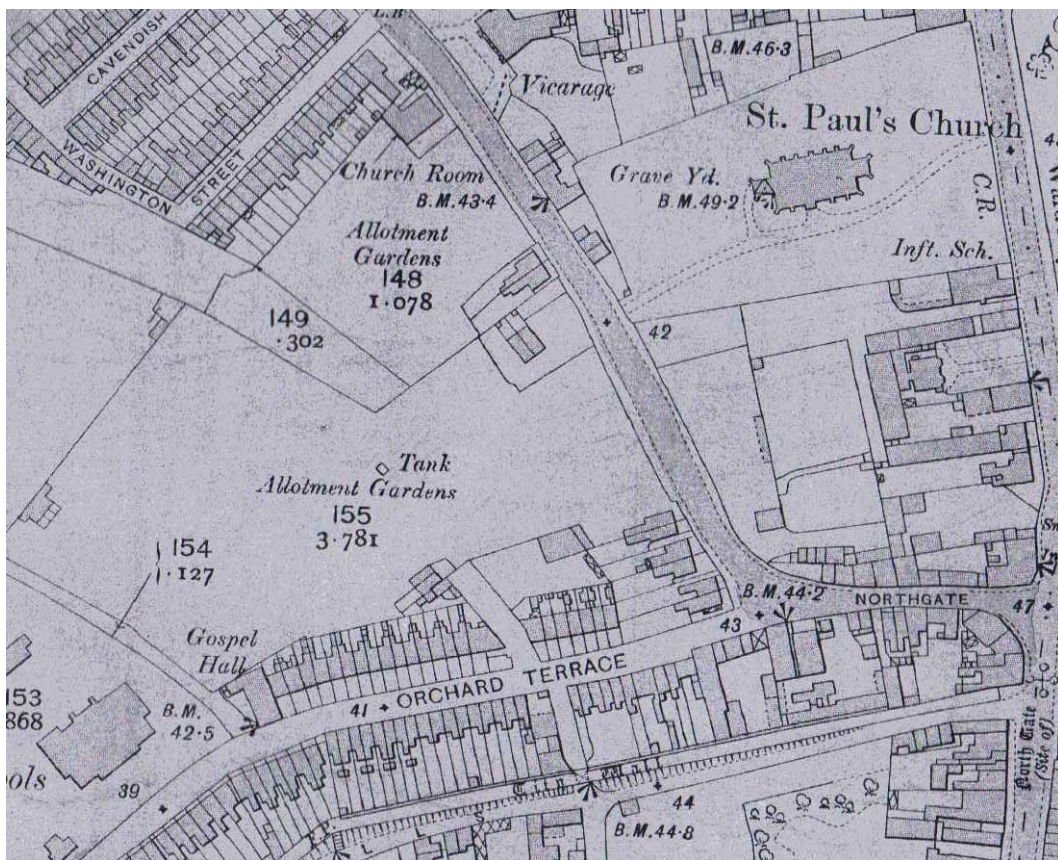


The Home Front: Allotments in the City of Chichester during the First World War



Ordnance Survey Map for City of Chichester 1912

By Steve Porter

Summary

The focus of this piece is the contribution made by allotments in the City of Chichester to the growing demand for food produced on the Home Front as the Great War progressed. It traces the attempts to expand the land under cultivation as allotments during the second half of the war, as local agencies sought extra land that could be used for this purpose to address the food shortages that were starting to appear.

Introduction

Researching my own family history has drawn attention to the role played by some of my ancestors in the Great War. As they are not local to West Sussex, I decided to develop my knowledge of the efforts made on the Home Front by researching the role of allotments, as this is a topic that also interests me today.

Background

According to a parliamentary debate just after the war, it was estimated that prior to the war in 1914, that there were 101,592 acres let to 453,627 allotment holders in England and Wales (excluding rural parishes having no parish councils). By the end of the war the land under cultivation as allotments had increased by more than 50% to 157,620 acres and the number of allotment holders more than doubled to reach 1,163,790. The value of these plots to home food supplies was noted and the beneficial effect of their cultivation on the participants was also acknowledged. Such was the popularity of working on allotments that in 1920, much as today, there were waiting lists for plots as they appealed to a wide cross-section of the population. ¹

Whilst the Defence of the Realm Act, passed in 1914, had given the government the power to acquire land for the war effort, this had relatively little impact on the land used for allotments locally in the early years of the war. Much of the increase of the amount of land in use as allotments was eventually brought about by the announcement in 1916 by the Earl of Selborne, the President of the Board of Agriculture, that local authorities should set aside all waste lands for allotment cultivation.

It was the role of Chichester City Council and West Sussex County Council to respond to the imperative to increase the fruit and vegetables produced in allotments.

Detail

At the start of the war, according to the Ordnance Survey map of 1912 (an extract of which is shown on the cover page), the main allotments in the vicinity of central Chichester were located:

- to the north of Orchard St,
- in Adelaide Rd (stretching as far as the present recreation ground),
- at St James (from the road of that name to St. Pancras bisected by some gravel pits),
- by Church Road
- by York Road
- and at Market Rd (south of the present Stirling Rd)

In many ways, it was business as usual on the allotments of Chichester during the Great War. Reading the City Council minutes, which are prepared in a beautiful copperplate hand, you are struck by how routine and prosaic most of the discussions appear. Apart from the quest for extra land, much time is taken up with every day considerations such as:

- trimming hedges,
- renewing gates,
- vandalism to sites,
- maintaining the water supply,
- collecting overdue rents,
- and contacting errant allotment holders for keeping untidy plots.

There is even time to issue a stern warning to plotheolders that they must not organise their own swaps of land without the permission of the Council and to prosecute a child for theft of produce and have their mother bound over in 1917. Despite the passage of 100 years, these are all issues which modern allotment holders would recognise as still going on today.

Surprisingly, there are few references to the fact that the country was at war. It is only because the committee also covers the provision of cemeteries that direct references occur. In 1916, permission is given for two temporary wooden crosses to be erected for soldiers who had died at Graylingwell War Hospital, followed by a public appeal for funds to create more permanent graves. Later in 1916, there is direct recognition of the war with permission being given by the Committee to sublet the allotments of 2 soldiers on active service.

Furthermore, in 1919 there are discussions about a soldier returning from the war and requesting his old plot back. Whilst the Council is sympathetic, they only write off part of his rent arrears and insist on him paying one year's back rent.

Having received notification of the need to expand the land under cultivation in January 1916, the Cemetery and Recreation Grounds and Allotment Managers Committee of Chichester City Council still had the matter under consideration in the following March, when the question of acquiring fresh land was considered and adjourned. Whilst the sub-committee meets on 4 further occasions during 1916, no further progress is made on this issue during the year.

In December 1916 the Town Council debates how they could increase food production and discuss a proposal to plough up the old recreation ground. They are unsure of their powers to do this and one councillor recalls a previous failed initiative by the County Council. Doubts are raised about who would do the cultivation and a suggestion is made to use German prisoners of war for the task. Whilst the discussion is inconclusive, it is clear that the difficulties are overcome as half of the space has been ploughed during the next year.

At the start of 1917 the pace of change seems to accelerate, as the Town Council places an advertisement to gauge demand for further allotments at a low rent. Responses indicated that the expressions of interest outstripped the land available. Much of the rest of the year would be spent trying to find extra land in order to meet the growing demand.

On January 17th an agreement is signed to rent the Bacon Factory site for £5/year. The City Surveyor is instructed to arrange for plots of 10 rods to be set out so that they can be rented from March 25th 1917. This ancient site measurement corresponds to 302 square yards or 253 square metres. The rent is fixed at 8d/rod. A second site is also identified in the meadow at Mill House, St James and the land agent for Orchard St. is asked to look at the feasibility of extending that site to meet unsatisfied demand for land.

At the February meeting consideration is being given to the allocation of the new plots being made available and it is resolved that those who are not current allotment holders should be given priority. The quest for new land also continued with a request to the County Council that the land at the back of their offices might be used for allotments.

By March, the pace of developments is such that the power to approve new sites is delegated to the sub-committee members and the Town Clerk. Consideration is also given to the idea of cultivating the gardens of empty houses in the City. However, the Committee were not aware of any such properties and the idea was not pursued.

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This acceleration in activity may have been brought about in part by the impact of German U-boats on food supplies being imported. The pressure caused by food shortages resulted in the recruitment of over 250,000 women into the Land Army and eventually the rationing of certain foodstuffs in 1918. Hence, the popularity of being able to grow your own produce on an allotment.

It was clear by May 1917 that progress had been made with the site at Mill House, when the Council resolved to buy a padlock if individual ploholders would purchase their own keys.

At the seventh meeting of the sub-committee, in what had been a busy year, the quest for further land suffered a reversal with the need to give up part of the St. James site for gravel extraction. This was an ongoing issue that had affected the land available at this site at various times to accommodate the extraction works.

At the start of 1918, the Council is continuing the search for extra land and it served notice to acquire the school land in Stockbridge for allotments within 10 days, otherwise compulsory powers would be used. The success of this strategy is evidenced by the request from allotment holders to use the canal water to irrigate their plots later in the year, which the Council granted.

In May 1918, there is evidence of the success of the additional allotment sites with a letter being received by the Mayor that the Council should organise sales of surplus produce. It was thought, however, that the extant auction sales were already sufficient.

At this time permission was also given by the Earl of Bessborough, the chairman of the London, Brighton and South Coast Railway, for railway staff to use land abutting the railway line as allotments. A pamphlet was made available at various stations in the area from the Board of Agriculture entitled "How to manage an allotment". As Chichester station was one of the places where the pamphlet was distributed from, it is safe to assume that there would have been some of these railway allotments, which are such a common sight on a train journey today, in use in the area.

Another more unusual space that was pressed into use appears to have been Rousillon Barracks, where a pumpkin with a 4 foot diameter had been raised.

As to the future of the new plots that were created in during the war, Mill House is still in use by ploholders in March 1919, as the Council declines to mend the fence. In June, notice is given to quit the Bacon Factory site, but almost immediately there are requests from potentially displaced ploholders for alternative sites. In response the Council explores using land in the Dean of Chichester Cathedral's garden; a space to the south of the Bacon Factory site; 2 acres west of the river Lavant (near Southgate) held by the Ecclesiatical Commissioners and Kingsham Farm.

Unfortunately, the Cathedral minutes do not reveal the response of the Dean to the request to use land in his garden, but they do refer to the Dean renting a meadow before the war, so this may well have been the space under consideration.

In August 1919, there is a report in the Chichester Observer of the Brighton Railway and Allotment Holders and Cottage Gardeners Association First Annual Show. Perhaps an indication that things were starting to get back to normal after the war, with the award of prizes for various categories of flowers and vegetables.

When the next Ordnance Survey Map was completed in 1932 it demonstrated a number of changes in the allocation of allotment space. Whilst Adelaide Rd, Church Rd, York Rd and St. James all remained, the Orchard Rd site had contracted to a much smaller space behind St Pauls Church Rooms to make way for housing. A similar fate had also befallen the Market Road site. However, two brand new sites had appeared just south of the Hornet and south of St Pancras.



Ordnance Survey Map of Chichester 1932

During the war, the efforts of the County Council were focussed mainly on the wider county rather than Chichester itself. Indeed, when the War Agriculture Committee was set up, it specifically excluded Chichester from its remit.

The minutes of the Small Holdings and Allotment Committee tell a very similar story to those of the City Council. A perusal of the minutes give very little impression that a war is taking place. One of the few references is to the application of a farmer to be exempt from conscription because of his occupation on a small holding.

Once the war is over, the County Council is very active in assisting the settlement of ex-soldiers on the land. The Commandant of Chichester Barracks also played a supporting role in helping ex-soldiers apply for land to work on. In fact, this all takes up so much time that the County Council

applies to the Board Of Agriculture for funding to pay for the extra administration involved and sets up a sub-committee to deal with the matter.

Conclusion

Allotments have been a controversial topic down the years. It should be remembered that they only came about in their modern form because of the land grabs that took place between 1600 and 1850. This process of enclosure denied many people access to the land that they and their ancestors had cultivated for hundreds of years. It was only in 1845 that the right to allotment land was given by statute in the third General Enclosure Act. This made provision for 2,200 acres of allotments out of the 615,000 acres of land being enclosed.

Subsequent Acts in 1887 and 1908 enshrined further rights for allotment holders before the Great War. More recent Acts in 1925 and 1950 further developed the provision of allotments and it is thought that the peak occurred in the middle of World War 11.

After a period of decline, allotments have gained in popularity again with a renewed emphasis on sustainability and the security of the food supply. In Chichester today (2013), there are 14.5 acres of land let by the City Council at £5/rod and once again there is a waiting lists for plots. St James still survives, as does the site near the Hornet. Adelaide Rd has succumbed to housing, given its proximity to the City centre and the York and Church Rd. sites have also disappeared. However, new sites have been created, such as the ones at Little Breach, Florence Rd and Quarry Lane.

Much as today, the years of Great War saw allotments in Chichester operating at peak levels, with demand evident for further increases to the space under cultivation. It is clear that Chichester allotments played their part in the war effort on the Home Front to increase food production as part of the drive for victory in the conflict.

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