The National Allotment Scene

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1. The Nineteenth Century

Allotments have been in existence for hundreds of years, with evidence pointing back to Anglo-Saxon times and, though the allotment movement had rural origins, there were many urban allotments from 1700. There were a surprising number of allotments around large towns like the 'Guinea Gardens' in Birmingham so called because they cost a guinea (See web article 6: 'The Development of Allotments in Birmingham'). Two centuries later 60% of local authorities were charging rents of 15/- a year or less for the same size plot.[1]These allotments were privately provided but, as cities like Birmingham grew apace, landowners were quick to sell these sites for housing and industry etc. The peak provision in Birmingham was the 1820s.[2]A range of produce was grown including gooseberries, currants, raspberries, flowers, shrubs, vegetables and special crops like asparagus.[3]

The system we recognise today, though, has its roots in the nineteenth century, when land was given over to the labouring poor for the provision of food growing. This measure was desperately needed because of the rapid industrialisation of the country and the lack of a welfare state. The growth of

[1] University of Birmingham, Special Collections, Cadbury Library, (UB/SC/CL), Box 9, Leaflet/Magazine: Area/Institute of British Geographers, 1976, No.3., 'A New Deal for Allotment: Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' by Harry Thorpe, of University of Birmingham, p.2.
[2] 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.172.
[3]Thorpe Harry, *'The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban Land Use,'* p.170.

industry brought a considerable influx of population from the countryside and thus the rise of rows of monotonous workers' houses with little or no garden. This stimulated a growing demand for allotments especially given the high food prices, large families, low wages and unemployment.[4]The Allotments Act of 1887decreed that if there was a demand for allotments amongst 'the labouring poor' in an 'urban district' the sanitary authority could buy or rent suitable land if none was obtainable at a reasonable rent by voluntary arrangements. In 1895 there were 482 901 allotment plots in Great Britain, mainly in rural areas.

2. 1900-1925

The Acts of 1908 and 1909 provided for plots of 30 yards by 10 yards allowing for crop rotation redolent of the three field system.[5]These Acts, the Small Holdings and Allotments Acts, placed a duty on local authorities, boroughs and urban districts as well as parishes, to provide sufficient allotments, according to demand. The 1908 Act brought problems for local authorities over the scale of provision. 'Sufficient number' – what did that mean? So allotments were often available only for a few years on land already earmarked for other uses.[6]

The humble origins associated with allotments continued into the early twentieth-century allotments when the economic motive was as significant as previously. There was a strong impetus to provide land for workers in mining and industrial areas to feed large families, produce fresh fruit and vegetables, eggs, poultry, rabbits and honey, particularly valuable at times of low wages, unemployment and war.[7]Because of the early emphasis on doles of land at low rents, few amenities were provided or indeed expected so allotments were about food production, sweat and toil not recreation and improvisation.

[4]UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, *'The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban land Use,'* p.172.
[5] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, *'The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban land Use,'* p.172.
[6]UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem, p.3.
[7]UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Booklet, Thorpe, Harry, 'Changing Values: From Allotments to Leisure Gardens,' Reprinted from *The Forward Look in Amenity Horticulture* (Report of the 11th Askham Bryan Horticultural Conference), January, 1971, p.2.

From 1908 on, the number of allotments in urban areas increased dramatically. However, it was now felt that industrial workers and miners, many of whom lived in the increasing numbers of terraced rows with back yards and no gardens, should have access to urban allotments for recreation purposes as well as to provide extra food when wages were low or unemployment high. So there arose our traditional allotment sites with regular mesh plots 10 yards by 30 yards. Government policy decreed rents should be low and few amenities could be provided, making improvisation necessary and there was a similar austerity on private sites.[8]

Allotments have always flourished in times of want and periods of war so initially ministerial oversight was in the Board of Agriculture and during WWI plots went from 600 000 in 1913 to 1 ½ million in 1918 with the greatest increase in urban areas. When peace and belated prosperity returned the number of plots declined because some gardeners lost interest or sought other recreations or allotment land was taken for housing, factories, schools and playing fields.[9] There was a similar upsurge with the 'Dig for Victory' campaign of WWII only to decline when peace and plenty was restored.[10]

At the end of the First World War land was made available to all, primarily as a way of assisting returning service men (the Land Settlement Facilities Act, 1919) instead of just the labouring poor. The rights of allotment holders in England and Wales were strengthened through the Allotments Acts of 1922, Restrictive legislation did not help improve facilities. The 1922 Act insisted on vegetables and fruit so there were no flowers and lawns, etc. The 1922 Act showed the strength of the economic motive which still provides the current definition of the allotment garden today as 'an allotment not exceeding 40 poles (a quarter of an acre) wholly or mainly for cultivation by the occupier for the production of vegetable and fruit crops for consumption by himself and/or his family.' But what did 'wholly or mainly' mean? This gave allotments problems in deciding limits. For example, some forbade flowers, whilst more

[8] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem, pp.2-3.
[9] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.3.
[10] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.3.

liberal associations permitted livestock, such as poultry and pigeons, and garages which discouraged some gardeners.[11]

The most important change can be found in the Allotments Act of 1925, which established statutory allotments which local authorities could not sell off or convert without Ministerial consent, known as Section 8 Orders. The 1925 Act attempted to give more security to allotments by requiring that the provision of sites should be considered in every town planning scheme. It also introduced a class of secure or Statutory Allotment Land, but there was no formula for provision. This established an important class of Statutory Allotment Land in which the freehold was vested in the local authority and could not be disposed of or used for other purposes without special Ministerial consent.[12]A modest minimum scale of half an acre per 1000 population was suggested.[13]

Further legislation has been listed over the intervening years which has affected allotments including the 1950 Allotments Act related to security of tenure, compensation for disturbance and increases in the levels of expenditure, and more recently the 2011 Localism Act, which gave communities a new right to create neighbourhood plans and set out the exact locations of sites that could be used for new allotments and identify those sites they want protected in the future.[14]

3. **The Society of Friends' Scheme**

See also article: https://www.theironroom.wordpress.com

[11] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.3.
[12] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe Harry, *'The Homely Allotment: From Rural Dole to Urban Amenity: A Neglected Aspect of Urban land Use,'* p.173.
[13]UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.3.
[14] The National Allotments Society: A Brief History of Allotments; UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, 'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem' by Harry Thorpe University of Birmingham, p.2; www.researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk

By 1928,unemployment was huge with 300,000 unemployed miners mostly from South Wales, and allotments were seen as a way to help them. Unlike the nineteenth century, however, it was not the landed classes, the church or the government that stepped in. Instead, it was the Society of Friends (SOF), the Quakers, who set up the *Coalfields Distress Committee* to help and encourage men to grow-their-own food.[15]The Friends' scheme was an immediate success and within a short time, there were 203 allotment societies in South Wales. By 1929, some 1600 tons of seed potatoes were distributed to allotment holders, along with 12.5 tons of peas, 8 tons of beans and over a million packets of seeds. By 1930, there were 15 000 allotments holders in Sheffield, where a plot could be rented for 2d., per week, with nothing to pay for the first six months. One ten rod plot in Sheffield was said to have produced 700 pounds of potatoes, 30 cauliflower, 40 cabbages, 60 pounds of peas, 30 pounds of beans, 20 pounds of beets and 30 - 40 yards of flowers. The average yield from a plot was calculated at £5 to £7 worth of produce per year.[16]The scheme was described as 'one of the most important social services which have been placed in the hands of local authorities.'[17]

Unemployed Men Digging an Allotment, 1930s.[18]

[15] Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed: www.allotmentresources.org; www.theironroom.wordpress.com
[16] Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed: www.allotmentresources.org; www.theironroom.wordpress.com
[17] Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed: www.allotmentresources.org; www.theironroom.wordpress.com
[18] https://www.theironroom.wordpress.com

In November 1930,a Conference was held in London in order to find ways to expand the provision of allotments for the unemployed. Not only were they seen as a solution to hunger and keeping the unemployed occupied, they also offered a form of security to the government by helping to maintain *the status quo*. Ramsay MacDonald, the Prime Minister, gave the keynote speech. Sir Christopher Addison, the Minister of Agriculture, thought the provision of allotments was such a good idea that he encouraged the government to take over the work of the Friends (SOF) in providing allotments. As a consequence of Addison's enthusiasm for the scheme, the Agricultural Land (Utilisation) Act came into force in 1931, although Parliament intended to repeal it as soon as the crisis was over.[19]With government participation in the scheme, the SOF Allotments Committee (formerly the Coalfields Distress Committee) now became known as the Government's National Allotments Committee. Allotments were seen as 'a strong counteracting influence' to the 'Red and Communistic agitators' to which unemployed men might fall prey. Unfortunately, the government's involvement with the scheme was short-lived and after only a year it withdrew its support, shut up its office, dismissed its staff and left the allotment holders in the lurch. The Society of Friends had little alternative other than to assume full responsibility for the scheme. The Government's National Allotments Committee was dissolved and SOF invited some of its members, as well as members of the National Allotments Society, on to a new committee, which was named the Central Committee for Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed.[20]

By 1935,the Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed Scheme had spread to every county in England and Wales, although the distribution of allotments varied according to the number of unemployed. The number of men helped had risen to 120,641 and their produce was estimated to be worth £600,000. Three years later in 1938, employment was on an upward trajectory and although the number of people participating in the scheme fell, it continued until the 1960s by which time it was known as the National Allotments and

[19] Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed: www.allotmentresources.org; www.theironroom.wordpress.com
[20] Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed: www.allotmentresources.org; www.theironroom.wordpress.com

Gardens Society Assistance Scheme.[21]In 1961, it had a budget of about £9,000, which helped 12,000 people to 'provide the best and most wholesome food-stuffs. 'Grants were available for seeds, fertiliser and potatoes 'to old age pensioners and blind persons,' women and the unemployed. For two shillings, the scheme supplied enough vegetable seed for a ten rod plot. The scheme was also available to people who did not have allotments but had vegetable gardens of at least 150 square yards.[22]

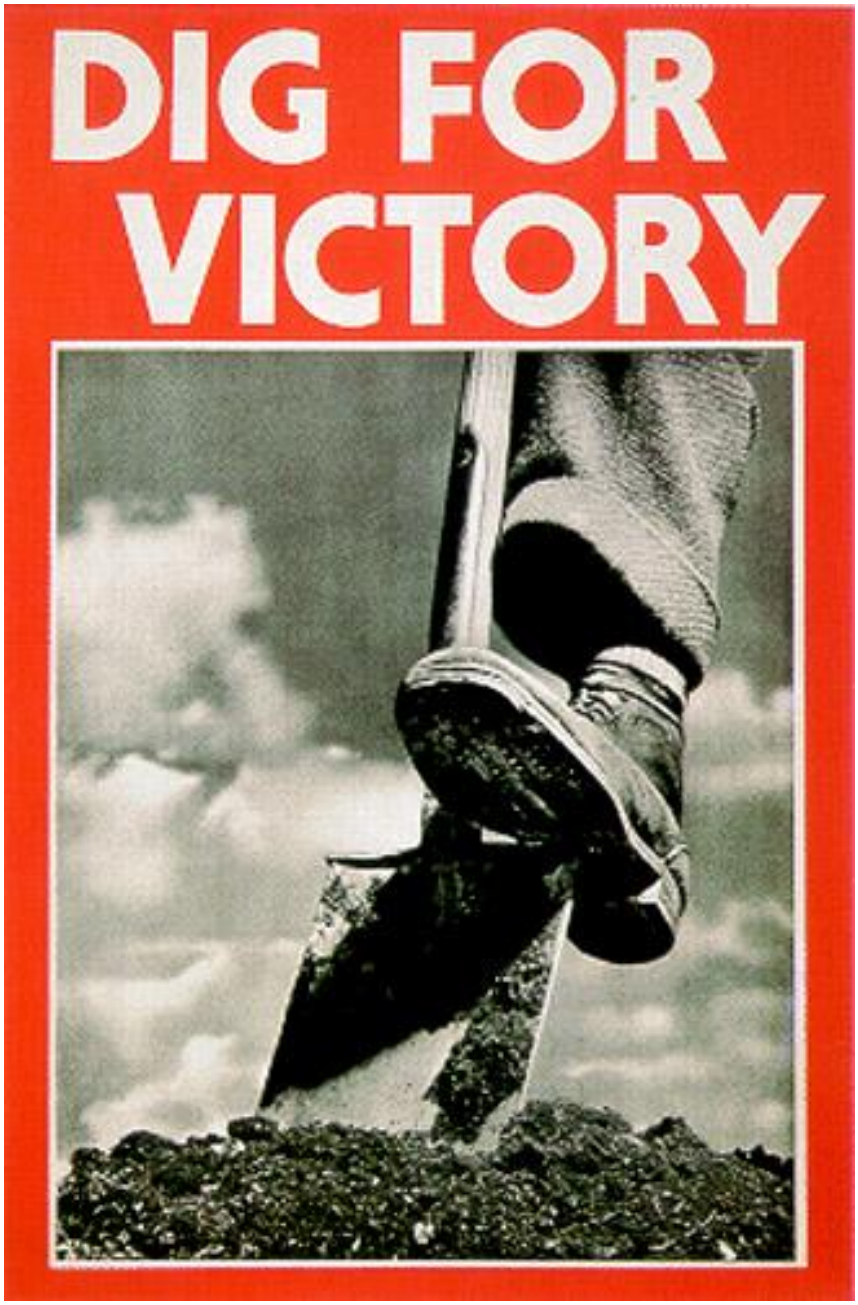
4. WWII

Just as in WWI, local and central government used similar measures at the start of WWII to bring unused urban land under cultivation. Allotments were again of primary importance and local food growing became essential for national survival as well as personal health, fitness and general well-being.[23] A range of posters and leaflets were issued to advise people on how to make the best use of their gardens and allotments, such as 'Grow for Winter as well as Summer', 'Dig for Victory Leaflet No.1,' which gave information on what to grow, when and how.

The *Dig for Victory* campaign was launched by the Ministry of Agriculture in 1940 to help combat food shortages in Britain by promoting the planting of allotments in gardens and on public land. Before WWII, Britain imported c. 55 million tonnes, three quarters of her food, by ship each year. When WWII started in 1939 shipping was attacked by enemy submarines and warships. This resulted in food shortages. The government had learned from WWI that this hit the poor worst and at the start of WWII were ready to launch the rationing scheme and the *Dig for Victory* campaign. Rationing was introduced on 8 January 1940 and the *Dig for Victory* was announced on BBC radio on 10 September 1940. *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

[21] Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed: www.allotmentresources.org; www.theironroom.wordpress.com
[22] Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed: www.allotmentresources.org; www.theironroom.wordpress.com
[23] http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace, p.6.

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.[24] 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.



[24] http://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinwarandpeace, p.6.

5. **Post WWII**

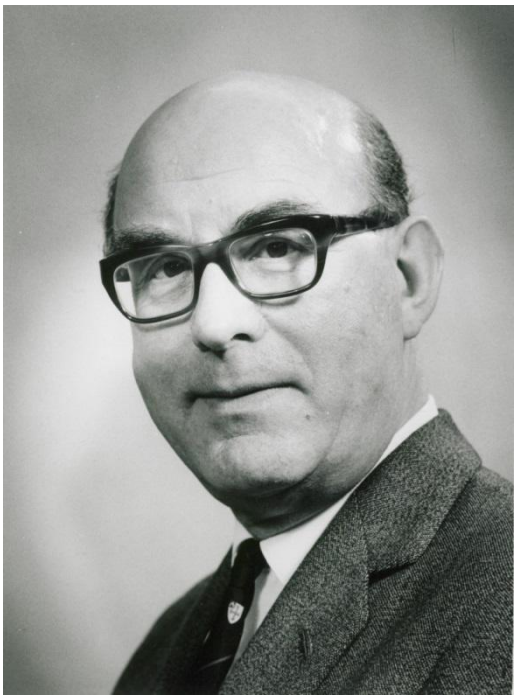
By 1950 wartime regulations regarding allotments had ended and there was a downturn in allotments influenced by the rise of the affluent society, TVs and the motor car.[25] There was an increase in food supplies and wages, there was Bingo and TV and frozen, canned and preserved fruit and vegetables. There was also a lack of security of tenure. Land could be sold or used for other purposes and plot holders would have to move on. Since 1945 c 70,000 acres of allotment land had gone to other purposes resulting in lots of moves to different sites.[26]During the 1950s and 1960s allotments went into decline as people bought food from the new supermarkets and convenience stores rather than growing their own.[27]Because rents were low local authorities had little income for the provision of basic amenities. Only 7% of urban allotment sites had toilets (the majority of these were the chemical type). Only half of urban sites had water supplies. Toilets, water supplies, parking, community centres, good roads and fences were needed.[28] By 1965 allotment numbers were down to 729,000 with many idle plots in poor condition.[29]1 in 5 plots lay derelict and weed infested. For many, allotments meant rectangular grid plots of vegetables, fruit bushes, older people (particularly men over 40 years), mainly OAPs and ramshackle huts.[30]Throughout their history, allotments and allotment gardens had been provided primarily for the relief of poverty, 'Parcels of land for the labouring poor.' Post-war they quickly became vital spaces for potential housing developments, schools, playing fields and playing fields to serve the growing towns and cities.

6. **The Thorpe Initiatives**

The decline in allotments led to a Government review of allotment provision in the UK chaired by Harry Thorpe, Professor of Geography at the University of Birmingham. Thorpe and his committee were responsible for establishing a

[25] https://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinthethorpeera?nojs
[26] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Booklet , Thorpe, Harry, 'Changing Values: From Allotments to Leisure Gardens,'p.5.
[27] https://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinthethorpeera?nojs
[28] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Booklet , Thorpe, Harry, 'Changing Values: From Allotments to Leisure Gardens,'p.5.
[29] https://www.libraryofbirmingham.com/allotmentsinthethorpeera?nojs
[30] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.2.

new vision for post-war allotment provision, a radical shake-up with allotments to be seen as a rewarding, leisurely recreational activity.



Professor Harry Thorpe

The Committee of Inquiry set up in 1965 by the Minister of Land and Natural Resources and chaired by Professor Harry Thorpe of Birmingham University, found that allotments had peaked during WWII (*Dig for Victory*) at 143,000 acres and 1,450,000 plots, but by 1965 the area of allotment land in England and Wales had declined to c.70,000 acres and 635,000 plots.[31]Plots were being taken for housing, industry, schools, playing fields, cemeteries, but 1 in 5 remaining plots lay derelict and weed infested. For many allotments meant rectangular grid plots of vegetables, fruit bushes, older people (particularly men over 40 years) and mainly OAPs and ramshackle huts**.**[32]In 1965, Harry Thorpe was writing about hating 'the ramshackle huts,' the unused plots, the weeds and lack of cultivation.

[31] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry,'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.2.
[32] UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry,'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.2

In 1969 Professor Harry Thorpe and his Committee of Inquiry produced a report on the poor state of allotments and made recommendations about how the situation could be improved. The Committee was clear that the unsatisfactory situation owed much to the movement's origins as doles of land to the labouring poor. 'The stink of charity had attached itself to allotments as beneficent grants to landless labourers during at least three centuries of enclosure.' On the other hand, in allocating allotments for fuel, grazing or cultivation the motive was essentially economic – to provide additional subsistence for a large family when farm labourers' wages were poor.[33]

The committee suggested there be a change of name from 'allotment garden' to 'leisure garden' to break away from the old image of a charitable dole of land for the needy. It was important to give out publicity about the privilege of having an allotment when land was so expensive and provision needed to be made for a secure half an acre per 1000 population.[34]The committee emphasised good design, landscaping, beauty, high amenity and respectability and believed allotments would make a positive contribution to townscapes. Tenants were to be encouraged to beautify plots with, for example, flowers and ornamental shrubs, while still producing vegetables and fruit and to have neat summerhouses for families where they could enjoy a simple meal together. These were to replace the 'sordid huts' if the plot holder wanted. Livestock should be excluded. Also needed was a community centre to serve as a central focus for the gardening fraternity. Rents were bound to rise and OAPs should have reductions.[35]

Professor Harry Thorpe was proposing a radical shake-up of allotments. They were to be a rewarding, leisurely recreational activity rather than sources of sustenance for the poor. He wanted them to be like the European 'Week-end Gardens,' with vegetables for half their length and lawns, flowers and shrub beds in the other half. At the centre was to be a Pavilion Summer House with a paved patio area for umbrellas and outdoor meals. He wanted ornamental shrubs in gardens on the site and a main site building with a lecture hall, office

[33] UB/SC/CL, Box 9, Thorpe, Harry,'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.2.
[34] UB/SC/CL, Box 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'Changing Values:From Allotments to Leisure Gardens,' p.6.
[35] UB/SC/CL, Box 9, Thorpe, Harry,'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.2.

and toilets.[36]The programme of improvement included the creation of strong gardening communities with a balance of age and sex, attractive summerhouses, children's play area, demonstration plots, well-equipped community centre for administration and social activities including lectures on horticultural topics. He suggested inviting the 'man in the street' to walk through from time to time.[37]

In 1973 Harry Thorpe expressed the 'essentials' of the 'New Image' of allotment leisure gardening in a series of ten points (since described as 'The Ten Pillars of Wisdom' or 'The Ten Commandments').[38] They were:

- Good design
- Beauty
- Amenity
- Good maintenance
- Productivity
- Family (with its neat little Summerhouse)
- Community (with its fine Community Centre)
- Grow for Pleasure
- Grow for Quality
- Grow to Show

By 1975 Birmingham was becoming the 'allotment capital of Britain.' The Russell Road/ Moor Green Farm sites were being developed in line with the Thorpe vision (See web article 1: 'The History of Moor Green Allotments'). In 1976 an international conference/exhibition was organised to demonstrate the new ideas and Birmingham's commitment. Princess Alice came to open the exhibition in 1976 and plant a tree at the Moor Green Allotments site.

[36]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.
[37] UB/SC/CL, Box 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'Changing Values: From Allotments to Leisure Gardens,' p.6.
[38]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.

1000 delegates visited the International Federation's 50th Anniversary Celebrations at Birmingham University in 1976.[39]

Princess Alice Planting a Tree at Moor Green Allotments, 1976.[40]

[39]Library of Birmingham (LB), 'Birmingham Newscuttings' - Birmingham Biography, Vol. 77, Feb-Nov 77, *Birmingham Post* 15/2/77.

[40] 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.

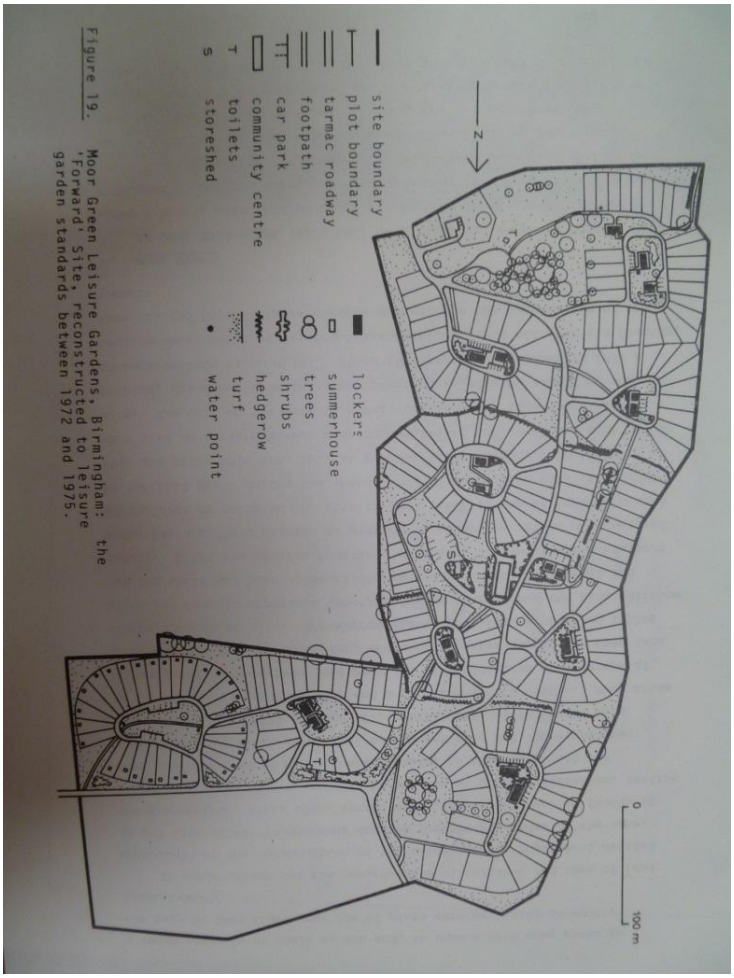


Figure 19. Moor Green Leisure Gardens, Birmingham: the 'Forward' Site, reconstructed to leisure garden standards between 1972 and 1975.

Plan: Moor Green Leisure Gardens, 1972-1975.[41]

Debate on Allotments in the House of Lords, 1976

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.'[42] 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. The new approach by Professor Thorpe was enthusiastically supported and the attractive leisure gardens with a water supply, toilets and a social centre, surrounding flower beds maintained by the plot-holders and many other amenities was seen as providing a centre for elderly people to get

[41] 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.

[42] HL Deb 17 March 1976 vol. 369 cc226-63*226*, HANSARD 1803–2005 → 1970s → 1976 → March 1976 → 17 March 1976 → Lords Sitting .

together. It was thought that all future planning development should include such facilities. Baroness Dudley was concerned about wasted land, specifically referring to the many thousands of acres in Birmingham alone being left to go to waste. She felt Thorpe's Report was particularly important. She highlighted how the seven Acts passed by Parliament between 1908 and 1950 were preventing rather than encouraging allotments, firstly and primarily because of the lack of a satisfactory definition of 'allotment.' In the seven Allotments Acts no general definition exists, but there are two which crop up:

'Any parcel of land, whether attached to a cottage or not, of not more than two acres in extent, held by a tenant under a landlord and cultivated as a farm or garden, or partly as a garden and partly as a farm.'

'Any parcel of land of not more than five acres in extent, cultivated or intended to be cultivated as a garden or farm, or partly as a garden and partly as a farm.'

She pointed to three basic and major defects in the law - anachronism, over-complication and ambiguity, words of Professor Harry Thorpe. She highlighted the advent of the Community Land Act since 1969 and irrelevance of current law to the allotments situation today. She called to attention the re-design of the Russell Road/Moor Green Farm site as a prototype for many others.

Professor Thorpe

Professor Thorpe died at his home in Hall Green in 1977 at the age of 64 years. He was chairman of the Government Committee of Inquiry into Allotments from 1965-69 and President of both the National Society of Leisure Gardeners and the International Federation of Leisure Gardeners. He was made an OBE for his services to the movement in 1976. He was married with two daughters.[43]His hope had been that 'For the future one envisages that leisure gardening will be accepted as a worthy recreation on equal terms with golf or cricket or bowls and sites will be equally attractive features of our townscapes.'[44]

Janet Berry

[43] BCLA, 'Birmingham Newscuttings,' Birmingham Biography, Vol. 77, *Birmingham Post,* 15/2/77.
[44]UB/SC/CL, BOX 9, Thorpe, Harry, 'A New Deal for Allotments; Solutions to a Pressing Land Use Problem,' p.5.