

A brief history of the allotment movement in Britain based on *Growing Space* by Lesley Acton

19th century

The modern allotment movement is often thought to begin with the 19th century campaign to provide rural agricultural labourers with allotments in response to land enclosure and falling wages, but the roots may be said to predate this. For example, by 1700 the growing demand for housing in industrial towns also generated a demand for gardens. Although many of these gardens were short-lived due to the expansion of urban areas. In Birmingham they were advertised in 1765 as 'Guinea Gardens', because of their annual rent of one guinea, by 1820, there were many sites around the city.

Allotments for rural labours had been suggested in the 18th century and some sites allocated along the Gloucester/Wiltshire border in 1795, there was no formal legislation for provision until 1819 when the Select Vestry Act allowed parishes to set up 20 acres of allotments as part of Poor Law amendments, very few sites were created, with less than 100 sites across Britain in the next 10 years. Increased mechanisation and worsening conditions eventually lead to the Swing Riots, and two Allotment Acts in 1831 and 1832, leading to the creation of many allotments by 1842 – perhaps as many as 100,000 allotments. By 1873 there were 242,542 allotments covering 58,966 acres. The Allotment Act of 1887 created another 200,000 Allotments, aiming to encourage labourers to stay in rural areas. This was unsuccessful, as mechanisation continued to decrease employment opportunities and so by the beginning of the 20th century, the rural populations were in decline leading to falling demand for allotments, just as demand for urban plots began to grow.

The most important piece of legislation relating to the creation of Allotments was the 1894 Local Government Act which created elected councils at district and parish levels. These councils had the power to power to obtain land for allotments. By 1897 another 15,000 acres (31,663 allotments) were created, although the majority of allotments were not provided by local authorities.

In fact the number of allotments supplied by private landholders between 1887 and 1900 may have been as many as 100,000 plots – although no official

figures exist. These plots were often seen as a good way to obtain a high aggregate rent for spaces which were otherwise of low value as agricultural land. The intensive spade cultivation received could also benefit the landlord by increasing soil quality. Sadly for tenants the leases could be short, insecure and the conditions restrictive. In contrast the tenure of local authority allotments was likely to be more secure and a discount could be received for paying rent promptly.

1900-1914

However at the beginning of the 20th century demand for allotments was such that the local councils often used spare land as temporary allotments – leading to insecure tenure as land was snatched away for development in the same way private allotment sites were often treated. To combat this some societies were founded to provide permanent allotment sites, which were very popular and could prove profitable – especially when selling seeds, fertiliser etc. as a side business. In 1907 and 1908 two Small Holdings and Allotment Acts were passed, which allowed local authorities to borrow more money for allotment provision, and where six registered voters or ratepayers requested it councils now had a duty to provide allotments, and where land could not be leased or purchased through agreement, they had the power to compulsorily acquire it, providing that the cost of the land was not more than could be recouped in rent.

Initially though the purchase of allotments was costly, although the security of tenure did make the success of the sites more likely. By 1912 Birmingham was the largest local authority provider of Allotments, with 400 acres and 2361 allotment holders. Many of these plots had been acquired since the 1908 act, leading to an increase in the allotment deficit of £67 in 1906, rising to £500 by 1912.

1914-1918

During WWI the Defence of the Realm Act gave the government emergency powers, one of which was the requisition of land for allotments. Horticultural committees were established to assist and educate the public about growing their own. Huge numbers of plots were created nationally, but by 1917 when

rationing was introduced there was a waiting list of 16,000 people who still wanted allotments, in fact provision never quite managed to keep up with demand, partly because some sites had to be reclaimed for other purposes. In Birmingham one small arms factory was built on an allotment site, and the plot holders had to be compensated with £6 each for the inconvenience. Overall by the end of the war there was 1 allotment for every 5 households, providing 8 to 10 million people with food.

1919-1929

During WWI many allotment sites were created in public parks, and sadly most councils were keen that these areas be returned to parkland quickly after the end of the war, a pattern that was also seen with other temporary sites, although food shortages were still severe. In fact post-war demand for allotments was very high, including plots for war veterans, even as many plot holders were being given notice to quit on temporary sites across the country. In 1920, 50,000 people were on waiting lists for allotments. Some sites were granted lease extensions, and £217,670 worth of loans were granted for allotment sites during 1919-1920 (almost as much as the £229,482 spent between 1908 and 1918). Sadly many sites were still lost, and new sites could not keep up with demand as post-war priorities for urban land were focused on slum-clearance, industry and improving infrastructure. New legislation was needed to protect the future of allotments, especially in light of their valuable contribution to domestic food production (in 1923, this was estimated at 200,000 tonnes of potatoes and 500,000 tonnes of other produce, worth £15million).

There were acts of parliament passed in 1922, 1925 and 1926, which made councils responsible for creating Statutory Allotment Committees and providing allotments, giving the Minister for Agriculture power to step in if they failed to do so, although sadly London was exempted in 1926 due to the high cost of land in the capital. By 1923 there were 14,000 allotment authorities responsible for over 1 million allotment plots in England, and 57,000 in Wales, but private landlords were still a large contributor with 500,000 plots, plus 100,000 owned by railway companies. Plot holders were also given greater security of tenure, and greater compensation if their

tenancy was terminated. By 1925 statutory allotment sites were protected – they could not be ‘disposed of’ without ministerial consent and allotments had to be included in all town planning schemes. In 1927 allotment societies had to be officially registered before they could lease land, but registration had several advantages, not only was the financial liability now shared among all members rather than the committee alone, they were also eligible for assistance from the council to buy or rent land and had the right to sub-let to members as well as permission to trade in tools and supplies.

1929-1939

These improvements were well timed as the economic importance of allotments was soon to be shown again when the American stock market crash of 1928 sent the UK spiralling into a depression. The situation was particularly bad for coalminers in South Wales, many of whom had struggled to find work, or suffered falling pay since the general strike in 1926. The Society of Friends stepped in and formed the Coalfields Distress Committee to help the miners create allotments, restore existing sites and provide supplies. As unemployment became widespread the committee was renamed Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed.

The main purpose of the scheme was handing out small grants to individual applicants. The grant depended on the size of family, length of unemployment and weekly income, but the average was 7 shillings, which were used to rent the plot. Supplies were initially given free but the committee realised that by purchasing them the men felt like they were contributing and thus kept their self-respect, so potatoes, seeds, tools and fertilisers were purchased from local traders and then sold on to the men at 1/3 retail cost. The allotments not only supplement family diet, the men were also allowed to sell up to 3 shillings of produce a week without losing their unemployment benefit, with an average yield of £6 a year. The Minister for Agriculture, Dr Christopher Addison, believed that allotments were beneficial and would ‘enable them to occupy their minds, relieve the monotony and provide food for their families’, some also believed allotments were a good way of maintaining the status quo and providing a strong counter influence to communistic agitation. The Agricultural Land (Utilisation) Act 1931 allowed the Minister to provide financial assistance

for allotments and small holdings for the unemployed – so the SOF scheme became the Government's National Allotments Committee.

With good publicity and government assistance of £23,000, the scheme had 64,000 successful applicants by 1931. Sadly, the government's involvement did not last, and on 1st September 1931 an announcement was made that aid was being withdrawn, effective immediately. The government believed giving so many small grants was an ineffective way to use resources, because the administration costs were high. The Society of Friends felt bound to continue and so appealed for donations of £30,000 to allow them to continue the scheme. The government relented somewhat in 1932 and offered some financial support, but donations were still important, as were repayment of the grants by successful members, allowing them to help another 61,200 applicants. The scheme was also supported by many allotment societies, as well as the British Legion, Rotary Clubs and Women's Institute – helping to distribute supplies and collect subscriptions. Buying in bulk helped keep costs low – so they could supply applicants with a spade, a fork and a selection of 11 vegetable seeds for 5 shillings, plus gardening and cookery booklets at a penny each. By 1936 the scheme had spread to every county of England and Wales, with 135,378 members and resulting produce valued at £1,000,000. Although numbers began to fall in 1937 as employment rates rose, the scheme continued throughout the war, not ending until the 1960s.

Allotment societies also helped new plot holders by giving talks on gardening to help them make the most of their land and encouraged their exploits with horticultural shows, where vegetables and other produce were exhibited. These talks and shows were also an important leisure activity, especially for those who had little money to spend on non-essentials.

Although allotments were hugely important during the 1930s, many temporary sites were still lost to housing development, as the government encouraged house building as a way of providing jobs and stimulating the economy. Also one unfortunate side effect of the 1922 Allotment Act was that since plot holders now had greater security of tenure and had to be compensated for the loss of their plot many landowners preferred to leave their land idle prior to development, rather than rent it for allotments and have to pay compensation when building work finally began.

1939-1946

Although the success of the allotment movement in the 1930s had mostly been due to necessity, the SOF scheme and general increase in gardening knowledge was very important when WWII began, having laid the groundwork for the Dig for Victory campaign to be successful.

At the outbreak of war, 2/3 of the food eaten in Britain was imported. In order to free up shipping space needed for the war effort and ensure a good food supply, this needed to change and fast. New allotments were created, mostly in urban areas, and people were encouraged to grow vegetables and start rearing chickens and rabbits for food. Defence regulation 62A empowered local authorities to seize unoccupied land without permission, with the aim of providing 500,000 allotments. In less than a year 264,000 of these had been created and as the war continued every piece of available land, however small was appropriated. Despite this, there was a reluctance in some areas to use public parks for allotments, because sport activities were seen as vital to welfare of the nation. At the beginning of the war there were 740,000 allotments in England and Wales, by 1943 there were 1.75 million, but still more plots were needed. The use of every available site, including bomb craters for growing, was ingenious, although sadly many plot holders lost their produce to bombing too and had to be compensated a year's rent for the loss and labour needed to put the site right again, including the burial of TNT contaminated soil which caused stunted growth and delayed germination.

The Dig for Victory campaign included propaganda encouraging everyone to think of growing food as the best way to strengthen the home front. Seed potatoes and plants were supplied in bulk by local councils and the Americans also donated seeds to be distributed by allotment societies free of charge. There was also a wealth of gardening advice available; leaflets were printed, talks given, radio shows broadcast and exhibitions staged, including horticultural shows and demonstration plots. The success of the campaign even led in some areas to a surplus of fruit and vegetables, which could be taken to collecting centres for distribution to greengrocers and local markets. Some plot holders made direct arrangements with local schools, hospitals or other organisations to make use of their surplus veg.

Sadly the lessons of WWI had not been learned, and although councils were encouraged to make provision for post-war statutory allotment sites via government loans, many did not and plot holders once again faced the loss of their temporary allotments for building, despite continuing food rationing.

1946-1959

Rationing for some foodstuffs did not end until 1954, and so domestic food production was as important as ever, and the 'Dig For Victory Over Want', which soon became known as 'Dig for Plenty' campaign was launched. However land was also needed for factories, railway stations, schools, and 1 million new homes, so many plot holders lost their allotments, and others became dispirited by their precarious situation. The NAS attempted to encourage councils to build new, model allotment sites alongside housing developments, which would be important for recreation and the aesthetics of towns as well as food production, but as the economic situation worsened, few councils were willing or able to invest in allotment sites, even when the government encouraged them with the availability cheap loans.

As the economic situation improved, government support of domestic food production waned, and the £3,000 grant which the NAS received was withdrawn, forcing them to raise their affiliation fees by 50%. Luckily most members were loyal and saw the NAS as important for helping fight local battles. In 1947 the society was renamed the National Allotments and Gardens Society, to reflect the fact that during the war and subsequently many allotment societies had allowed home gardeners to purchase supplies or enrol as garden members. The NAGS wanted to halt the decline in allotment numbers by improving legislation – with a new act to replace all the existing ones, which would be clearer and provide better protection for plot-holders. Sadly when the final Allotment Act came in 1950, aiming to improve security for allotment tenants, it did not revoke the existing acts, and in fact referred to them heavily, increasing the complexity of legislation.

The continued improvement of the economic situation by the end of the 1950s saw a steady decline in allotment numbers, with total allotments decreasing from 1,113,000 in 1950, to 891,257 by 1959. There was also a shift in focus – if

allotments were to survive in this prosperous age it would be for recreational and not economic reasons.

1960-1969

The early years of the 1960s saw continued decline in allotments, partly because the land was often wanted for development. As more and more sites were lost, allotment holders became dispirited by their lack of security and this led to undercultivated and untidy plots. In 1965 Birmingham had 10,931 plots but many were described in *The Sunday Mercury* as 'quite definitely idle'. In some cases councils may have deliberately spread rumours about development in order to discourage plot holders and allow them to claim the site was not in demand. Many regarded allotment holders as a privileged minority – paying very little for otherwise valuable land. The low rents charged for allotments may also have made their condition and overall situation worse, encouraging misuse of allotment sites for other occupations including car repairs, sawmills and other non-horticultural businesses.

The decision of what to do with allotment land was a hard one, and so a Committee of inquiry into allotments was appointed in 1965, led by Harry Thorpe, who was head of Geography at the University of Birmingham. The Thorpe report, published in 1969, was a monumental undertaking, nearly 500 pages long and making 54 major recommendations. Thorpe believed that the future of allotments was in following the continental model of leisure gardens which would encourage a high standard of maintenance, with good amenities including toilets, pavilions and fully landscaped grounds. He believed in making them easily available to those who did not otherwise have access to outside space, such as flat-dwellers because although gardening was a very popular pastime 4/5 of British homes had gardens and so many did not also want an allotment. Thorpe stated that grants should be provided for pensioners so that financial consideration would not act as a barrier. He also believed security of tenure was essential to the survival of the movement. Thorpe, like the NAGS before him, wanted to see all the existing legislation replaced by a single Act. Sadly by the time the Thorpe report was complete there was little political will to make any of these changes, and some aspects of the report were even rejected by plot holders themselves. For example, the 6,000 remaining plot

holders in Birmingham were soundly opposed to relinquishing their individual sheds. The Thorpe report could have been a highly important moment for the allotment movement, but instead it largely ignored.

1970-1979

The dire situation of the 1960s continued in the early 1970s, and although sites continued to be lost, many societies struggled to rent their available plots and started to increase advertising, or offer incentives like supply deliveries for those without cars. A lot of allotment societies opened up their trading huts to garden members which not only brought in income, but often also eventually persuaded home gardeners to become plot holders. In the 1970s gardening was an extremely popular hobby, and featured in many television programs including *Gardener's World*, *Blue Peter*, *Kitchen Garden* and of course *The Good Life*, but it was not just love of gardening or even the emerging green movement which saw allotment movement begin to flourish once more, once again economic concerns were also a factor – as food prices rose 24.7% in 1975, due to high inflation and the oil crisis. Allotment waiting lists began to grow again in some areas, but others still lost sites to development or suffered from large numbers of derelict plots.

Many still believed that Thorpe's suggestion of creating leisure gardens with good amenities and layout was the best way to reverse the decline. One characteristic feature of leisure gardens was a landscaped site with a radial arrangement of plots. Although some sites were transformed into leisure gardens like Meadow Road in Birmingham, very few made the transition and instead retained their traditional rectilinear arrangement. This was often because the conversion to leisure gardens needed planning, leadership and most of all funding, all of which were in short supply, especially when design was not often high on plot holders list of concerns.

1980 – 2000

The brief resurgence of the allotment movement in the 1970s was sadly not sustained into the 1980s and waned even further in the 1990s. In 1980, the Thatcher government tried to repeal Section 8 of the 1925 Allotments Act which protected statutory sites from development because local councils faced

budget cuts and wanted to sell the land. Luckily this was not successful and Section 8 was retained, sadly placing even more pressure on non-statutory sites. By the 1990s the rate of loss of allotment sites had slowed, but mostly because a large number of non-statutory sites had already been sold.

Disposal of statutory sites also occurred, and although plot holders had to be offered an 'adequate' replacement site, there was much disagreement on what this meant, with most councils believing this simply meant any site where allotment gardening could be carried out – regardless of how unfavourably it compared to the present site. Other councils were even more underhanded, and carried out a policy of deliberate dereliction – by withholding maintenance and refusing to let plots which had become vacant, allowing them to claim that sites were surplus to requirements. Sadly even where councils were not being obstructive many sites struggled to attract new plot holders, despite incentives like free rent for the first year.

Worry about the decline in allotment sites led to the *Inquiry into the Future for Allotments*, which was published in 1998. The inquiry revealed there were now only 296,923 plots left in England, 29% of which had no statutory protection, 43,000 of the plots were vacant. The rate at which plots had been lost was 6,250 a year between 1970-1978, accelerating to 9,400 a year between 1979 and 1996. It was clear that without changes allotments would soon disappear entirely. The inquiry did not see allotments as a relic of a bygone era and emphasised their benefits to modern urban life – providing fresh food, open space, educational and therapeutic benefits. The committee wanted allotment data to be published annually so that any further decline could be noted and investigated, it suggested that all temporary sites which had been in use for 30 years should be automatically made into statutory sites, and that allotments should be included in sustainability initiatives. Once again a suggestion was made to update and overhaul the legislation, as had been suggested by Thorpe and many others previously. In 2001 legislative change was considered but it was decided that the legislation was adequate if best practice could be encouraged with the publication of a guide entitled *Growing in the Community*.

As the 20th century drew to a close the situation for allotments looked bleak, but there was a ray of light on the horizon as increased interest in

environmental sustainability with accompanying media attention, plus economic depression drew in a new generation to join the ranks of allotment holders, which had previously been overwhelmingly older and retired people.

2000 – Present day

At the beginning of the 21st century there was a massive turnaround in demand for allotments and waiting lists for plots exploded. For the first time in decades large number of new allotment sites have been created – with 50 in the South-west of England alone, but in other areas the disposal of allotment sites for development has sadly continued, leading to an overall decline in plot numbers. Local authorities seemed unaware of their obligation to provide allotments, or reluctant to act, especially as the lack of deadline on providing allotments allowed for long delays while the council claimed to be ‘looking for a site’. The continual shifting of allotment committees from department to department during the 20th century also caused problems – many councils found records had been lost and they had no accurate record of their allotment holdings or jurisdiction in areas which also had a Parish council or meeting, which frustrate councils who had hoped to provide allotments to reduce waiting lists and meet green targets for their towns.

Despite these set-backs, the economic and especially lifestyle benefits of gardening are now widely recognised. In many areas there have been successful grass-roots movements to campaign for allotments, or involve more local residents in existing sites through community plots. Others make use of non-traditional locations for growing, including reclaiming derelict land, roof or vertical gardens and creation of container gardens in public spaces. The positive impacts of these allotments and gardens often go far beyond the group, improving the appearance of the local area and encouraging a wider sense of community.

Allotment holder demographics

In the early 20th century, tending an allotment was seen as a suitable leisure activity for ‘all classes of working men’, although Allotments were often seen as important because of the economic benefit they provided – saving money and providing families with good nutritious food. This was especially true not

only in the rural allotment movement of the 19th century and during both world wars, but also during the interwar period when food shortages continued and the economic recession left many unemployed. Allotments have also seen a resurgence in demand during times of economic hardship in the 1970s and again in the 21st century.

At the beginning of the 20th century horticultural education was considered important, especially as a way of making the labouring classes more self-sufficient by enabling them to grow their own food. In 1902 elementary schools in Britain were eligible for garden grants, the scheme proved popular and by 1915, 3,100 school had gardens (over 16% of all elementary schools). The idea was not a new one, many European and American schools already having 'kindergartens' (school gardens) during the 19th century. During WWII children were encouraged to Dig for Victory, and were sometimes assigned to help absent or infirm plot holders - for instance in Dudley 400 children tended the plots of servicemen who had been called up to fight. There has been a recent resurgence in horticultural education for children, with many schools creating vegetable gardens or taking on an allotment when they lack outside space. The benefits are myriad, especially helping the children learn about where food comes from, increasing their confidence and promoting healthy lifestyles.

Gardening was also considered a suitable hobby for women, or even a field which they might enter professionally. Demand for horticultural education among women was particularly strong during WWI, when organisations such as the Irish School of Gardening for Women were founded and immediately found themselves oversubscribed. Although during the war women were encouraged to undertake all the labour themselves, at most other times heavy work such as digging and manure spreading were done by men whilst women and children would take on lighter tasks such as weeding, watering and picking. The suitability of allotment work as an occupation for women was partly because it was seen as linked to the home and family budgeting. The legacy of Dig for Victory includes a generation of women who developed an early passion for gardening, and now cultivate an allotment.

At times when the allotment movement has been in decline the majority of plot holders have tended to be older, retired people who have more time to

dedicate to their plots. Although many older allotmenters attribute their good health and vitality to the healthy exercise they get, this still creates a trend towards further decline. The recent resurgence in interest amongst the younger generation can then only be a positive indication for the long term future of allotments.

Those who take an allotment solely because of economic need, during war or recession, are less likely to keep their allotment in times of plenty, therefore the recreational and social aspects of allotments are important in encouraging long term cultivation. Although some plot holders lament a lack of community spirit on their site, on most there is a strong identity and social life. Tending the plots often provides a shared framework for people of diverse cultures and backgrounds and brings these people together, with 92% of plot holders surveyed nationally saying they had made friends at the allotment, 80% also have involvement of some kind from their families.

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