

# Witney Allotments Newsletter

## March 2024

### In this issue

Welcome to the March issue.

It's still early days in the growing season and this wet weather can get in the way of making progress on your plot. I hear that Lakeside has been under water so that must be frustrating!

There are signs of life on the plots though – spring bulbs are blooming at Hailey Road and rhubarb is growing well.

This month I explore the history of allotments in general and in a future issue, I'll share my research on the history of allotments in Witney.

I've included some recipes for those of you who still have brassicas or leeks growing. The pigeons got my sprouting broccoli, and it's a reminder for me to keep nets on brassicas in winter!

*Julie Charlesworth*  
*Hailey Road*



### WAA AGM

**The AGM will be on Wednesday 10 April at 7.30pm at Witney Bowls Club.**

*Do attend as it is your chance to have your say, vote for and/or maybe get involved with the WAA committee and hear how everything has been going over the past year.*

**A reminder from the Committee that rents are due 1<sup>st</sup> April.**

### Site News

Hailey Road will have their first social get-together on Saturday 13 April at 10.30am. Please bring food and drink to share. We'll have a seed and plant swap as part of the get-together so please bring anything spare along!

### Contact details

Do you have feedback, information or ideas for the next newsletter?

Email: [WAAnewsletter@outlook.com](mailto:WAAnewsletter@outlook.com)



## History of Allotments

The notion that an allotment is just a piece of land for people to grow their own food on is far too simplistic. Allotments have a long history which has been intertwined with numerous important historical developments: land reform, welfare concerns for unemployed and low-waged workers, broader social, economic and political change, nineteenth-century exodus from rural areas, food safety and security, and in current times, awareness of the benefits of growing food for health and well-being. Essentially, though, they relate to people's rights to land for growing. Their popularity has ebbed and flowed throughout the centuries although today, demand is increasing across the country, with waits of over 20 years in some areas. In this first article, I explore the origins of allotments and the situation up to the early twentieth century.

The first allotment site is considered to have been land at Long Newnton and Shipton Moyne on the Gloucestershire/Wiltshire border in 1795. Allotments were given different names at this time, which makes it difficult to work out exactly when and where they were developing. Names such as: land, garden, potato grounds, cottage garden allotment, allotment of land were used in rural areas. In urban areas: manorial garden plots, workers' gardens, craftsmen's gardens. Potato grounds were different though as they were for farm workers to grow potatoes at the edges of farms (either at market rent or in lieu of wages).

There had been increasing demand for houses and gardens during the 1700s but each time land was created for growing food, it was quickly taken back and built on. However, as the rural poor were increasingly affected by land enclosures, concern grew that they should be provided with land for growing food, to alleviate hunger but also stem the rural exodus to urban areas.

Various Acts related to allotments and the need to alleviate hunger: the 1819 Poor Relief Act allowed for allotments for the poor and unemployed; the Swing Riots of 1830, which came about due to poor harvests, low wages, high unemployment, loss of common land, prompted the 1831 and 1832 Allotment Acts. The 1845 Inclosure Act provided allotments for the labouring poor.

Employers offered allotments to their workers to supplement low wages, which brought criticism from some people such as the philosopher and politician John Stuart Mill (1806-1873). The idea of allotment provision was often not popular amongst farmers who did not want workers side-tracked with their own growing. Equally, shopkeepers and small market gardeners wanted people to buy their produce rather than grow their own. Others felt they were a good idea as they kept men busy and out of the pubs! Rules and regulations have always been a big part of allotment life: no working on plots when you should be at church, and ploholders were required to be sober and of good moral character.

Allotments appealed to all people though not just the lower income groups and in fact, research shows that the most impoverished people did not have the time or energy to grow their food, manage the rents or even have access to cooking facilities to cook produce. Interest in having an allotment waxed and waned at different times and was not enough of an incentive to stem the rural exodus. The 1887 Allotments Act was a further attempt to help this but people working on farms all day had little time for their own plots. However, they became popular amongst older people being laid off by farms

as they were able to grow food for themselves and sell it too. Urban dwellers too were very keen to have allotments and these were often quite expensive (rent of a guinea hence the term 'guinea gardens') and they were a place to grow food but more importantly, have access to a garden with flower beds, greenhouses, summerhouses and space to relax. They were often surrounded by hedges or fencing so they felt more private. Only four of these sites remain – Edgbaston Guinea Gardens; Hill Close Gardens, Warwick; St Ann's, Nottingham; Coventry town gardens.

The first allotment organisation was the Labourers' Friend Society founded in 1831, which aimed to promote allotments and produced a magazine for members. The Agricultural Organisation Society, established in 1901, went through several iterations and eventually became the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners and then the National Allotments Society.

Next month I will explore the development of allotments during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

I have referred to these two books in the writing of this article: Lesley Acton (2015) *Growing Space: A History of the Allotment Movement*; Twigs Way (2012) *Allotments*.



Nottingham allotments 1860s. Source: [www.nottinghampost.com](http://www.nottinghampost.com)



Man on allotment 1910. Source: [gardenmuseum.org.uk](http://gardenmuseum.org.uk)

## What's cooking?

### Purple sprouting broccoli with garlic and sesame (Serves 6)

450g purple sprouting broccoli  
2 tbsp vegetable oil  
2 tbsp toasted sesame oil  
5 garlic cloves, peeled and thinly sliced  
1 tbsp toasted sesame seeds

Trim off any hard ends from the broccoli stalks as well as any very coarse leaves. Bring a large quantity of salted water to the boil in a very large saucepan and plunge in the broccoli. With the lid on, quickly bring the water back to the boil, then remove the lid and briskly simmer the broccoli for about 2 minutes. Drain thoroughly.

Meanwhile, heat both oils in the pan over a medium heat. Fry the garlic for 2-3 minutes, stirring constantly, until the slices are light golden. Throw in the broccoli and fry it for 2-3 minutes, tossing frequently, until the stalks are piping hot and imbued with the garlicky oil.

Serve immediately with the sesame seeds sprinkled over the top.

Recipe from BBC Good Food:  
[www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/purple-sprouting-broccoli-garlic-sesame](http://www.bbcgoodfood.com/recipes/purple-sprouting-broccoli-garlic-sesame)



### Leek and Potato Soup (Serves 6)

In honour of Dave Myers of The Hairy Bikers....

4 medium leeks, sliced, dark green stems removed  
1/2 large white onion, chopped  
2 medium russet potatoes, peeled and cut into cubes  
1 tablespoon flour  
1 tbsp butter/margarine  
950 ml stock  
120 ml milk  
salt and fresh pepper, to taste

Melt the butter in a medium-sized soup pot. Then, add the flour and cook on low heat. Mix well with a wooden spoon.

Bring the leeks, onion, potatoes, and stock to a boil. For 20 to 25 minutes, or until the potatoes are soft, cover and cook on low heat.

Blend the soup until it's smooth. Add the milk and taste for salt and pepper.

## What's in the next issue?

I will cover the next instalment on the history of allotments. I'd love to hear from you about what you'll be growing this year and if you're brand new to your plot, why not introduce yourself and talk about your plans!

