardens system for the future. The methodology was to be of great help to other local authorities. Careful consideration had been given to factors such as functional design and landscaping so the sites made a positive and worthy contribution to the townscape and formed an integral part of recreational complexes which might comprise parkland, playing fields and young children's play facilities. Other cities and international agencies were influenced.<sup>38</sup>

In the 1960s and 1970s in Birmingham allotments continued to be important green spaces. The Thorpe committee found that over a quarter of Birmingham flat dwellers wanted a garden of their own, but were put off by the squalid image of allotments.<sup>39</sup> Not all plotheolders liked the Council's plans or Thorpe's vision. An article in *The Birmingham Post* on 7 November 1969 told how allotment tenants objected to their allotments being described as 'agricultural slums.' People valued their autonomy, particularly being able to choose what they wanted to grow, what they wanted to use or recycle on their plot and how they wanted their plot to look.<sup>40</sup>

In 1970, the majority of Birmingham sites were statutory with a total of 118 sites covering 759 acres and providing 7996 plots. They therefore had security of tenure. Most Statutory Birmingham sites had piped water (89%) and sheds (96%), secure gates/fencing (78%) and a store-shed (64%). Rather fewer had some all-weather roads (36%), car parking (29%), a communal meeting hut

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<sup>38</sup>UB/SC/CL, Box 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'Current Research into Allotments and Leisure Gardens,' SSRC, Annual Report.

<sup>39</sup>UB/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,' p.1.

<sup>40</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, Address, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' p.1.



(17%) and toilets (15%).<sup>41</sup>46% of Statutory Birmingham allotments had 21-50% of plots with flowers and 8% were without any flowers, whilst only 9% had 21-50% of plots with fruit and 35% were without fruit.<sup>42</sup>In April 1974, the Local Government Act became operative, but allotment legislation remained the same.<sup>43</sup>Birmingham spent well over £500,000 during the 5 year period on new and improved sites.<sup>44</sup>'Birmingham, after putting gaunt batteries of tool lockers on sites had second thoughts and included 'a fine run of wooden chalets' on its Uffculme site.<sup>45</sup>In 1974, it was reported that a great deal had been achieved in a very short time since the 1965 Inquiry and 1969 Report. In 1965 many sites were being lost. 20% of the plots remaining were derelict and the standard of sites was poor. There were few basic amenities, little regard to appearance, weak associations, uncertainty and disillusion.<sup>46</sup>Thorpe noted 'beautifully lettered noticeboards at 'Uffculme Leisure Gardens' and that Birmingham and District Allotments Council had given freely of their time and hospitality in entertaining visitors and showing them around etc.<sup>47</sup>There were now waiting lists for allotments.<sup>48</sup>There were plans for an International Allotments Congress for September 1976.<sup>49</sup>

By 1975 despite resistance by ploholders 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 1976 Birmingham Metropolitan District Sites varied from up to 200 sq. yards to 600 sq. yards and rentals varied from £2.20 to £5.95. There were charges for piped water (£0.40), hard-surfaced roadways (£0.40), flush toilets (£0.40), tool lockers (£1.00), Summerhouses (£6.50) and greenhouses (£12.50).<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>41</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, Address, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' pp.5-8.

<sup>42</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, Address, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' pp.5-8.

<sup>43</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, Address, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' p.2.

<sup>44</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, Address, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' p.3.

<sup>45</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, Address, 'The Shape of Things to Come,' p.4.

<sup>46</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, 'President's Address to Annual Conference NSLG,' Plymouth, June 1974, 'Taking Stock,' p.2.

<sup>47</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, 'Taking Stock,' p.3.

<sup>48</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, President's Address to Annual Conference NSLG, Plymouth, June 1974, 'Taking Stock,' p.4.

<sup>49</sup>UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, President's Address to Annual Conference NSLG, Plymouth, June 1974, 'Taking Stock,' p.7.

<sup>50</sup>UB/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.

In September 1976, the 20<sup>th</sup> International Leisure Gardeners' Conference took place in Birmingham and *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A Case Study of Birmingham* was produced by the Leisure Gardens Research Unit, Department of Geography, at the University of Birmingham.<sup>51</sup> Denis Howell, Minister for Sport, Recreation and Drought, opened the Congress with a reception.<sup>52</sup> The 20<sup>th</sup> International Conference and Exhibition visited Moor Green Farm where there were displays of flowers and lawns and manicured vegetables. HRH Princess Alice arrived at the University of Birmingham by helicopter and processed up the aisle of the Great Hall to a fanfare. She later went on to open the new Moor Green/Russell Road Allotments (See web article 1: 'The History of Moor Green Allotments') where she planted a tree and inspected the new Leisure Garden layout and the model gardens exhibited there.

An article in the *Times Diary* of 9 September, 1976, entitled 'Upgrading the Labourer's Patch,' reported on the Congress of Leisure Gardens at Birmingham University and described Harry Thorpe as having 'dreamed up the leisure garden as an upbeat version of the allotment' and Birmingham as 'a pioneer city.'<sup>53</sup> However, the author of the report claimed that 'Beneath the seemingly placid scenes of honest and innocent toil flow fierce undercurrents,' referring particularly to break-away groups such as 'Dig for Survival.'

Professor Thorpe and his vision for allotments were brought to the attention of the House of Lords in their 1976 debate, 'Allotments and Home Food production.'<sup>54</sup> The need to make sites more socially attractive was supported, but the fault was attributed to the local authority and not the plot-holder, who often had to cope under great difficulties, lacking such essentials as water and basic toilets. Attractive leisure gardens with a water supply, toilets and a social

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<sup>51</sup> 20<sup>th</sup> International Leisure Gardeners' Conference, Birmingham, September 1976, *From Allotments to Leisure Gardens: A case study of Birmingham*, produced by Leisure Gardens research Unit, Department of Geography, University of Birmingham.

<sup>52</sup> BCLA, Newspaper Cuttings, *The Times Diary*, 9 September, 1976.

<sup>53</sup> BCLA, Newspaper Cuttings, *The Times Diary*, 9 September, 1976.

<sup>54</sup> *HL Deb 17 March 1976 vol. 369 cc226-63226*, [HANSARD 1803-2005](#) → [1970s](#) → [1976](#) → [March 1976](#) → [17 March 1976](#) → Lords Sitting .

centre, surrounding flower beds maintained by the plot-holders and many other amenities was seen as providing a centre for elderly people to get together. Moor Green Allotments was highlighted as an example of the new vision for allotments, but Baroness Dudley was concerned about wasted land, specifically referring to the many thousands of acres in Birmingham alone being left to go to waste. Professor Thorpe attended the debate.

Birmingham, then, was at the forefront of developments in allotments across the century, responding to the needs of the unemployed and the pressures of wartime and supporting and acting on new conceptions of allotment design and provision.

**Janet Berry**