



THE HISTORY of LEICESTER'S allotments

Leicester has over 40 allotment sites with more than 3,000 plots, most of which are managed by local allotment societies and others directly by Leicester City Council. Home grown food, healthy open air exercise and the company of like-minded people from different social and cultural backgrounds are just some of the benefits enjoyed by allotment holders, both past and present.

Allotments are also part of a movement with an interesting history of its own, originating in the 19th century, playing a crucial role in maintaining the nation's food supplies during both World Wars, and remaining an essential part of the life of the city today.

The Labourer's Friend

This movement had its origins in the countryside, where changes in agriculture from the late 18th century reduced the amount of land available for cultivation by rural labourers. As well as providing outdoor exercise and a better diet, allotments were seen as benefitting the morals of the labouring classes by reducing drunkenness and crime, increasing self-esteem, and avoiding the social consequences of 'recklessness and despair'.

Land for allotments was often provided by the gentry and clergy, or from charitable funds, but by the 1840s they were also a feature of urban areas. The Leicester Labourer's Friend Society, part of a national movement founded in the 1830s, was established in 1842 at a time of serious depression in trade.

Its 'Cottage Garden and Allotment Plan' aimed to alleviate 'the soul sickening and heart-harrowing unhappiness in our country, flowing from the deadly fountain of poverty', and to provide an alternative to charity or poor relief for working men 'willing and anxious' to support themselves by their own labour. The secretary of the local society was William Burden, a self-educated framework knitter who was also one of the leaders of the Chartist movement in the town.¹

The Borough Corporation leased land to the society for cultivation, including a plot in Gaol Lane in the area of Highcross Street. In 1844, 'during leisure hours, the men may be seen working, digging, planting, and sowing their little plots of land with industry and an ardour that prove how highly they value the boon, if the opportunity of working hard can be called a boon. The results cannot

be otherwise than good, both in moral and physical respect to the occupants'.²

In the following year the Deputies of the town's Freemen also acquired powers to plough, dig and break up part of Freeman's Common to provide allotments at a rent of 'no more than one farthing' a square yard.³

The number of allotments increased after an Act of Parliament in 1887 which obliged local authorities to make land available where the demand could not be met by private landlords. This encouraged the formation of allotment societies in turn. Some of the earlier ones were the South Leicester Allotment Society, consisting of holders of allotments on Freeman's Common, Aylestone Road and Victoria Road; and the East Leicester Allotment Society, which rented land in St Margaret's parish.⁴

By the 1890s Rev Joseph Montague Harris of English Martyrs church was also providing allotment gardens opposite the Bede Meadow Bathing Station - but not in the most tranquil of surroundings: the bathers were said to be 'bathing without a bathing dress... and running about the gardens in a state of nudity... they dress and undress by the side of the river in full view of the allottees'.⁵

Many of these societies had middle class patrons, but in 1901 the Aylestone Allotments and Leisure Gardens Society was formed by a small group of people from the CWS

Wheatsheaf Boot and Shoe Works on Knighton Fields Road and the Leicester Gas Department, operating on a co-operative basis 'to establish comradeship, to create a community of interests and to spread a spirit of mutual helpfulness'. The surplus from the 'superabundance' of fruit and vegetables that its members soon produced was offered to neighbours 'who appreciate it so much that they are ready to pay more for what they know is absolutely fresh than they would give to the street-hawker'.⁶

Twentieth century expansion

The Small Holdings and Allotments Act of 1908 led to a new expansion in allotments by allowing local authorities to borrow money to provide for those who desired them. The demand was such that the Corporation had difficulty finding enough land 'in all respects suitable for the purposes for which the future owners or occupiers require it' within a reasonable distance of the town.⁷

¹ Leicestershire Mercury, 28 May 1842

² Leicestershire Mercury, 20 April 1844

³ Act of Parliament 30 June 1845

⁴ Leicestershire Mercury, 29 March 1856; 14 April 1855

⁵ Borough of Leicester, Parks and Recreation Grounds Committee, 6 September 1893

⁶ Aylestone Allotments and Leisure Gardens Society history - www.aylestoneallotments.org/ (28 July 2018)

⁷ Borough of Leicester, Estate (Small Holdings) Sub-committee, 11 December 1907

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It advertised in local newspapers for owners of land willing to sell or lease, used some of its own land on the Old Belgrave Sewage Farm for the purpose, and rented around 200 acres from the Earl of Dysart.⁸ Applicants were invited to satisfy themselves 'as to the desirability of the land with regard to situation and suitability of soil' before taking it on, and representatives of the allottees were appointed to liaise with the sub-committee responsible for the scheme.⁹

Most new allotments were around one acre in size, but some larger plots, designated as 'smallholdings,' were also provided. In 1909 annual rents varied from £2 to £5 10s a plot according to the size and quality of the land.

The Act also encouraged the formation of new allotment societies, which were able to negotiate leases as well as buying in bulk to reduce the cost of seeds, fertiliser and other items to members.¹⁰ Among them was the Rowllatts Hill Allotment Society, which was granted a lease on land on Coleman Road in March 1910, and an additional 28 acres between the Great Northern Railway line and Coleman Road in 1913.¹¹ The agreement between its Trustees and the Corporation imposed strict conditions on its cultivation and management which were typical of those required of other societies for years to come. They included the cultivation of the land as 'Allotment Gardens and in no other manner and to keep the same in good heart and condition and free from weeds'; payment of all expenses incurred in laying out the allotments, erecting fences, and providing roads and water supplies; and ensuring that allotment holders did not 'cause any nuisance or annoyance thereon or to any of the other allottees or to any other person whatsoever'.

Allottees were also prohibited from erecting summer houses, huts or other buildings, or keeping pigs and poultry on land not designated for these purposes.¹² Members of the Corporation usually served as Trustees of the societies and took an active part in them, attending annual shows and speaking at dinners or other events

Lending a hand on the land

Before the First World War around 60% of Britain's food was imported. Once the war started, more land was brought into cultivation and the production of wheat and other cereals was increased. From 1916, however, food supplies were increasingly affected by German submarine attacks on merchant shipping, and new ways of increasing production had to be found. Local authorities were given powers to take over unoccupied land, and to let it to allotment societies or individuals. In Leicester this included the gardens of empty houses, building sites and land used as 'common tips', which required 'a great amount of labour and patience' to restore to a suitable condition. Around 150 acres of land were taken over by the Corporation on a permanent basis, along with additional land leased from the Earl of Dysart in the Groby Road/Blackbird Road area.¹³

By February 1918 these measures had resulted in 'a considerable augmented food supply'. Around 20 tons of seed potatoes were distributed by the Corporation and potato spraying was introduced to keep down fungal disease. This was described as 'quite a new thing to the great majority of small gardeners', but helped to produce 500 tons of potatoes.

In another new departure, allotment

holders were encouraged to keep poultry and rabbits for food. Around 200 tons of other crops were produced in 1917, thanks to the 'splendid patriotism of the working men of Leicester who took up this work of augmenting their food supply'.

As the Corporation also noted, while not formally members of allotment societies, 'the women of the town too have had their share in this work of digging and planting their own special plots', as well as tending those of male relatives who had volunteered or were later conscripted into military service.¹⁴

Between the wars

More allotment societies were formed in Leicester during or just after the war, including the Evington Parks and Glenfield Road societies. In 1920 there were around 16,000 allotment holders in Leicester with 1,600 acres of land under cultivation, and 'a constant demand for more' - but pressure on land for post-war municipal housing was such that some temporary allotments were soon reclaimed for building.¹⁵ Compensation was payable if land was required 'for national purposes', but notice to quit while produce was still in the ground or on the bush involved a significant loss to individual members, as well as to a society in rents.

The Allotment Act of 1922 gave some security of tenure by requiring a landlord

to give at least six months notice to quit, expiring on or before 6 April or 29 September in any year, but allotment land continued to be acquired for these purposes in the inter-war period. Allotment holders given notice to quit on the Westcotes estate in 1927 solved this particular problem by acquiring other land on a permanent basis - as reflected, in the name of their new organisation, the Leicester City Permanent Allotment Society. The Corporation itself also set aside land for allotments on some of the housing estates built in the inter-war period, including those at Braunstone and Kirby Fields.¹⁶

⁸ Borough of Leicester, Estate (Small Holdings) Sub-committee, 21 January 1907

⁹ Borough of Leicester, Estate (Small Holdings) Sub-committee, 24 July 1908

¹⁰ D. Nash and D. Reader ed., Leicester in the Twentieth Century (Leicester City Council, 1993); Small Holdings and Allotments Sub-committee, 27 July 1917

¹¹ Rowllatts Hill Allotment Society leases, 1910 and 1913

¹² Lease of Land Situate in Coleman Road... 9 March 1910

¹³ Letter from Borough Corporation to the Horticultural Representative for the Borough of Leicester, February 1918

¹⁴ Letter from Borough Corporation to the Horticultural Representative for the Borough of Leicester, February 1918

¹⁵ Leicester Daily Post, 6 October 1920

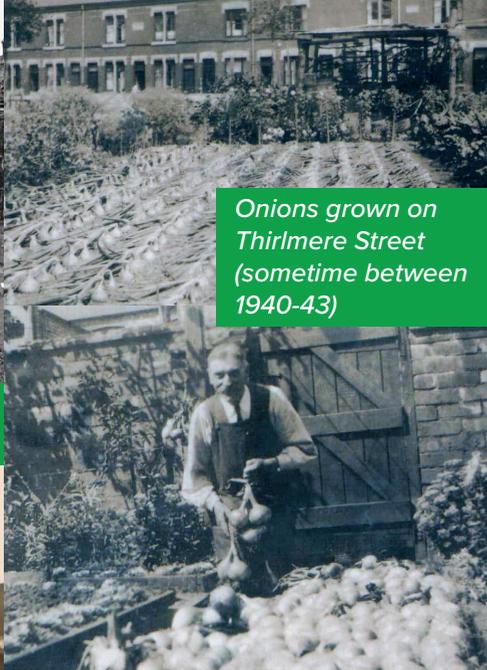
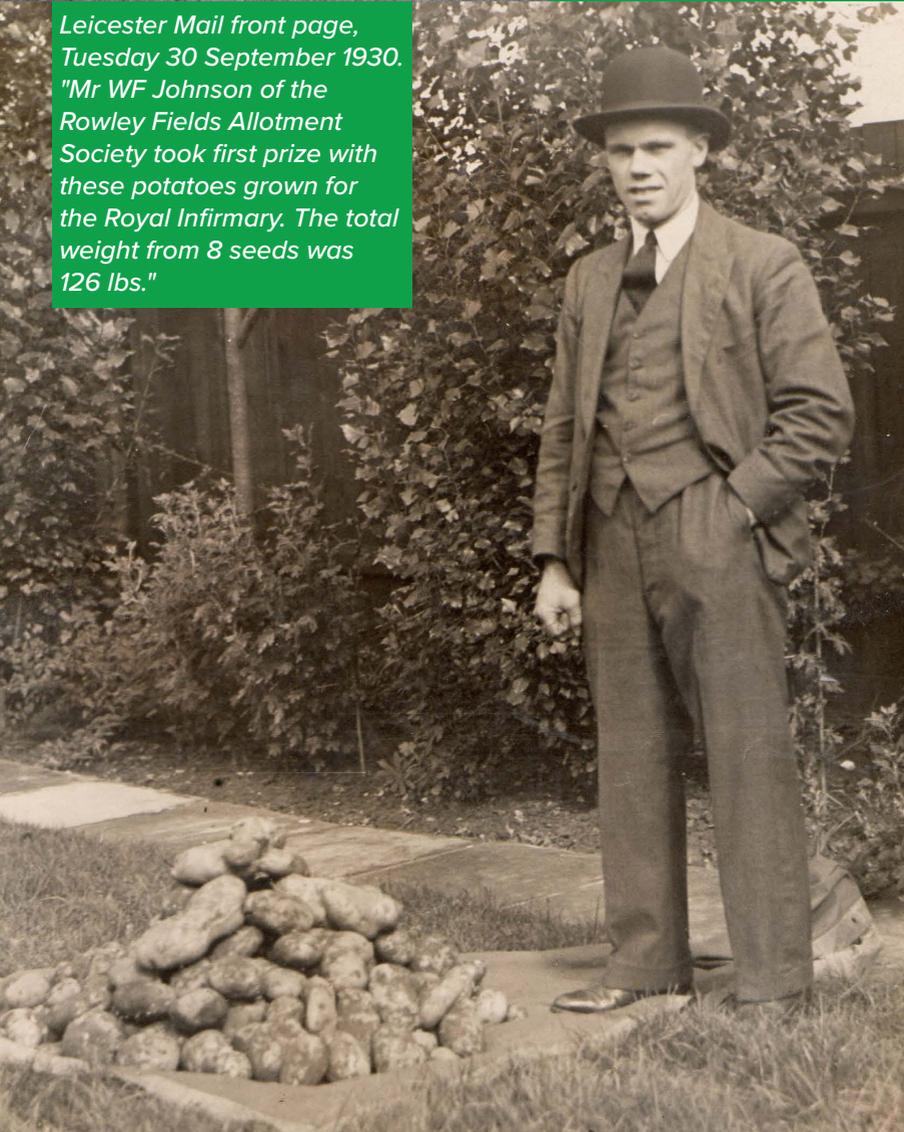
¹⁶ Leicester in the Twentieth Century

Local authorities were given powers to take over unoccupied land, and to let it to allotment societies or individuals.



Demonstration plots
De Montfort Square 1953

Leicester Mail front page,
Tuesday 30 September 1930.
"Mr WF Johnson of the
Rowley Fields Allotment
Society took first prize with
these potatoes grown for
the Royal Infirmary. The total
weight from 8 seeds was
126 lbs."

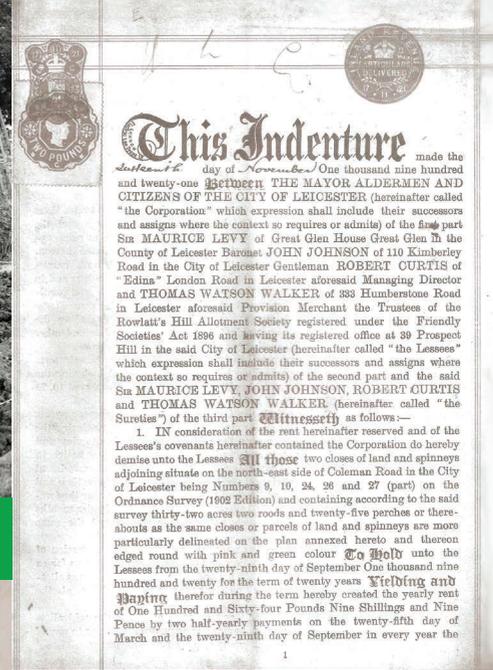
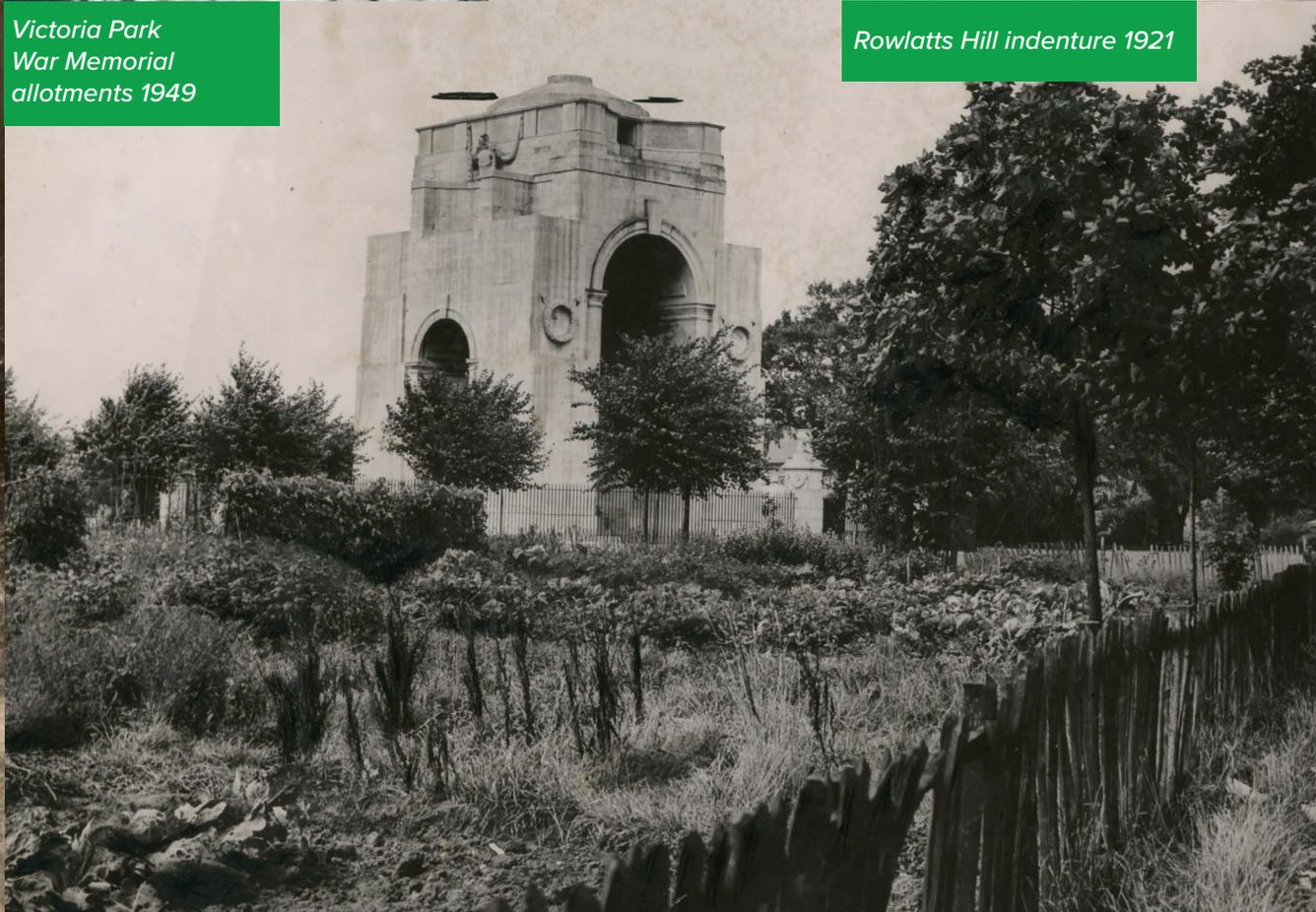


Onions grown on
Thirlmere Street
(sometime between
1940-43)



Working the soil 1975

Victoria Park
War Memorial
allotments 1949



Rowlatts Hill indenture 1921

Digging for Victory

In the view of one correspondent to a local newspaper in March 1939, allotment societies played an important role in people 'breaking down class and social barriers, moulding individual characters and uniting all sections of the community'.¹⁷

They were soon to play a crucial role once again in augmenting the nation's food supply. When Britain went to war later that year their help was enlisted right from the outset. A new War Horticultural and Allotments Committee, including non-members of the Corporation experienced in cultivating allotments and smallholdings, acquired new sites around the city for wartime allotments and allocated them to allotment societies or schools for cultivation.

They ranged in size from plots of 80 or 90 square yards up to over 1,000 square yards on St Margaret's Pastures and in parts of Braunstone and Belgrave. Housing Committee land on Hockley Farm Road was taken over by the Braunstone Avenue Allotment Society, along with part of Western Park. More land on parks was cultivated by other allotment societies, among them the Evington Parks society on Victoria Park and part of Braunstone Park by the Leicester City Permanent society.¹⁸

In the summer of 1943 'Demonstration plots' were established on Abbey Park, close to the London Road entrance of Victoria Park, and in Town Hall Square.¹⁹

The first annual report of the Washbrook Allotment Society, formed in September 1939 with a 'handful' of members, gives an interesting insight into wartime demands and conditions. By the end of 1940 it had

246 members, each paying one shilling for a share in the society. Its first 113 plots off Welford Road were taken up 'forthwith' and a waiting list introduced.

Early in 1940 a further 94 plots off Knighton Lane were taken within a week, and another 115 provided later in the year on land off Baldwin Road. The Society was 'highly congratulated by the Lord Mayor and other experts for their sound and rapid development of allotments... a fine tribute to those who were responsible for its development'. In common with other societies, members also helped relatives of plot holders called up for military or civilian service to maintain their allotments.²⁰

By 1944 there were around 18,000 allotments in Leicester compared with the pre-war figure of 12,000, and 1370 acres under cultivation compared with less than 950 before the war.²¹ The war also saw an increase in the number of women becoming tenants of allotments: an estimated 10,000 nationally, and 'many more are known to be cultivating plots while their menfolk are away'.²²

Planning for post-war allotments began before the war ended, with the aim of achieving 'the greatest possible measure of security of tenure' for tenants. Demand in Leicester was expected to be around 15,000 plots, but it was clear that land would once again be required for housing. However, rationing did not end until 1954, and the Ministry of Agriculture wanted to retain wartime allotments under cultivation for 'as long as possible'.²³

Those on Victoria Park were retained until 1951, and the records of the Evington Parks society show that the last temporary plots

were not surrendered until 1961.²⁴ Provision was also made for allotment gardens for tenants on new post-war estates, and for those in built-up areas nearby.

The spirit of competition

Competition between members, and later between different societies, has long been an important feature of allotment societies, to encourage them to still greater efforts. The South Leicester society held its first floral and horticultural show in July 1863 in a field between Aylestone Road and Knighton Road, when a silver cup was awarded to the winner of the largest number of first class prizes.

There was said to be 'fair competition in fuchsias and geraniums... The show of roses was large, and included many nice specimens of the Queen of Flowers... In fruits there were some very fine strawberries and gooseberries... The potatoes, peas, beans, rhubarb and other vegetables, were very good'.²⁵

These shows often became one of the highlights of the year, reported in great detail in the press and attracting large crowds from well beyond their own localities - both for the show itself and the other entertainment on offer. On this particular occasion the band of the Leicestershire Militia played a selection of popular tunes, and in the evening there was dancing

accompanied by Mr Woodville's quadrille band.²⁶

At the East Leicester society show in July 1873 there were rifle galleries, roundabouts, swing boats, and 'a brilliant display of fireworks' to conclude the first day. The second day, although 'unfortunately showery', ended with a balloon ascent by Mr Jackson of Derby, who 'after rising gently to a moderate height, sailed off over the ground in the direction of Billesdon'.²⁷

Competitions organised in later years by the Leicester and District Allotment Council helped to provide large quantities of potatoes for the Leicester Royal Infirmary. In December 1939, for instance, a total of over 23 tons was provided, more than four tons of it by the Rowllatts Hill Allotment Society which was awarded the Pickard Cup for the highest aggregate amount.

¹⁷ Leicester Daily Mercury, 16 March 1939

¹⁸ Borough of Leicester, War Horticultural and Allotments Sub-committee, 1941 - 43

¹⁹ Borough of Leicester, War Horticultural and Allotments Sub-committee, 1941 - 43

²⁰ Washbrook Allotment Society, Annual Report (1940)

²¹ Borough of Leicester, Minutes, 28 November 1944

²² Borough of Leicester, War Horticultural and Allotments Committee, 18 December 1942

²³ Leicester Daily Mercury, 23 May 1950

²⁴ Evington Parks Allotment Society, Minutes, 26 April 1961

²⁵ Leicester Journal, 17 July 1863

²⁶ Leicester Journal, 11 July 1873

²⁷ Leicester Journal, 18 July 1873

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Each allottee was provided with six sets of potatoes, and these were weighed on the spot after lifting, under the supervision of officers of the societies, before being sent on to the Infirmary.²⁸

Classes for allotment societies were also a feature of the annual Abbey Park Show for many years. Today most societies have their own annual Best Kept Plot competition, with winners entered into a Best Kept Allotment Plot in Leicester under the auspices of the Leicester Allotments and Gardens Council.

Difficult times

The day-to-day running of allotment societies has always had its challenges, as the records of local societies show. The work of managing a society has often fallen on a small number of people, with the majority unwilling or unable to stand for office, attend meetings or otherwise take an active role.

It was said at one AGM in the 1950s that if plot holders did attend, they would 'possibly realise the difficulties [of management]... As it was, there was plenty of complaints and the lot of the Committee was not a happy one'.²⁹

Rules about non-payment of rent or uncultivated plots are strict on paper, but not so simple to enforce in practice, particularly where tenants are known to be ill or finding the physical effort of maintaining a plot increasingly difficult.

Vandalism has often been a problem, along with dogs and other animals roaming around sites, rats brought down onto land by flooding, and the ravages of rabbits. The latter was such a problem to one society in the 1960s that after contacting three Corporation departments and the Ministry of Agriculture, none of whom could help,

they opted for a more direct solution: 'one member knew of someone with a gun, and would contact them...'

Complaints from the public about bonfires were also common in the past, and tenants were often urged to 'have a little thought' to 'save a lot of trouble', to themselves as well as nearby residents: 'it was not nice on a lovely summer day to be choked by these billowing clouds of smoke'.³⁰

The 1950s had begun on an optimistic note, not least for the Washbrook society whose on-site shop was officially opened in 1950 by Alderman A. Halkyard, Chairman of the Allotments and Small Holdings Committee.

The Allotment Act of 1950 increased the notice that plot holders must be given to quit to 12 months. By the end of that decade, however, allotment societies across the country were experiencing more and more difficulty in letting plots, with a consequent fall in the rents that were their main source of income, along with sales of seeds and other requisites. 'The outlook was not very cheerful', as the Evington Parks society noted at its AGM in 1958, and it continued to deteriorate.

For the Aylestone Society, 1963-64 was 'the most trying' year it had ever faced, with 70 plots vacant, an average loss in rent of £1 a plot, and the prospect of the Corporation reclaiming uncultivated land, as it was legally entitled to do. A survey by the Corporation itself in that year reported that around a third of total allotment acreage across the city was 'derelict'.

There were a number of reasons for this situation, among them the use of home freezers, changes in provision for leisure,

including the wider availability of television, a lack of access to older allotment sites by vehicle, and an increase in vandalism – all contributing by the early 1960s to 'a feeling of despondency' in the allotment movement as a whole.³¹

Nevertheless, through increases in rent, reductions in the honoraria paid to society officials, fundraising activities such as whist drives, and reduced rents for Senior Citizens, most societies were able to keep going until interest in allotments began to revive in the early 20th century.

Looking to the future

Allotments have rarely been so popular as now, and most societies have waiting lists for plots. There is no single reason for this resurgence from the depths of the later 20th century, but greater awareness of environmental issues, including the 'carbon footprint' that can be reduced by importing less food, is one important factor.

Many of the benefits attributed to allotments in the past still apply. The potential for saving money by growing one's own produce is certainly a factor, particularly when the price of food and other commodities rises - along with the satisfaction of seeing a home grown crop 'emerge from the dirt'. Allotments continue to offer healthy open air exercise and a sharing of knowledge and enthusiasm with like-minded people

from a wide range of backgrounds. The membership of allotment societies in Leicester has become much more diverse in recent decades, not only in terms of women taking on plots in their own right, but members from the city's varied ethnic and cultural backgrounds with their own knowledge and experience of different crops and techniques.

Some societies now offer smaller 'starter plots' for those new to allotment gardening, along with the expertise and support of existing members. Opportunities for young people with learning disabilities and unemployed people have also been provided through separate projects supported by local societies, while the City Council's Allotment Users Consultative Committee enables allotment societies to influence future policy and address issues of shared concern.

Open Days and events such as National Allotments Week also provide opportunities for the public to see what goes on behind the gates of allotment sites, as well as celebrating 'the wonders of allotment gardening'.

²⁸ Washbrook 1940 report

²⁹ Evington Parks, Minutes, 21 March 1956

³⁰ Evington Parks, Minutes, 28 April and 26 October 1965

³¹ Aylestone Allotment and Leisure Gardens Society, Minutes, June 1964

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And allotments are not only good for the people who cultivate them. A recent study of soil samples from 15 allotment sites in Leicester found that the soils under the allotments were significantly richer in nutrients than those that have been intensively farmed – largely due to sustainable management techniques including composting which recycles nutrients and carbon back into the soil more quickly.³²

At the moment, and hopefully for many years to come, the outlook for allotments in Leicester is very cheerful indeed.

³² University of Sheffield, Department of Animal and Plant Sciences, 2014 - <https://www.sheffield.ac.uk/news/nr/allotments-could-be-key-sustainable-farming-1.370522> (27 July 2018)

Researched and written by Cynthia Brown.

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**For more information
about applying for an allotment in Leicester,
visit leicester.gov.uk/leisure-and-culture/allotments.**

