

## Allotments in Hackney during the First World War

Monica Blake

November 2014

Allotments are small parcels of land rented to individuals usually for the purpose of growing food. The land itself is often owned by local government or self managed and owned by the allotment holders through an association. Legislation obliging local authorities to provide allotments was consolidated in the 1908 Small Holdings and Allotments Act (Willes, 1914).

The number of allotments in Britain increased dramatically during the First World War. At this time the country relied on imports to feed its population. Many merchant ships carrying food were sunk by German U-boat submarines. By the summer of 1916, the food situation was causing anxiety, and by April 1917 a quarter of ships leaving Britain were being sunk and food supplies fell dangerously low (Robb, 2002).

According to Willes (1914, p273), in February 1917, 'Kaiser Wilhelm had threatened that German U-boats would "frighten the British flag off the face of the waters and starve the British people until they, who have refused peace, will kneel and plead for it". This chilling threat was prevented by a combination of naval convoys protecting British shipping and the national effort to grow as much food as possible.'

As the war progressed, there were indications in the Hackney press about how hungry people were. Children were caught stealing food. The *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* reported on 27 August 1917 that boys had stolen fruit and marrows from a magistrate's garden and allotments. Later that year a 'lad' was fined £3 for stealing pears (17 October 1917), and in 1918 four boys were charged with theft of onions from Hackney Downs and two boys with theft of carrots from Millfields (9 August 1918). Food rationing was introduced at the beginning of 1918: individuals were limited to a weekly allowance of eight ounces of sugar, five ounces of butter and margarine, four ounces of jam and two ounces of tea; bread was not rationed; meat was rationed by price (Robb, 2002).

Within days of the outbreak of war, the Board of Agriculture and Fisheries appealed to private gardeners to keep seed stocks to give to allotment holders. However, it was not until December 1916 that local authorities were given powers to take over land (Uglow, 2005). The Defence of the Realm (Acquisition of Land) Act 1916 provided specifically for the requisitioning of land for allotments and other purposes (National Archives, n.d.).

In London there were moves for land in parks and unused gardens to be given over to allotments. At the time such land was the responsibility of the London County Council (LCC). There appears to have been conflict between the LCC and people wanting allotments. According to the *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* of 6 January 1917, complaints were received by the Vacant Land Cultivation Society regarding the dilatory action of the LCC in putting into force the order issued by the Board of Agriculture that 'As soon as possible local authorities shall hand over unoccupied land to persons who may desire to cultivate it'. Although the Board of Agriculture intended that local authorities should enter unrated and unused land and then notify owners, it seems that the LCC went to the owners first, thereby causing delays.

In the early months of 1917, there was a flurry of activity concerning allotments. 'The London and North-Western Railway Company issued a notice to the effect that during the present emergency applications will be considered, both from the staff and the public, for the use of vacant land, either inside or outside the railway fences' (*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, 17.1.17). Plots of 300 square

yards were to be let on short agreements at 1s per annum. At the end of January 1917, there was a special meeting of Stoke Newington Borough Council on the cultivation of vacant land. Alderman Dod mentioned several large gardens which were vacant (*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, 31.1.17).

By March 1917, Stoke Newington had received 65 applications for allotments, and had staked out 40 plots on land in Green Lanes. Of these, 28 were allotted. The General Purposes Committee of Stoke Newington had applied to the LCC for portions of Finsbury and Clissold Parks to be given over to allotments (*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, 19.3.17). Shortly afterwards it was reported that a portion of Clissold Park was to be cultivated for allotments (*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, 21.3.17).

The Hackney and District Smallholder and Allotment Society noted that 'practically the whole of the unoccupied land within this borough, suitable for cultivation for the production of food, has now been dealt with by allotment, and that also a considerable area of the Hackney Marsh open space has been similarly appropriated' (*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, 26.3.17). However, hundreds of people were still waiting for allotments.

In April 1917, 700 people attended an enthusiastic meeting on allotments at Library Hall organised by the Stoke Newington Vacant Lands Cultivation Society (*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, 13.4.17).

Although the *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* reported on 18 April 1917 that the LCC refused to grant the use of any further land in Clissold Park for the purposes of allotments, some days later the paper recorded that further land had indeed been secured for allotments in Clissold Park (*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, 27.4.17).

Scott (2005) reports that: 'In Hackney, one burial ground produced 36,000 vegetable plants of 16 varieties and by March 1917, virtually the whole of the borough was growing food.' She notes that the borough council responded to a plea from the Hackney and District Smallholders and Allotments Society that they had several hundred people waiting for plots by creating 300 allotments at Victoria Park in December 1917. Other sites created in 1917 included vacant land packages at Egerton Road, Leadale Road, Mount Pleasant Lane, Bakers Hill, Leaside Road, Mount Pleasant Road, Southwold Road, Gunton Road, Cleveleys Road, Devonshire Road, and Chatham Place.

By January 1918, Hackney had 1,019 allotments out of 4,883 in London (excluding 80 on Stoke Newington Common, although this was in Hackney). Parts of the following green spaces were given over to allotments: Hackney Marsh, Millfields, Springfield Park, London Fields, Victoria Park and Hackney Downs. Stoke Newington had 654 plots, including 534 in Clissold Park and 40 in Finsbury Park (*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, 30.1.18). Bagust (1913-1929) reports that part of Clapton Common was cut up for allotments' (vol. 2, p. 26).

The number of allotments in Hackney continued to increase during 1918. In March the allotments at Well Street Common were increased; by April, 700 to 800 additional plots were opened and the council transferred 13½ acres of land at Hackney Marsh to Hackney and District Smallholders and Allotments Society (Scott, 2005).

With the increase in allotments came a corresponding interest in information about growing food. Willes (2014) notes the rapid interest in the readership of *Allotments and Gardens*, the journal of the Vacant Land Cultivation Society: in November 1916 the journal had 2,000 readers; by June 1917 there were 6,000, by December 1917 12,000 and by March 1918 the number had risen to 30,000.

During the autumn of 1917 and 1918, allotment holders proudly displayed their produce in exhibitions – often with a charitable intent. In 1917 the *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* mentions:

Hackney Downs Allotment Holders' Association, a concert and exhibition of produce (which was later sent as a gift to a hospital) (20.8.17); a successful exhibition of vegetables from Stoke Newington Allotments in the Church Rooms (Defoe Road) of produce grown in Clissold Park, Finsbury Park and Stoke Newington Common (14.9.17); a vegetable show from Hackney Allotments at King's Hall (17.9.17); allotment produce at a Harvest Festival in Shoreditch Tabernacle (19.9.17); and a vegetable exhibition at Kingsland by members of Kingsland P.S.A. in Kings Congregational Church.

Speaking at an exhibition of allotment holders' produce in August 1918, Mr GN Benson MP predicted a record harvest. He said that 200,000 acres of land had been given over to allotments and that each allotment produced several tons of food (*Hackney and Kingsland Gazette*, 12.8.18). Other exhibitions the *Hackney and Kingsland Gazette* covered in 1918 included The Hackney Downs Allotments' exhibition at Clapton (19.8.18); the allotment parade exhibition at Clapton (21.8.18); a vegetable show at Stoke Newington (30.8.18); a vegetable show at Upper Clapton, opened by the North Hackney MP (9.9.18); and Hackney & District Small Holders' Society's exhibition at the Town Hall (9.9.18).

Once the war was over, allotment holders were given notice to quit. Acres requisitioned from owners had to be returned, and a series of legal battles took place as gardeners resisted the surrender of their plots (Willes, 2014).

## References

Bagust, F. (1913-1929) Some notes on Clapton past and present. *Bagust Collection*. London: Hackney Archives, D/F/BAG.

National Archives (n.d.) Land requisitioned for war. <http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/records/research-guides/requisitioned-land.htm> (visited 31.10.14).

Robb, G. (2002) *British Culture and the First World War*. Basingstoke: Palgrave.

Scott, E. A. (2005) *Cockney Plots: Working Class Politics and Garden Allotments in London's East End, 1890-1918*. MA Thesis, Department of History, University of Saskatchewan.

Uglow, J. (2005) *A Little History of British Gardening*. London: Pimlico.

Willes, M. (2014) *The Gardens of the British Working Class*. New Haven: Yale University Press.