

## Allotments

by Tim Wood

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Tim Wood, who is a member of the management team running the private Rectory Allotments' Association adjacent to Stoke Lake in Little Anglesey Road, Alverstoke, gave an interesting talk to the Gardeners' Club on the history of allotments and his personal experiences. It is believed that the site has been used for personal cultivation since the 1890s following its earlier origins as the Church Glebe. Recently the Church of England has adopted a more commercial approach to land management and in 2010 the Association took up a tenancy to fully manage the site.

Tim highlighted the social and physical benefits of allotment gardening where like-minded people can gain new skills, experience the seasons, learn from each other and achieve the satisfaction of growing crops for themselves. It also helps to combat loneliness, improve mental well-being, particularly for those living on their own, and inspire more environmentally aware behaviour such as recycling, composting and organic gardening. Certain livestock is permitted and Tim has holders who keep chickens and bees, the latter providing a critical role in the pollination of plants, especially fruit crops.



Allotments have been in existence for hundreds of years, with evidence pointing back to Anglo-Saxon times where an Open Field system was adopted by dividing up the fields surrounding a village into long narrow sections, which were allocated to villagers at public meetings. As the population increased over the centuries this system became difficult to maintain. During the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries members of the aristocracy lobbied to privatise land and this led to the enclosure of over 5 million acres of common land, of which less than 0.5% was set aside for the poor. This led to a significant rise in poverty and the introduction of the Poor Laws.

The allotment movement as we know it today seems to have started in the 1760s when some members of the landed gentry and clergy argued that their provision would reduce crime, provide incentives for people and decrease the ever-increasing cost of the Poor Relief. Several landowners made allotments available to their workers and this slowly expanded during the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Select Vestries Act of 1819 gave Churchwardens and Poor Law Overseers the authority to purchase up to 20 acres of land and let it out to the poor and unemployed of the parish as allotments. The take up of this initiative was limited

due to the hostility of many landowners but towards the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century urban dwellers started to clamour for allotments.



The numbers grew from 243,000 in 1873 to 600,000 by 1913. The “Dig for Victory” slogan during WW1 accelerated this number to 1.5m. Although the inter-war years saw a decrease in allotments due to the rising popularity of new build houses with gardens, WW2 saw a rapid expansion to 1.75m due to a higher political profile and shortage of food. The post-war lifting of

rationing started a further decline and apart from a brief increase in popularity in the 1970s, probably resulting from the three-day week, trade union unrest and the BBC’s TV series ‘The Good Life’, numbers had dropped to 250,000 by 1999. The National Allotment Society states that currently there are some 330,000 allotment plots in the UK with about 90,000 people on waiting lists, which could increase with global economic uncertainty. However, in Tim’s case the Rectory Allotments are facing more vacancies than normal at the start of this year.



Written by Robert Blake  
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