

# Patterns of allotment holding in the Black Country, 1914-2000.

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## **Abstract**

Based on the existing literature and supported by images present in popular culture four stereotypes relating to allotments and allotment holders can be discerned: the characteristics of allotment holders; their motivations for taking on a plot; the appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotments sites; and the importance attached to allotment activities. This thesis uses documentary and oral evidence to explore each of these stereotypes in relation to the allotment community in the Black Country between 1914 and 2000 in order to determine the extent to which they have held true throughout this period. The research concludes that, although some aspects of the traditional stereotypes, especially in relation to the characteristics of allotment holders, could be argued to be broadly accurate, many aspects of the existing stereotypes need to be revised. Stereotypes relating to the motivation for allotment holding and importance of allotment activities in particular are far too crude to be a helpful means of investigating these features. By questioning existing views of allotments and allotment holders, this thesis raises issues for the study of twentieth-century middle class and working class cultures in the Black Country and beyond.



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# 1. Introduction

The practice of allotment cultivation in the twentieth century has been largely ignored by historians, usually featuring only as an adjunct to research centred on other issues such as recreation (Bailey, 1987), self-help (Benson, 1983) or the division of household labour (Roberts, 1995). Allotment holding has, therefore, rarely been the subject of in-depth research in its own right at either local or national level. In particular, there have been few attempts to investigate the motives for, and importance of, urban allotment holding or deal, to any great extent, with the situation in the Black Country.

The aim of this research is to investigate patterns of allotment use in the main industrial centres of the Black Country from 1914 to 2000 using oral and documentary sources. The main themes explored are: the characteristics of allotment holders; their motivations for allotment gardening; the appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotment sites; and the importance of allotment activity for individuals, their families and the wider community. This chapter starts with a review of the literature under these four main themes, from which it is possible to discern stereotypes of allotments and allotment holding for each theme. The remainder of the chapter describes the approach which is taken and the methodology employed. Finally, consideration is given to local background factors as the key characteristics of Black Country communities and land use patterns are described. The following section provides a brief overview of the literature which will be reviewed.

It is evident that much of the existing literature relates to allotments and gardens in rural localities and to the nineteenth century. A number of researchers have studied the history of allotments in rural areas, for instance Burchardt (1997), whose thesis focused mainly on the south of England, and Archer who himself admitted, "Allotments have largely escaped the historian's archival spadework, receiving only occasional and sporadic examination" (Archer, 1997: 21). Investigations of allotments in urban areas or in the twentieth century are rare, although some research has been carried out into the history of gardening. Among the most relevant is that by Constantine (1981) who explores the

popularisation of gardening as a recreational activity for the working classes as well as elites. Again, however, much of the previous research in this area focuses on the nineteenth century, for example, Veder's study of English textile mechanics' flower gardens (2002) and Gaskell's consideration of Victorian gardens for the working classes (1980). In addition, general studies of gardening rarely reflect in any depth on the ways in which allotments differ from gardens<sup>1</sup>.

In what is probably the most comprehensive review of allotment history, Crouch and Ward (1997) survey the development of allotments from the early 1700s to the end of the twentieth century. Otherwise work on twentieth century urban allotments is limited. Some studies focus on a local area, such as Moran's (1990) work on Swindon and Roberts' (1995) research in Lancashire. These are useful in relation to the study presented here both in terms of considering the methodology adopted and also to compare their findings to the situation in the Black Country. Overall, however, it is clear that there has been insufficient previous research by historians, especially in relation to allotment holding in the late twentieth century, to draw firm conclusions about its development.

The dearth of material relating directly to allotment holding in urban areas and in the twentieth century necessitated a widening of the literature search to include more general works by economic and social historians. Hopkins' (1979) seminal work on the English working classes; Cunningham's (1990) examination of leisure and culture; Gittins' (1982) study of family structures; and McKibbin's (1994) investigation of class and social relations are just a few examples. Where appropriate, writing by contemporary social commentators, is also taken into account, for example, Gibson (1951) and Ellis (1923). In addition, it was necessary to consult research conducted by social scientists, especially geographers such as Thorpe et al (1969) and Kay (1988), and researchers concerned with community development and leisure, such as Bishop and Hoggett (1986) who examined patterns of mutual aid in leisure activities; Clarke and Critcher (1985) who give an overview of leisure in a capitalist Britain; and

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<sup>1</sup> For example, the fact that they are divorced from the home and are therefore less centred around family life and have more relevance to both community interaction and personal interests outside the family.

Parker's (1983) consideration of the links between work and leisure. Such works from other disciplines helped to fill in some of the gaps in existing historical research, in relation to the age and ethnic profile of allotment holders, their motivation for allotment holding and the management of sites for example. It should be noted that the methodologies adopted by such researchers obviously differ from those of historians, for example, surveys and fieldwork reports are common.

In addition to work carried out by academic researchers, the literature review presented below incorporates investigations conducted by the government throughout the twentieth century. These might take the form of evidence to select committees or social surveys<sup>2</sup>. Perhaps the most important of these was the 1969 Departmental Committee of Enquiry into Allotments. As a result of the increasing pressure on urban land, in 1964, the Ministry of Land and Natural Resources commissioned a Departmental Committee of Enquiry into Allotments. This committee was to "review the general policy on allotments in the light to present day conditions in England and Wales and to recommend what legislative action and other changes, if any, are needed" (Thorpe et al, 1969). Questionnaires were sent to one in fifty allotment holders, which produced a response rate of 19.95%. The results are, therefore, based on a sample of just 0.4% of allotment holders and should thus be treated with caution.

Other organisations have also conducted useful social surveys. These include the Pilgrim Trust's (1938) report on unemployment and the Rowett Research Institute (1955) report on family diets and health. National bodies, in particular, the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners (NSALG) have also carried out surveys. In 1993, it conducted a survey of its members entitled *Towards Allotments 2000*. However, this survey was not representative of all allotment holders; it was limited to those plot holders and sites which were, in some way, involved in the allotment community at a national level. In 1997, the NSALG conducted a broader survey which was sent to all English local authorities asking them to supply details of the types of site in their area, sizes, rents charged and facilities provided. However, as the title suggests, it does not

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<sup>2</sup> For example, the 1998 Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs and the 1946 Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food's National Food Survey.

provide information about allotment holders themselves. It is therefore clear that accurate, comparable data about allotment holding at various points during the twentieth century is difficult to obtain.

The following review of the literature considers four main themes: the defining characteristics of allotment holders; their motivation for taking on a plot; the appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotments; and the importance of allotment activities for individuals, their families and communities.

### **Characteristics of allotment holders**

The defining characteristics of allotment holders reported in the literature relate, primarily, to social class, age, gender, ethnicity and personal and family characteristics.

#### *Social class*

As Thorpe et al (1969) point out, a number of occupational groups have long-established links with allotment holding. For instance, before the First World War, it was common for lower paid railway employees to work on company allotments between the arrival of trains. Even in the 1960s, when many railway allotments were let to local authorities, those alongside the tracks were reserved for rail employees for safety reasons. However, changing working practices and the closure of branch lines led to the decline of this practice. Mining companies also often owned allotments. These were originally provided because miners' houses lacked gardens and land near to mines was liable to subsidence, making it unsuitable for development. Allotments were popular among miners who worked shifts so were often free during the day. Short-time working and unemployment during the inter-war years made allotments a necessity for many mining families (Thorpe et al, 1969). On the other hand, Badger (2002) suggests some occupational groups might be less likely to own allotments, for example, service sector workers often had opportunities to acquire free or cheap goods in the form of 'perks' or manufacturing workers might steal from their employers to supplement their incomes rather than relying on an allotment. Several authors, including Poole (2000) and Hyde (1998), have argued that,

more recently, there has been a distinct change in the occupational groups associated with allotment holding as academics, teachers and similar middle class professionals have come to be associated with allotment gardening. It has been suggested that the mechanical and repetitive activity of gardening helps such people to relax and provides opportunities for creativity (Midgley, 2000).

Traditionally, however, allotments have been overwhelmingly associated with working class communities whose members faced problems such as poverty, unemployment and poor diet. For instance, Thorpe, Galloway and Evans (1977) reported that redundancies, layoffs, strikes and unemployment all increased demand for allotments. The 1931 Land Utilisation Act made it a duty of each local authority to provide land for cultivation by the unemployed and it was estimated that half a million people benefited from this scheme (Pilgrim Trust, 1938). As Opie (1975) reports, there was a small boom in allotment holding in the middle of the 1930s as a result of special measures introduced by the Ministry of Agriculture and local authorities to provide sites as well as action by the organisations such as the Society of Friends and the Land Settlement Association in depressed areas. They hoped to turn some of the urban unemployed into smallholders and revive old patterns of self-sufficiency. In 1928, the Society of Friends succeeded in securing a statement from the Minister of Labour agreeing that the small amount of produce a man could sell from his allotment would not affect the amount of dole received. The fact that this was described as "a great gain" indicates that allotments were important to the unemployed not just to feed their families, but also to provide a small income (Fry, 1947: 24). It was hoped that, not only would allotments bring direct economic benefits, but they would also provide people with a new interest and a healthy occupation (Opie, 1975). Allotments, it has been suggested, could present a partial solution to problems such as loss of self-esteem, apathy and discontent, as well as poverty and malnutrition caused by unemployment (Fagin and Little, 1984). As Hayburn (1971) points out, they were not popular among all sectors of the unemployed however. For example, some were inclined to wait until they were taken on again and women tended to devote the free time they gained to family duties. There were also regional variations. The Pilgrim Trust reported differences in attitudes towards allotments depending on the prosperity of an area: "Allotments in the more prosperous areas tend to be regarded as an

interesting hobby for old age whereas in the Special Areas they are to a large extent providing a fairly full 'alternative life' for younger men" (Pilgrim Trust, 1938: 216). Opie claims that, between 1934 and 1939, interest in allotment declined generally, but in Special Areas, where unemployment was high, the number of plots remained steady or even increased slightly (Opie, 1975).

In a survey carried out by the Pilgrim Trust in 1933, it was found that 44% of families affected by unemployment were living at or below the British Medical Association (BMA) standard poverty level, with large families being more at risk. According to Aitkin these families tended to have a monotonous diet, consisting of little more than bread and potatoes, the cheapest filling food (Aitkin, 1995: 248). It has been suggested that allotments might be vital to such households to supplement this basic diet with fresh vegetables. The National Food Survey, carried out between 1944 and 1946, certainly supports this view. This survey, found that gardens were almost twice as common in middle class households than they were in working class areas, but more working class families had an allotment. For half those working class families with an allotment this was the only area available to them to grow vegetables (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 1956b: 14). It is clear that 'free food' was important to working class families. In rural areas, this might include food obtained by poaching and harvesting from fields and hedgerows (Badger, 2002). While these options were not available to town dwellers, Humphries and Gordon (1993) refer to alternative ways in which urban families might obtain free or cheap food, such as stealing and buying over-ripe fruit and stale goods. While families in urban areas generally had a wider choice of food shops and had opportunities to purchase cheaper, mass-produced goods, some were tied to local shops because of the need for credit facilities. The limited range of goods available and high prices charged at these shops may have made home-based production, including allotment holding, attractive to some (Badger, 2002).

Between 1950 and 1970, prosperity increased as real wages rose and unemployment remained low (Saunders, 1993). So, by the time of Thorpe's survey in the 1960s, the situation appears to have changed somewhat and only 0.6% of allotment holders were unemployed. As Thorpe et al reported: "We have encountered no more than a handful of cases where it is claimed that an

allotment holder today needs his allotment in order to supplement an inadequate income" (Thorpe et al, 1969: 148). Unemployment and poverty were, therefore, no longer seen as defining characteristics of the allotment holder and this remained the case until rising unemployment in the early 1980s prompted a temporary renewed interest in allotments (Crouch and Ward, 1997). Just 4% of allotment holders were unemployed, however, by the 1990s (Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998). Badger argues that, although allotments became less important as a survival strategy over the course of the twentieth century, they still existed as "an atavistic form of cultural behaviour and a means of asserting working class identity" (Badger, 2002: 167-8). This is an argument which appears elsewhere. Gibson claims that, "In most of us there is a latent knowledge of horticulture which can be readily awakened by circumstances bringing us once again into contact with the land" (Gibson, 1951: 13). Nevertheless, poverty had by no means been eradicated even at the end of the twentieth century. In 1968, there were still 7.3% of households living in poverty, that is, below Supplementary Benefit level (Scott, 1994:90) and although this fell in the next two decades, in 1987, 5% of the population was still living below this level (Scott, 1994:92). However, the role allotments might play in supporting such families is rarely discussed in detail in the literature.

Even in the later twentieth century when, as Crouch and Ward (1997), Thorpe et al (1969) and Jones and Greatorex (2001) have argued, allotments became more important for their leisure rather than their economic, value divisions between working and middle class practices remained. Kelly (1983) describes a class-determined model of leisure, based on financial resources, role expectations, community status, cultural values and access opportunities. Similarly, Clarke and Critcher (1985) reflect on differences between working class and middle class leisure pursuits. Working class leisure, based on the neighbourhood, is seen as inherently different from its middle class counterpart, which is more mobile and based around specific interests. However, it is unclear where allotment holding fits in the schema. While gardening is a hobby Clarke and Critcher identify as being more common among the middle classes, allotment holding is an activity traditionally associated with working class communities. The situation has become even more complex during the last quarter of the twentieth century as the prevalence of middle class allotment holders has increased (Hyde, 1998).

## *Gender*

Although just 3.2% of those responding to Thorpe's survey in the 1960s were women, he speculates that many more women actually worked on allotments held in their husband's name (Thorpe et al, 1969). Gibson estimated that, in the 1950s, three-quarters of plots were worked by a husband and wife. However, the type of work carried out on allotments frequently required significant physical effort, so women who were interested in gardening were more likely to grow flowers in their home garden (Gibson, 1951: 20). By 1993, the number of female allotment holders had reportedly increased, but they were still in the minority, accounting for just 15% according to the Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs (1998). However, there is some evidence that the numbers may have increased at the turn of the twenty-first century. According to the Allotments Regeneration Initiative, "women make up the fastest growing group of allotment holders and in 2005 were responsible for 59,000 plots"; this would represent approximately one-fifth of all allotments (Hughes, 2005: 56).

Historians have supported the findings of these surveys. Bourke stresses that, although women did help on allotments, they remained essentially "masculine territories". In fact, in the first half of the twentieth century, working on allotments and gardens could be seen as a form of "masculine housework" (Bourke, 1994: 88). Roberts suggests that domestic chores, like leisure pursuits, were divided into traditionally male and female activities. Under this classification, allotments and gardens, were seen as a male preserve (Roberts, 1995: 11). Similarly, DeSilvey argues that allotment activity reinforced, rather than challenged traditional stereotypes:

*In the allotment, men could be men – household breadwinners and effective members of the community. In this version, women were passive dependents who would happily peel and parboil the scores of turnips brought home by their husbands (DeSilvey, 2003: 451).*

In the field of leisure studies, Whammel (2001) argues that, for women, "domestic labour has no neat boundaries of time". While women may have less freedom due to childcare or other responsibilities, male leisure tends to be

demarcated in time and space from work. Hence, the male-dominated practice of allotment holding takes place at a location away from the home.

Although they do not make direct reference to allotments, Klein and Anderson (1980) argue that male activities, both work and leisure-based, have traditionally taken place outside the home and this has an impact on relationships within the household. McKibbin stresses the masculine culture of allotments in the first half of the twentieth century when, "Allotments were a kind of married men's club to which husbands went as soon and as often as possible" (McKibbin, 1994: 146). Several commentators have devised theories related to this phenomenon. Gittins (1982) claims that men and women pursue separate leisure interests, but sometimes come together to participate in family-centred pursuits, while Bott (1971) developed a tripartite system, according to which, leisure activities can be described as complementary, independent or joint. Complementary activities are those which are undertaken separately by a husband and wife, but fit together to form a whole. Independent activities are also carried out separately, but are uncoordinated. Joint activities are those which a couple carry out together or may be undertaken by either. Under this system, most allotment activity would usually be classified as either independent or, perhaps, complementary if it is based on a decision to divide household labour in a particular way.

According to West, during the course of the twentieth century, there has been a 'slow influx' of women. Initially those who had lived in the countryside and had helped their parents to cultivate land took on plots; alternatively, a woman might help her husband on his plot. However, a more recent phenomenon is that of younger, middle class women taking on plots primarily to grow cheap organic vegetables. She speculates that the presence of more female gardeners on television has lifted the profile of gardening among women (West, 2000).

## *Age*

Although a number of historians have considered the social class and gender of allotment holders, there has been little research examining the age profile of the allotment community. Nevertheless, it might be inferred that, if a significant proportion of allotment holders in the earlier part of the twentieth century had an allotment as a response to periods of unemployment, they were of working age and being middle aged or elderly was not a defining characteristic of allotment holders at this time. This is supported by Thorpe's survey which does provide some information about this characteristic of allotment holders. Well over half the allotment holders responding to Thorpe's questionnaire in the late 1960s had held an allotment since at least 1945 and 30% had done so since before the Second World War. Although just 44.7% of allotment holders were still working, 90.2% had first taken up their plots while they were employed (Thorpe et al, 1969: 146).

By the 1960s, however, 15 to 40 year olds were underrepresented in the allotment community; they accounted for just 17.5% of allotment holders despite making up more than one-third of the overall population. In contrast, 40 to 65 year olds accounted for almost two-thirds of allotment holders, while overall they represented just under one-third of the population, and a fifth of allotment holders were over 65, a group that accounted for just under 10% of the total population. Perhaps as a consequence of this demographic profile of allotment holders, one in eight had some form of disability (Thorpe et al, 1969: 144). Little had changed by the 1990s, when another survey, this time conducted by the NSALG, found that just 6% of its members were under 35 years of age; 65% were aged 50 or older, with 40% being retired. However, it is clear that not all allotment holders conformed to the stereotype of being retired; a significant proportion, 37%, were still employed full time (Saunders, 1993). Furthermore, a number of researchers and commentators have described the phenomenon of younger people taking on allotment plots in the last quarter of the twentieth century (DeSilvey, 2003; West, 2000).

### *Ethnicity*

There is even less data about the ethnicity of allotment holders than is available for the age profile. Not only has this characteristic been neglected by historians, but there is relatively little to be gleaned from other disciplines either. In the 1960s, Thorpe found "no evidence to suggest that many immigrants from Africa, Asia, or the West Indies have taken to allotment gardening: it remains essentially a British pursuit" (Thorpe et al, 1969: 142). However, according to Poole (2000), there are indications that by the last decades of the twentieth century many ethnic minority families had developed an interest in allotment holding.

### *Personal and family characteristics*

In the nineteenth century, as Gaskell (1980) points out, labourers wanting an allotment were expected to adhere to middle class standards of honesty, thrift, industriousness and respectability. Family history was taken into consideration, as was church attendance in decisions concerning the allocation of allotments. Archer (1997) claims that the strict rules attached to the provision of rural allotments and cultivation were used to establish social control and to ensure labourers complied with high standards of honesty, industriousness, respectability and sobriety. Allotments were generally not granted to the poorest members of society; they were largely the preserve of the respectable labouring poor who were willing to emulate their social superiors. In contrast to the work of historians studying the nineteenth century, there has been little consideration of the personality of twentieth-century allotment holders. There is a general perception of allotment holders as harmless eccentrics (Arnot, 2001; Crouch and Ward, 1997: 4-5), although towards the end of the twentieth century, there is some indication that they became more politically active, particularly in relation to the 'green' movement (Crouch and Ward, 1997).

It is useful to draw on the work of other disciplines in considering the family background of allotment holders. Collins and Strelitz (1957) make an interesting link between leisure and family relationships by hypothesising that families can be regarded as either 'resource pools' or as 'constraining influences' on the

leisure opportunities available to an individual. Family commitments may, thereby, preclude some individuals from owning allotments, but in other cases, family links can actively encourage people to become involved in the allotment gardening. The latter is demonstrated by the fact that almost half the allotment holders surveyed by Thorpe et al had spent their childhood in a country district; 72% had either been born in rural areas or were the children of allotment holders; 42.3% had worked on an allotment as a child (Thorpe et al, 1969: 144).

### **Motivations for allotment holding**

The above outline of the main characteristics of allotment holders indicates that, traditionally, allotments have been viewed as a practical way for poorer families to supplement their diet and income. However, it is clear that motives for allotment holding have changed over time and a number of historians and other researchers have investigated this process. For example, Crouch and Ward (1997) contend that workers in early industrial towns cultivated allotments because of a need for food, improved health and recreation, and that allotment provision formed part of the wider nineteenth and early twentieth century movement for landownership. Jones and Greatorex have attempted to account for more recent fluctuations in the interest in allotment holding and levels of participation as allotments have evolved from being a means of subsistence to a recreational outlet: "Allotments have clearly outgrown their original function as a means of subsistence and are primarily now a recreational utility". Among the factors leading to increased interest in allotments, they mention re-runs of *The Good Life* and parliamentary enquiries. Conversely, at other times, demand has been suppressed by a poor image; lack of awareness; ignorance of their potential for achieving social, leisure and health objectives; poor site facilities; reduced leisure time; and the growth of supermarkets and the 'fast food culture' (Jones and Greatorex, 2001).

#### *Economic*

Living standards, wages, employment patterns, diet and food production all have the potential to influence the need for allotments. Meller (2003) argues that urban allotments have traditionally been associated with poverty as migrants

from rural areas continued to use them as a method of survival by growing their own food. Similarly, Thorpe et al assert that, "Throughout their history, allotments and allotment gardens have been provided primarily for the relief of poverty" (Thorpe et al, 1969: 146). This might occur at individual, family or community level or, at times of national crisis such as the First and Second World Wars, to alleviate national poverty. Allotments were promoted by the government as a patriotic activity in wartime (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 75). While some people took on allotments just for the duration of the crisis, for others, emergency measures led to a more lasting interest. According to Thorpe et al (1969) one of the reasons for the growing interest in allotments immediately after 1918 was the free advice and help offered during the war, which stimulated a widespread interest in gardening.

It is worth considering more general works on self-provisioning when examining the economic motivations for allotment holding. Generally, "work for self-consumption and informal consumption" is a basic survival strategy for poorer workers within a capitalist system" (Minigone, in Pahl, 1984: 318). Many commentators have identified specific causes of poverty. Scott refers to Rowntree's survey of 1936 which identified low pay, unemployment, old age, irregular earnings, widowhood and illness as the main causes (Scott, 1994: 57). Humphries and Gordon (1993) added single parenthood, disability and a large number of children to this list. Jones claims that the diets of the unemployed were worse than those who were in work during the 1930s and large families tended to have inferior diets, with consumption of fruit and vegetables being linked to household income (Jones, 1994: 98). In 1933, the Rowntree Institute estimated that more than one-third of the population did not enjoy a diet of a healthy standard, in most cases because they could not afford to (Scott, 1994: 55). Burnett (1968) refers to another survey from the 1930s, *The People's Food* by William Crawford, which found that those in the lowest income group spent almost half their earnings on food each week; this compared with less than one-fifth for those in the highest income group. Families in the lowest income group were least likely to eat green vegetables or fruit; just 32.3% ate green vegetables and 6.4% ate fruit as part of their lunch compared with 45.7% and 41.4% respectively in the highest income group and there were similar patterns for other meals (Burnett, 1968: 309-311). Poorer families, therefore, generally

experienced difficulties in obtaining sufficient fruit and vegetables for a healthy diet. Humphries and Gordon (1993) report that, in the late 1930s, it was estimated that 17.5% of the population, or eight million people, were spending less on food than was regarded as a minimum by the BMA (Humphries and Gordon, 1993:120). However, in 1939, a report found that the diet of allotment holders' families did often include fruit and vegetables (in Rice, 1981). According to Burnett (1994), as well as being inadequate, the diet of the poor was monotonous during this period, consisting mainly of the cheapest and most filling foods such as bread and potatoes. Vegetables were a valuable addition, especially if the family had an allotment, but the quantity of fruit consumed was very small (Burnett, 1994: 248).

Fruit and vegetables were important commodities during the Second World War because, although the supply was loosely controlled, these were never rationed. Zweiniger-Bargielowska uses data collected for the Wartime Social Survey<sup>3</sup> to argue that insufficient vegetables was the reason for an inadequate diet only in a small minority of cases, but shortage of fruit was more of a problem, especially for women (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000:75). Zweiniger-Bargielowska suggests there was clearly a demand for fruit and vegetables which could not be satisfied through legal means. In 1947, there were 768 prosecutions for selling black market fruit and vegetables and 215 prosecutions for selling carrots or potatoes (Zweiniger-Bargielowska, 2000: 167). Vegetable consumption appeared to be affected by social class to some extent in the 1940s and 1950s. The Rowett Research Institute found that consumption of both green vegetables and fresh fruit increased as overall household food expenditure rose. Consumption of potatoes also rose with income until weekly expenditure reached a certain level, after which it began to fall off as more expensive foods could be incorporated into the family's diet (Rowett Research Institute, 1955: 107). According to the second report of the National Food Survey, in the mid 1950s, potato consumption was 20% higher in working class households than middle class ones, but middle class families consumed more of other types of fresh vegetables and fruit with the exception of cabbage (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 1956a:14). Owning an allotment might, therefore, be a way for working class families to

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<sup>3</sup> At Nuffield College, Oxford University

achieve a more varied and more nutritional diet. This inference is supported by the fact that immediately after the war, working class consumption of most types of vegetables fell and the Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food believed this may have been linked, in part, to people abandoning allotments which they had taken on for the duration of the war (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 1956a: 86).

There is little reference to allotments being important as a method of supplementing household diets during the more affluent 1950s and 1960s, although Badger found evidence of "the persistence of working class self-provisioning for certain cash goods" well into the mid twentieth century and beyond (Badger, 2004: 348). However, another sharp increase in food prices in the late 1970s has been linked by some commentators to people starting to grow their own vegetables (Heasman, 1978). Although this has rarely been explicitly linked to allotment provision, it is worth noting that poverty, and the subsequent difficulties of obtaining a healthy diet, was a problem even at the end of the twentieth century. In 1997, a report for Save the Children estimated that a 'healthy food basket' cost four pounds more than a 'less healthy food basket' and this was a particular problem in deprived areas where access to supermarkets was restricted and local shops tended to be more expensive (Owens, 1997). In 1999, an Inquiry into Health Inequalities found there was a lack of fresh food available to mothers and children living in deprived areas (Laurence, 1999).

The cost of other commodities and services may have played a role in determining demand for allotments. For example, Webster (1982) refers to the higher rents charged for council housing, which restricted food expenditure in poorer households in the 1930s. There is plentiful evidence from the literature that patterns of food production have changed during the course of the century. For instance, Oddy details the decline of domestic food production during the first half of the twentieth century in response to changing lifestyles. He concludes that, "Domestic sources of food production declined rapidly as a consequence of the adoption of an urban lifestyle" (Oddy, 1990: 254). According to Pahl (1984), self-provisioning declined in favour of formal purchase after the First World War.

As Benson (1983) has pointed out, allotment gardening is an inexpensive activity to start, provided it does not include livestock. He identifies allotment cultivation as one of the ways in which the working classes attempted to supplement income; allotments added to the family budget through the sale of produce as well as by providing food directly. He estimates that 10% of working class families made money from produce grown in their allotment or garden and a "substantial number worked chiefly for sale" in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Benson, 1983: 30). Roberts (1984) noted that produce was used to supplement the incomes, as well as the diets, of working class families in Lancashire during the first half of the twentieth century. According to Bourke (1994), if their standard of living could be raised further by working on an allotment than it could be spending more time at work, men would be willing to take on an allotment. However, while the sale of allotment produce may still have been significant in the first half of the twentieth century, by 1967 Thorpe et al found that, despite the fact that helping the family budget was still the third most common reason for having an urban allotment, making additional money by selling surplus was the least important consideration (Thorpe et al, 1969).

Traditionally, many allotment holders gave produce to friends, relatives and neighbours in addition to producing food for their own household. This 'gift relationship' is similar to that associated with other forms of working class self-help, such as friendly societies, trade unions and the co-operative movement (Crouch and Ward, 1997). Henry (1981) identifies allotments as a form of 'legal alternative social economy', characterised by barter and exchange and not explained solely by economic gain. In the 1920s, many allotment holders were also members of labour movements and other self-help organisations (Meller, 2003). As Harris argues, however, while charity given at a personal level was generally acceptable and appreciated, attempts to extend this sort of assistance to a mass scale, for example, through the activities of the Society of Friends and the National Council of Social Service (NCSS) in the 1930s, were often greeted with scepticism. Fears were expressed that this could create "linkages of dependence and underlined the powerlessness and inferiority of the beneficiary" (Harris, 1995: 541).

Although it is generally agreed among historians and other researchers that the importance of allotments for household food production was insignificant in the last quarter of the twentieth century, there is evidence that it did not disappear completely. It has been argued that, even in the last decades of the twentieth century, allotments had an economic role outside the dominant consumer society, for example, through community cafes and local exchange trading schemes (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 275).

### *Personal*

When Thorpe et al asked about reasons for allotment holding in the 1960s, the most common responses were: a love of gardening; a desire for fresh produce; mental relaxation; physical recreation; and a change from the home environment (Thorpe et al, 1969: 150). In his later report, Thorpe found that "the amount of time and energy required to produce crops would far outweigh the financial economies made"; it was therefore necessary for an allotment holder to have other reasons for cultivating a plot (Thorpe, Galloway and Evans, 1977: 126). Benson (1983) also identifies various personal motives for allotment holding from earlier in the century; it might be a hobby or a place of refuge from the wife and children as well as a means of providing fresh food. Thorpe (1992) deals with the preconditions he considers were necessary for the expansion of leisure which occurred in the 1930s. Gardening is mentioned as one of the activities which became more popular as a result of more free time; greater surplus income; and increased leisure provision. Constantine (1981) is one historian who has examined the impact of the expansion in the amount of free time available to members of the working classes on their ability to devote time and energy to hobbies, including gardening in the inter-war years. He identifies a number of social changes that facilitated an interest in gardening, including new types of housing development and the growth of the mass media. In the 1950s, Gibson claimed that "many non-manual workers became rapidly adept in horticulture" (Gibson, 1951: 13). Allotments and gardens provided an alternative to the monotony of the working day and were popular among "sedentary workers seeking eventually for outdoor occupation as an escape" (Gibson, 1951: 24).

According to Kelly (1983), leisure can be seen as either an escape from work, or as a continuation of work, suggesting that the popularity of allotment holding and other hobbies will be affected by employment patterns. For example, as Jones (1986) points out, while unemployment leads to time to follow individual interests and hobbies, less money means fewer options are available. In 1914, the Land Enquiry Committee reported that, although for agricultural workers allotments were a continuation of work rather than a separate recreational activity, for industrial workers they were a pastime which, with more free time and rising wages in industrial centres, they had the leisure and money to enjoy. Thorpe et al (1969) made a similar claim more than fifty years later, suggesting that one of the main reasons for the growing interest in allotments immediately after the First World War was the closing of munitions factories and a ban on overtime, which gave people more leisure time. By 1938, most employees working were working half a day less than they had been in 1913 (Hopkins, 1979:228). The average working week continued to shorten after the Second World War; in 1961, it was 41.2 hours, but by 1975, it was just forty hours, giving significantly more time to devote to leisure activities (Collins and Strelitz, 1982).

Comparing the types of hobbies that were popular in the 1920s to those common in the 1960s, Clarke and Critcher (1985) note the decline of traditional public leisure activities and the growth of family-centred leisure and 'work-in-leisure' such as gardening and do-it-yourself. They suggest that, while an interest in gardening remained, the location shifted from the community allotment to the family garden attached to the home.

Roberts has commented on the potential for creativity through hobbies to compensate for a loss of such opportunities in the workplace: "There was a loss of creativity in some families, which was not necessarily compensated for in their paid work, but which was increasingly sought and found in the wave of DIY" (Roberts, 1995: 11) and it might, perhaps, be added, allotment holding. Veder (2002) claims that, at a time when trades were becoming deskilled and workers were subject to increasing outside control on their working lives, they were able to retain a sense of pride through demonstrating their horticultural skills. This is evidenced in the secrecy surrounding fertilizer recipes and other growing

techniques. This, however, led to the worry that competitive activities associated with allotment holding could foster too much pride and undo employers' efforts to foster humbleness and docility among their workforce (Veder, 2002). This is a theme more commonly discussed in relation to nineteenth century allotments (Archer, 1997; Burchardt, 1997). McKibbin (1994) considers whether hobbies merely make life bearable or risk becoming so absorbing that they preclude any interest in work. He argues that an individual's competitive drive is often focused on their leisure pursuits and allotment competitions are an example of this. Cunningham has claimed that "participant competitiveness was indeed a key feature of urban popular culture" in the 1920s and 1930s, especially for traditionally masculine activities, such as bowling, pigeon racing, dog racing, clog dancing, brass bands and sport (Cunningham, 1990: 316). Bourke (1994) agrees that competition with their peers acted as an incentive for allotment holders. However, by the time of Thorpe's survey in 1967, just 1% said they were motivated by participation in competitions and just half of these had first taken on an allotment specifically for this reason.

According to Kelly (1983), one way of classifying leisure activities is dividing them into solitary, intimate, group or mass activities. Allotment holding may fall within any of these areas. It is often a solitary activity undertaken by the plot holder alone. Sometimes, however, family and close friends may become involved. Local allotment societies offer opportunities for group leisure, while national organisations act to create a mass activity. Many commentators acknowledge the social role of allotments. According to Roberts, they provided "a meeting place where they could exchange gossip as well as surplus garden produce". This community role of allotments is contrasted with the high fences and hedges of private gardens, which "encouraged social isolation from the neighbourhood as a whole" in the middle decades of the twentieth century (Roberts, 1995: 215-6).

According to Burchardt (1997), at various times from the nineteenth century onwards, allotments have been promoted for their health value, especially for workers in sedentary occupations. Despite a lack of direct evidence, there are numerous references to the health benefits of allotment holding to be found in

the literature. Allotment holders are often believed to be healthier than other sectors of the community. They are thought to benefit personally from the physical activity gardening entails and, by growing their own wholesome fruit and vegetables, their whole family's diet and health could be improved (Gaskell, 1980; Crouch and Ward, 1997). As the Jones and Greatorex point out, in 2001, gardening was one of the Health Education Council's recommended forms of exercise for the over 50s. Among the health benefits claimed are: prevention of heart attacks and strokes, control of blood pressure and relief from arthritis (Gatton, 1998). Milligan, Gatrell and Bingley refer to gardens and allotments as "a key site of comfort and a vital opportunity for an individual's emotional, physical and spiritual renewal", especially for older people (Milligan, Gatrell and Bingley, 2004: 1781).

Individual eating habits might also prompt an interest in allotments. Roberts (1984) noted differences in families' diets that may have been attributable to the availability of allotment produce; in Barrow and Lancaster where half Roberts' interviewees had allotments before the Second World War, families consumed a more extensive range of vegetables than in Preston where there were fewer allotments. However, the potential health benefits of allotments appear to have assumed even greater importance since the late 1980s. In 1988, 43% of the population said they were cutting back on meat (Spencer, 1993: 337) and by 1994, 7% of the UK population was known to be vegetarian and, according to press reports, increasing numbers of allotment holders were vegetarians (West, 2000). Wale (2001) claims that food scares, for example, concerns over genetically modified foods, salmonella and listeria led to growing waiting lists for allotments in the late twentieth century.

In addition to considering factors which motivated people to become allotment holders, it is useful to examine the issues which prevented some sections of the community developing an interest in allotments or which could account for a general decline in the number of allotments at certain times. When Thorpe, Galloway and Evans (1977) investigated reasons for giving up allotments, the most common responses were: moving house, infirmity and old age. Beyond events affecting individuals, changing economic and social patterns in society as a whole can also play a role. Rising wages, combined with falling family size and

new styles of housing development from the 1920s onwards, meant that more working class families had gardens (Mass Observation, 1943: 161). Bourke refers to a 1943 Mass Observation survey of working class estates which found that all had gardens, the majority between twelve and thirty feet long (Bourke, 1994: 87). By the early 1960s, two-thirds of houses had gardens (Constantine, 1981: 387). On new estates, recreation tended to be more home-centred, for example, council estate residents often grew food in their gardens (Wibberley, 1959). While this made the urban environment more pastoral in some ways, at the same time housing density increased with the introduction of new types of development such as high-rise flats and houses with small private gardens or a communal garden (Oliver et al, 1981). It might be supposed that people living in these types of dwellings might be more likely to own an allotment. However, it would appear that personal inclination plays an important role. In Thorpe's survey of Birmingham flat dwellers in the 1970s, more than half the non-allotment holders said they did not own a plot because they were not attracted to the idea; practical considerations such as no site nearby, inadequate site amenities or no vacant plots were mentioned less frequently (Thorpe, Galloway and Evans, 1977: 172).

During the 1950s and 1960s, Thorpe reported a decline in the appeal of allotments as society became more affluent; unemployment fell; the welfare state cushioned people from the worst aspects of poverty; other leisure activities competed for spare time; frozen and canned food ensured a regular supply of convenient, cheap vegetables; and allotments remained tied to their charitable origins and were not seen to have a place in modern society. In summary, the image of allotments did not develop with changing times (Thorpe et al, 1969).

### *Political*

During the twentieth century, political activity surrounding allotments shifted from a focus on production to become centred around issues of consumption. In the last three decades of the century, the anti-consumerism and green movements and similar socio-political groups have all shown an interest in allotments (Select Committee on Environment Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998). Brown (1999) attributes the expanding waiting lists for allotments

witnessed in the mid 1970s to the 'green revolution'. There was early evidence of this in Thorpe's survey in the late 1960s; this found that wanting "fresh produce of better quality than you can buy" to be the second most common reason for having an allotment. Three-quarters of allotment holders in the 1990s claimed that the benefits of fresh food and concerns about modern production methods motivated them to cultivate an allotment, compared with less than one-fifth who said they did so in order to save money (Select Committee on Environment Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998). In the 1990s, a new type of 'political gardener' emerged, linked to the move towards organic gardening, permaculture and shared community plots (Garnett, 1996). Poole (2000) claimed that 40% of allotments holders were interested in organic produce and many had concerns about additives and preservatives in shop-bought food. However, it has been reported that there was often tension between these and traditional allotment holders (Jones, 2000).

### **The appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotment sites**

Although there have been several surveys detailing management arrangements and the provision of facilities on allotment sites<sup>4</sup>, the appearance, culture and atmosphere of allotment sites are topics which have been largely overlooked by researchers. Some work has been conducted by geographers, but coverage is limited.

#### *Appearance*

Although few researchers have considered the appearance of allotment sites in any degree of detail, there is a general perception that they are neglected, unattractive places. For example, Gibson claims that allotments are seen as "ragged patches in need of clearance" (Gibson, 1951: 32). Thorpe, Galloway and Evans refer to the "poor quality landscape traditionally associated with old style allotments" and the apathy of allotment holders regarding the rundown appearance of sites (Thorpe, Galloway and Evans, 1977: 80). DeSilvey suggests that this "messy co-existence of different plotting practices might actually contribute to the vulnerability and marginalisation of these landscapes"

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<sup>4</sup> In particular Thorpe et al (1969) and NSALG (1997)

(DeSilvey, 2003: 444). As Crouch and Ward point out, however, it is ironic that, given this view of an allotment site as collection of ramshackle huts and largely derelict land, there were often numerous rules and conditions attached to the provision of allotments for the nineteenth century poor. Typically, these might include: not underletting the land; attending a place of worship at least once every Sunday; only cultivating the plot by "spade husbandry"; keeping the plot neat and clean; applying a specified quantity of manure; and adhering to a specified rotation system (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 55-56). Thorpe et al found that, like nineteenth century philanthropists, many twentieth century local authority allotment providers established strict rules. In the 1960s, 22.7% prohibited the growing of flowers; 68% did not allow pigeons; and 69.1% forbade allotment holders to keep pigs. Despite these restrictions, however, flowers, lawns, compost heaps, greenhouses, sheds, livestock and beehives were all to be found on at least some allotments (Thorpe et al, 1969: 101).

Thorpe Galloway and Evans claim that the appearance of sites has been adversely affected not only by local authority policies, but also the media representation of allotments: "The policy of some local authorities to discourage or even forbid the growing of fruit and flowers on allotments/leisure gardens and the emphasis by the media on the economic motivation of tenants has led to a very utilitarian view of allotment holding and this has not only prejudiced the crops which tenants have thought they were able to grow but has also affected the appearance of the sites" (Thorpe, Galloway and Evans, 1977: 77). There is evidence that the type of produce grown on allotments has changed over time. According to Poole (2000), in the 1930s, potatoes, tomatoes, onions, beans, peas, carrots, cabbages, soft fruit and flowers were the main allotment crops, but by the 1990s, peppers, chillies, cumin, dill, coriander were commonly to be found, at least in some localities. Poole argues that, despite the stereotypical view of allotments as a place to grow potatoes and onions, the range of vegetables that could be grown on allotments was more diverse than that found in most shops until very recently. Methods of cultivation have also altered during the course of the twentieth century. For instance, in the 1920s, the "frequent and constant use" of artificial fertilizer was advocated (Ellis, 1923), but by the 1990s, Poole (2000) claimed that 40% of allotment holders were using organic methods of cultivation.

### *Atmosphere and culture*

The atmosphere of allotment sites is among the most neglected aspects of allotment research. However, this is given some consideration by Crouch and Ward (1997). They place the 'gift relationship' at the centre of allotment culture. This involved not only the sharing of produce among allotment holders, but also charitable and community activities. They also investigate the community life of allotment sites, citing examples of organised dinners and dances which bring together the gardeners on a site. Jones and Greatorex claim that, "most successful sites have a 'spirit of common purpose' among allotment holders which helps to unify the site" (Jones and Greatorex, 2001: 9). Veder's (2002) work suggests that competitions are another activity which help to form the atmosphere of a site, but there has been little research into the significance of these.

Allotment associations are an area which has received some attention by researchers. Garnett (1996) claims that associations have the potential to instil pride in local identity as well as offering opportunities for social interaction, through swapping seeds and advice for example. Stokes (2003) has outlined the national development of the allotment 'movement'. There were a number of associations formed specifically to promote allotment holding. The Agricultural Organisation Society was established at the end of the nineteenth century, the National Union of Allotment Holders (NUAH) in 1918 and the Allotment Organisation Society (AOS) in 1924. The NUAH and AOS amalgamated 1929 to form the National Allotments Society Limited. Within a year, this boasted 600 affiliated societies. The number rose slowly throughout the 1930s to reach 1,000 by 1939. The expansion of allotment holding during the Second World War meant that the pre-war membership figure had quadrupled by 1945. This organisation later became known as the National Allotments Society and Village Produce Association, and later still, the National Society of Leisure Gardeners (Stokes, 2003). In 1996, the NSALG had 14,799 individual members, 238 associations and eight affiliated local authorities within the West Midlands. However, in 1998, part of the organisation broke away to form the United Community Horticultural Association, reflecting the increased focus on the community aspects of allotment holding among some sections of the movement

at this time. Due to this and a general decline in interest, by 2000 another 27,000 members of the NSALG had been lost (Jones, 2000).

Thorpe criticised allotment holders' reluctance to help themselves, describing them as, "a collection of individuals with little or no sense of corporate responsibility" (Thorpe et al, 1969: 166). Although "a spirit of comradeship existed on almost every site" during times of need such as during wars and depressions, "today's recreation-orientated allotment holder...is primarily an individualist who considers his allotment to be as private as his home garden, who is seldom interested in anything beyond its boundaries and is blind to his further responsibilities" (Thorpe et al, 1969: 167). However, formal organisation was clearly more important amongst urban allotment holders, 43.7% of whom were members of the National Allotments Society compared to just 20.9% of their rural equivalents (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 117).

The problem of vandalism is referred to in passing by a number of cases. It is acknowledged to be a problem for the movement by Thorpe, Galloway and Evans (1977), Crouch and Ward (1997) and others, but little further detail is provided.

### **The importance of allotment activities**

Constantine (1981) quotes the 1887 Conference of Agricultural and Horticultural Co-operative Associations Limited, which outlined the perceived values of allotment gardening. In addition to increasing food production, it was believed to provide "a refining occupation"; "brighten people's lives"; and stimulate "a higher influence that would develop from contact with nature" (Gaskell, 1980: 250). Over one hundred years later, in its evidence to the 1997 Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, the NSALG also claimed a number of advantages for urban agriculture. Firstly, it could help to create a 'greener environment' by reducing the amount of packaging required, reducing the distances food was transported and increasing biodiversity. The social benefits of urban agriculture in terms of leisure, creating sustainable neighbourhoods and fostering community development were also highlighted. In addition, the NSALG argued that urban agriculture had the potential to lead to

better health through the provision of fresh food, exercise and relief from stress (Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998).

In general, however, there is relatively little consideration of the importance and benefits of allotment activity for individuals, families and communities to be found in the literature specifically relating to allotments. Nevertheless, it is possible to make inferences from wider literature on self-provisioning and recreation as well as from work relating to rural allotments.

### *Economic*

In the nineteenth century, it was argued that tying workers to the land prevented the development of a mobile workforce placing a burden on the local poor rate (Barnett, 1967; Moran, 1990). However, Gaskell refers to the value of allotments and gardens as a form of poor relief in themselves. Providing the poor with the means to grow their own food could ease the burden they placed on society as well as supplementing the individual family budget. Allotments brought a degree of economic security and lessened the threat of dismissal. The contribution of allotments to the family budget was particularly important if the adults in a household were only employed intermittently (Gaskell, 1980: 484). Veder (2002) contends that, in some respects, allotments were a response to structural unemployment in the countryside; to the seasonal nature of some types of work; and to the vagaries of market demand. Allotment holding was generally regarded as less popular among factory workers who were virtually guaranteed continuous employment, so lacked the same incentive to take insurance measures (Crouch and Ward, 1997; Veder, 2002). It has been suggested by Badger (2002) that this remained true to some extent in the twentieth century, at least until the Second World War.

In rural areas, farmers often objected to the provision of allotments as they feared their labourers would put more effort into the cultivation of their own land and would, therefore, reserve their energy for after work (Archer, 1997). According to Crouch and Ward (1997), the concern that allotment holders would spend time cultivating their own crops when they should be working for their employer was one that was transferred to the urban allotment community.

Employers did not wish their workers to become too independent or financially secure, as this would diminish their reliance on their employer.

Allotments have long been held to be important for the family in a financial sense. In common with other forms of penny capitalism, allotments were based around the family as the unit of production (Benson, 1983). Ellis supported the view that allotments could easily bring economic benefits: "it was never the idea either of the promoters or of the holders of the gardens that the work should be done at a loss" (Ellis, 1923: 9). He described the loss of allotments in the 1920s as "one of the most extraordinary, vital and serious problems of modern times" when thousands were out of work and "food is sold at wicked prices" (Ellis, 1923: 10). Another commentator of the 1920s, Udale, claimed that, "Allotments are doing much to mitigate the evil of a scarcity of vegetables and fruit among the poor in rural districts and to a lesser degree near large centres of population" (Udale, 1920: 95). The wider community often benefited from the availability of allotment produce. As has been mentioned above, in addition to consuming allotment produce within the household, allotment holders frequently sold surplus vegetables to supplement their incomes in the early years of the twentieth century (Benson, 1983) and this activity continued into the middle years of the century (Badger, 2004). Even in the 1960s, more than six in ten respondents to Thorpe's survey said they gave away produce grown on their allotment, supplementing the diets of friends and extended family (Thorpe et al, 1969).

During wartime, self-provisioning took place on a national scale. Wibberley (1959) cites a government report of 1944 which estimated that 10% of food was grown on allotments or gardens. During both the First and Second World Wars, it was argued that producing food on allotments reduced the need for imports, freeing ships for military use. During the Second World War, the total value of the allotment yield was approximately £3,000,000 (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 76). Allotment produce continued to make a significant contribution to the national economy after the war. In 1956, it was calculated that amateur food growers contributed £50,000,000 to the national balance sheet (Hyams, 1975: 7). In 1967, 60% of allotment holders in urban areas estimated that the total value of produce they harvested was at least fifteen pounds (Thorpe et al,

1969: 147). The lack of references to the economic impact in the literature describing the cultivation from the 1970s onwards suggests that the importance of allotments' economic role has declined, but there is a lack of explicit evidence that this is the case.

### *Social*

The impact of allotments can extend beyond the individual and their family to affect whole communities. Garnett (1996) argues that allotments can have a number of positive effects on local communities including: reaffirming community identity; promoting active citizenship; preventing crime; combating ethnic, age and gender discrimination; rehabilitating offenders; training and educating local people; improving the environment; improving the health of communities; offering leisure opportunities; and creating sustainable neighbourhoods. For the unemployed, retired people or immigrants, allotments, like other forms of leisure, can offer entry into a new community (Garnett, 1996). Crouch contended that allotments cost less than many other facilities such as parks, golf courses and community centres and they are frequently utilised for a variety of community activities (Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998).

As the discussion on self-help above indicates, allotments can provide opportunities for working class collaborative activity without management intervention (McKibbin, 1994). However, Gaskell argues that, at least in the nineteenth century, horticulture was, in fact, more commonly used as a means of social control by middle class employers. Although the literature contains little discussion of the use of allotments as a form of social control in the twentieth century, it has been argued to be a hobby that helped to diminish the threat the working classes posed to social stability by simultaneously curtailing crime and discontent and promoting industriousness: "they were seen to encourage conduct that was praiseworthy and were claimed to stem the tide of discontent, to act as an antidote to crime, and to encourage industriousness and sobriety" (Gaskell, 1980: 485). According to Constantine (1981), moral improvement was a focus for early providers of allotments at times of political unrest, such as the 1840s and 1880s. Some nineteenth-century middle class societies, such as the

Home Colonization Society and the Garden Cities Movement had a romantic view of the physical and moral values of horticulture and a return to the land, which they attempted to spread to members of the working class. In addition, the Church and other religious organisations, in particular the Quakers, provided allotments throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries (Gaskell, 1980). It has been claimed that nineteenth century manufacturers such as Owen, Lever and Salt who incorporated allotments in their planned estates often had an ulterior motive for doing so. They believed that gardening could help to improve labour discipline. The allocation of gardens, establishing a horticultural society and awarding prizes was seen as a means of controlling the lives of workers (Archer, 1997; Gaskell, 1980; Meller, 2003). As allotments required an investment of labour over time, Veder (2002) argues that labourers would come to have a stake in the status quo, making them more docile and unlikely to do anything that might run the risk of them losing their land.

Conversely, on occasions, allotments have been reported to have an impact on social mobility as they have enabled working class labourers to raise their status, at least superficially, by acting the part of tradesman, merchant or even landed gentry. At various times, allotment holding has been linked to issues of land ownership. Both Veder (2002) and Archer (1997) point out that owning an allotment allowed a small minority of labourers to actually climb the social ladder by becoming independent smallholders. Although this is less obvious during the twentieth century, allotments were again associated with a 'back to the land' movement in the 1930s (Opie, 1974).

Gardening can be viewed as an activity that isolates workers, making them less likely to combine and participate in trade union activity (Veder, 2002). However, Meller argues that, although gardening associations only represented a minority of citizens, they could be powerful bodies if well organised, offering "a people-centred framework for bringing the country influences into the city" and having an impact on wider issues such as the public park movement (Meller, 2003). Bishop and Hoggett (1986) have examined the reasons why people choose to join groups such as allotment associations. Among the factors they identified are recreational motivation; to facilitate production and consumption; social motives; and competitive instincts. As *The Future of Allotments* report pointed out, "A

lively allotment society can negotiate, liaise, work with local councils, local firms, local sponsors of a variety of kinds and local voluntary groups, schools, social service departments, environment and food growing organisations, local civic trusts... in a sense, allotment holding has been sustainable for much longer than the word sustainability has existed" (Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998). However, Thorpe et al found little evidence of communication and understanding between allotment holders and the wider community. Often, the closure of allotment sites was not strongly opposed because it only affected a minority of local inhabitants. In general, the public were quicker to object to the untidy and neglected appearance of allotments and so supported their closure (Thorpe et al, 1969). Lawson (1994) is one of several commentators to claim that the absence of an organised allotment community to defend the land has contributed to their demise, along with the increasing prevalence of private gardens, local authority neglect and a reluctance to promote allotments vigorously.

According to Gaskell, in the nineteenth century, allotments were seen as providing an alternative to the beerhouse: "It had the benefits of putting one's leisure time to the best use and greatest advantage" (Gaskell, 1980: 483). Gardening was "held up to the working man as an exemplar of the benefits to be gained from rational recreation" (Gaskell, 1980: 501). The idea of 'rational recreation' is best described by Bailey. He argues that, in pre-industrial society, there was no division between work and leisure. However, the Industrial Revolution brought about a change in thinking, as leisure increasingly formed "a separate and self-contained sector in an increasingly compartmentalised way of life", separated from work in terms of time, place and community (Bailey, 1978: 4). The layout and living patterns of cities, including the location of allotments, acted to segregate home, work and leisure. The notion of rational recreation was based on middle class fears of radical social and political movements; the aim was to 'respectabilise' leisure, to combat idleness and to promote acquiescence. Bailey has claimed that "in a work-orientated value system leisure represented the irresponsible preoccupations of a parasitic ruling class or the reckless carousing of an irrational working class" (Bailey, 1978: 64). Within this schema, allotment holding was an acceptable form of recreation because it had a useful purpose, promoted industry and could help to counter idleness and

dissolution (Bailey, 1978: 170). According to Bailey, middle class employers were keen to promote "a play discipline to complement the work discipline that was the principal means of social control in an industrial capitalist society" and they sought to provide "reformed recreations which would immunise workers against the alleged degradations of their own culture and counter the most corrupt appeals of an embryonic leisure industry" (Bailey, 1978: 6). Some of the most famous groups and figures involved in the promotion of rational recreation had an interest in allotment provision<sup>5</sup>. There is evidence that the idea of 'rational recreation' was also important during the twentieth century. For example, in the early 1930s, charitable concerns such as the National Council of Social Service and National Unemployed Workers' Movement were keen to arrange a variety of opportunities to prevent idleness amongst the unemployed (Harris, 1995).

Hoyles (1994) cites Cook, who in 1908, argued that gardening "brings into play the sweeter attributes of man's nature" acting as an antidote to the "reckless craving for pleasures, often more or less vicious which is steadily sapping the moral strength of the British race" (Hoyles 1994: 138). After the First World War, the promoters of allotments adopted a more secular approach, but even in the 1930s, it was claimed that the allotments movement would lead naturally to the revival of the British peasantry (Opie, 1974). Although Meller suggests that allotment holders continued to "occupy the high moral ground" for their contribution to feeding the nation during both world wars and the depression of the 1930s (Meller, 2003: 5), in general, there is little discussion in the literature of the moral or religious significance of allotments in the mid-twentieth century. However, it is an issue which became more important towards the end of the century when allotment holding was extolled by environmental campaigners. For example, West (2000) suggests that owning an allotment made some people feel virtuous because it meant that they were helping to prevent environmental damage caused by transporting food long distances and were not involved in the exploitation of third world farmers.

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<sup>5</sup> For example Samuel Greg and the Temperance Movement. For further details see Bailey (1978) and Gaskell (1980).

## *Personal*

As regards the personal importance of allotments, the majority of the literature focuses on their economic value and, to a lesser extent, their contribution to physical health. There is relatively little discussion about the implications of allotment cultivation for family relationships and for mental well-being. As Gaskell (1980) points out, being a distance from the house, allotments were less of family place than gardens. In the 1960s, Thorpe found that, although in 29.1% of cases, the 'rest' of an allotment holder's family spent at least 200 hours a year on the allotment (approximately four hours per week), 63.9% of allotment holders said their family never visited the plot (Thorpe et al, 1969: 406). This suggests that the immediate impact of allotment holding on family activities may be limited. However, it is worth noting that Crouch and Ward (1997) have suggested that, by the end of the twentieth century, the practice of families working together on allotments may have become more common, especially among ethnic minority families. They have described the allotment environment as "a symbol of both separation and escape" from the home (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 272).

Many commentators have argued that allotments can also make a positive contribution to household diet. Marrack reported that, around the time of the First World War, half the population of Great Britain was not getting enough calcium and vitamin A and in lower income groups, other nutritional deficiencies were common. Many of the crops commonly found on allotments, such as broccoli, spinach and cabbage, provided high quantities of vitamin A (Marrack, 1942: 147). In 1920, it was argued that, "Allotments are doing much to mitigate the evil of a scarcity of vegetables and fruit among the poor in rural districts and to a lesser degree near large centres of population" (Udale, 1920:95). Poole (2000) claims that before supermarkets became widespread, allotments were one of the easiest ways in which town dwellers could have access to a wide range of fresh fruit and vegetables. In 1939, it was reported that a family with an allotment ate fresh vegetables three or four times a week and fruit also often featured in their diet (Rice, 1981).

The personal importance of allotments may be indicated, in part, by the amount of time allotment holders spend there and the amount of land they cultivate. The amount of time gardeners spend on their allotment depends, in part, on the season. According to Thorpe's survey, in summer, the average was five two and a half hour visits a week, making a total of 12.5 hours. In the winter, this fell to a single three hour visit. However, this varied greatly for individuals; 6% visited more than twelve times in week in the summer, while 1% never visited at all. Some owned more than one plot; 10.8% of respondents occupied two plots, and 2.0% more than two, (Thorpe et al, 1969: 156). The Local Government Association (LGA) hypothesised that the traditional ten-rod plot is too large for many people; it can take too much time to tend and produce a glut of produce which smaller families are unable to consume. On some sites, there are schemes to share plots, often pairing a novice gardener and a more experienced, but less physically able, plot holder (LGA, 2000).

## **Conclusions**

The literature therefore offers an outline, or stereotype, to describe the typical allotment holder. Allotment holding would appear to be a male-dominated, working class activity, especially during the earlier years of the twentieth century. There is evidence in the literature that, towards the end of the twentieth century, a greater diversity of allotment holders could be found. There were more women, members of ethnic minority communities and, in particular, more middle class growers and these groups were likely to have different interests and motivations from those of traditional allotment holders. In addition, the importance of certain defining characteristics has shifted throughout the course of the century. For example, poverty and unemployment were more closely related to allotment holding in the earlier years of the century, whereas the association between old age and allotment holding became more apparent from the 1960s onwards.

In general, allotment holders themselves and their motivation for allotment gardening have been the subject of greater study than allotment activity; the question of what allotment holding actually involves has not been investigated in any depth, so this aspect of allotments has a less well-defined image. Although

it is possible to discern stereotypes of allotment holding from the literature, they are less explicit than is the case for the characteristics of allotment holders themselves. It may be that the perception of allotment sites as haphazard and ramshackle in nature makes them appear not to be worthy of serious study. Likewise, management arrangements, although sometimes perceived as authoritarian, are generally seen as weak and disorganised when confronted with a serious threat such as the loss of allotment land (Thorpe et al, 1969).

The literature shows that, during the first half of the twentieth century, allotments had an important role in the relief of poverty at individual, family, community and national levels. As they helped to supplement both income and diet, allotments were particularly valued as a financial safeguard by those suffering from difficulties such as unemployment, irregular earnings, low pay, old age or illness. The price of vegetables, fruit and other commodities, food shortages and wage levels all affected demand for allotments to some extent. This suggests that allotment holding was motivated primarily by financial considerations at this time. In the later decades of the twentieth century, however, there was evidence of a shift towards recreational motives; the reasons for becoming involved in allotment holding became increasingly personal and particular to individual gardeners. However, this is a tentative conclusion based on the general literature relating to leisure activities rather than to specific research into allotment holding.

A stereotype relating to the importance of allotment activity is more difficult to deduce from the literature; although it does exist, it is implicit. Like motivation for allotment holding, the importance of allotments appears to have shifted away from economic concerns to focus on more personal and social needs. The main issues referred to are economic in nature; the social importance of allotments for individuals and their families and communities has been much less well researched, although there are a number of advocates of the allotment movement who speculate about these benefits. A number of researchers point out the long-established association between allotments and charity and working class self help. However, an alternative view offered is that they were actually a form of social control, used to diminish the threat the working classes posed to social stability and the curb excess. This is supported by theory of 'rational

recreation' (Bailey, 1978). For industrial workers, allotments were seen as a recreational activity which offered an escape from work. However, it was a leisure activity that served a useful purpose and promoted industry. It has also been suggested that allotments offered an opportunity for creativity, especially if people were unable to find this through their work; they might also act as a focus for competitive drive (Veder, 2002).

The prevalent image of allotments in the literature is of a masculine environment; being away from the home makes them fundamentally different to gardens. However, there are indications that the extent of female involvement has been underestimated throughout the century; women working on their husbands' allotments have remained largely 'hidden'. Based on the literature, family involvement in allotment holding would also appear to be limited; it is more of an individualistic pastime. However, there are examples of family co-operation both in terms of production and recreation and the extent of this has, perhaps, not been fully investigated. There are some arguments in favour of viewing allotment cultivation as a household chore rather than a pleasurable activity even when the economic necessity for allotment holding had declined.

While motives for the provision of allotments are well documented from the point of view of those providing them, for example through local authority records, the motives of allotment holders themselves are often overlooked. Similarly, there is less evidence regarding the importance of allotment holding at a local and individual level than at a national level. The value of this study is that it focuses on the allotment holders themselves and allows their voices to be heard. It also investigates allotment holding in more detail than is usual by concentrating on the local, rather than the national, stage. By doing so, it allows all the aspects of allotment holding outlined above to be investigated in greater depth, including those issues which have previously been neglected. This will help to determine whether the images of allotments and allotment holders presented in the literature are an accurate representation or simply crude stereotypes.

### *Allotment stereotypes*

From the review of the literature, it is possible to discern stereotypes of allotment holding and allotment holders in relation to the following four issues: the characteristics of allotment holders; their motives for having an allotment; the appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotments; and the importance of these activities. However, the stereotypes relating to allotment holders themselves are more explicit and well developed than the stereotypes of allotment activities. The main features of the stereotypes are outlined below. In many cases, the stereotypes presented in the literature are supported by images of allotments and allotment holders present in popular culture.

Easily the most detailed stereotype is that relating to the characteristics of a typical allotment holder. In fact, three distinct stereotypes are apparent. The first was prevalent in the earlier years of the twentieth century when a typical allotment holder was a working class man with a family to support; the family was usually poor, unable to afford an adequate diet and frequently suffered as a result of unemployment. However, from the 1960s onwards, this image altered somewhat, in particular in terms of the expected age profile of allotment holders, and a second stereotype emerged. During the second half of the century, allotment holding came to be viewed as a hobby for middle aged or elderly men, as exemplified in Thorpe's survey in the late 1960s (Thorpe et al, 1969). This allotment holder has now become almost a caricature:

*He is elderly, fairly poor, relying on a remnant of subsistence survival, a dying anachronism* (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 5).

*There is a stereotype of allotment holders. They are middle-aged and elderly men, their grey hair partially hidden by flat caps* (Arnot, 2001)

*...full of old men growing cabbages* (Stokes, in Arnot, 2001).

*The perception of the allotment tenant is an elderly, flat-capped stalwart* (West, 2000).

Given the prevalence of these sorts of images, it is not surprising that, in popular culture, allotments are a hobby most commonly associated with older, working class men, Jack Duckworth from *Coronation Street* being a stereotypical example

presented in the mass media. Even the allotment community itself does little to discredit this stereotype. In 2002, a cover of *Allotment and Leisure Gardener*, the journal of the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners, showed four 'typical' allotment holders, all elderly men, one wearing a flat cap and another smoking a pipe. In keeping with this image, the journal also features a regular column titled 'Old Pete's Ramblings'.

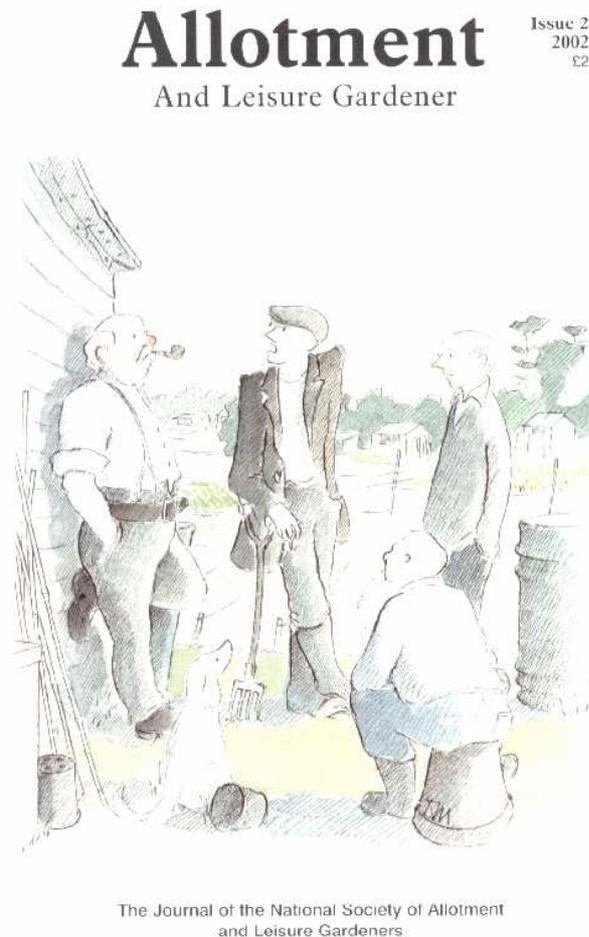


Figure 1: *Allotment and Leisure Gardener*, *The Journal of the National Society of Allotment and Leisure Gardeners*, 2002, Issue 2

This stereotype has now become dominant in the media and society generally and the original image of an allotment holder as a man with a family to support has been largely forgotten. However, the 'elderly, flat-capped stalwart' stereotype has been challenged in recent years with the emergence of a new type of allotment holder. Recently, a third image of a stereotypical allotment

holder has appeared as more women have taken on plots and middle class growers with an interest in 'green' issues have appeared on many sites:

*A regiment of trendy, middle-class women has begun to defy the Eastenders' Arthur Fowler stereotype by signing up for plots, motivated by a desire to feed their children cheap, organic vegetables...Allotment gardeners are starting to look more like Charlie Dimmock than Arthur Fowler (West, 2000).*

This too has been reflected in the mass media. In 2003, *Coronation Street* introduced a new character, Maz, a young female, new age allotment holder who used her plot to grow cannabis. Locally, the Black Country newspaper, *The Express and Star*, has a regular column devoted to allotments which is written by a woman. This development is particularly noteworthy because both the previous stereotypes had depicted allotment holding as a white, male, working class activity, despite the shift from allotment holding as a necessity to a leisure pursuit. This newer stereotype represents a more dramatic change. However, it has not taken over from the previous stereotype; the two currently co-exist.

The motivation for allotment holding follows naturally on from the characteristics of stereotypical allotment holders outlined above. For the allotment holder in the first half of the twentieth century, poverty was a key motivator as allotments were required to supplement both the income and diet of poorer families. However, as allotment holding came to be seen, primarily, as a hobby, the range of factors which motivated someone to take on a plot expanded. Financial considerations were no longer important; instead, issues such as competitive instinct and pride became significant. The importance of competitions, especially those for the largest or heaviest vegetables, have become a component of the allotment stereotype:

*They hawk enormous cabbages around public bars on Sunday lunchtimes and stage competitive shows of bomb-shaped onions and leeks the size of torpedoes (Arnot, 2001).*

However, perhaps the most important motivation for having an allotment for an older, male gardener, according to the stereotype, is to escape from the home and family, most notably a nagging wife:

*...keeping out of the way of their wives* (Stokes, in Arnot, 2001).

*...looking for his slice of the good life away from the wife* (West, 2000).

The most recent stereotypical allotment holder has a very different set of motivators though, including political beliefs and a desire for fresh, organic food:

*...trendy, middle-class women...motivated by a desire to feed their children cheap, organic vegetables* (West, 2000).

The stereotype relating to patterns of cultivation and the management of allotments is much less strongly developed in the literature than those of allotment holders themselves. Crouch and Ward have suggested that there are a variety of images of the physical environment of allotments. In general terms, the stereotype depicts allotments as backward and dilapidated:

*The culture is seen as a bit funny or eccentric, the last of the summer wine, prize leeks, pigeons and a messy use of materials that has not caught up with DIY superstores* (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 5).

DeSilvey likens allotments to "shanty towns" of "ramshackle unruliness" (DeSilvey, 2003: 446). This image clearly corresponds closely to the predominant stereotype of allotment holders themselves. Jones and Greatorex (2001), for example, personify allotments as, "the eccentric, shabby old uncle you rarely bother to visit any more" (Jones and Greatorex, 2001: 8).

As Crouch and Ward (1997) point out, it is ironic that the ramshackle appearance of sites often contrasts with a plethora of rules regulating the management and cultivation of plots. However, the fact that these rules exist, but are not enforced (Thorpe et al, 1969: 101) reflects not only the haphazard nature of sites, but also the ineffectual nature of the allotment community. Despite a growing interest in allotments from those involved in the green movement, allotment holders are seen as having little political power. In theory, allotments present an ideal opportunity for collective action, but as is pointed out in the literature, this has rarely been seized (Thorpe et al, 1969: 166-167).

Crouch and Ward also refer to the 'awkwardness' of allotment sites:

*A visible sign of failure in the competition for urban space...not desirable or exciting in the consumer city, not part of the mainstream of modern life, not pleasant in its associations with frugality and improvisation*  
(Crouch and Ward, 1997: 4).

As they are presented in the media and literature, allotments are of relatively little importance to modern lifestyles:

*...they seem like a hangover from the Victorian era* (Leapman, 1998).

Allotments are stereotyped as rural idylls in the midst of the chaos of contemporary urban life. This is exemplified in the poems of Wright and Tomlinson:

*Nine beanrows will I have there,  
Not ten, not eight, but nine.  
And I shall build a pav there  
Or shed of weathered pine,  
And all shall be contentment  
Down by the railway line* (Wright, K., *A Love Song of Tooting*).

*these closer comities  
of vegetable shade,  
glass-houses, rows  
and trellises of redly  
flowering beans  
This  
Is a paradise  
where you my smell  
the cinders  
of quotidian hell beneath you* (Tomlinson, C., 1963 *John Mayhew*  
or *The Allotment*)

Despite being closely linked to the urban landscape, they are essentially rural in nature:

*That clutter of tarred sheds and rhubarb, tin baths and red cabbages, that peaceful patchwork behind the gasworks or in the shadow of the pit...* (Humphreys, 1999).

Allotments are located in the heart of working class communities, close to gardeners' homes, yet far enough away to act as an escape from family life. This stereotype of allotments as tranquil havens was the view promoted in an edition of *Gardeners' World* broadcast in September 2003, which was devoted to allotments. The music, incidents reported and overall mood gave the impression of a laid-back, harmonious place where people could retreat from the pressures of urban life. The programme finished with an allotment show and competition which was compared to "a 1950s drama set".

The least well-defined aspect of the stereotype in the existing literature is the importance of allotment activities. Indeed, not a great deal of significance is expected to take place on an allotment; like allotment holders themselves, they are seen as harmless and uncontroversial:

*To the casual observer...allotments are peaceful backwaters where men talk knowingly about pea-weevils and Maris Pipers* (Humphreys, 1999).

For some, however, especially older people, allotments are still viewed as a survival mechanism to cope in times of poverty and hardship, for example, as a method of alleviating unemployment or as part of the Dig for Victory campaign of the Second World War:

*The Dig for Victory allotment image persists in the public imagination to this day, exerting a subtle, but unmistakable influence on how these places are classified and coded* (DeSilvey, 2003: 454).

The 'gift relationship' (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 94-109) is another aspect of the stereotype; this extends the impact of allotments beyond a gardener's immediate family to benefit the wider community. It would appear that this stereotype has remained to some extent even though an allotment holder is no longer seen as a person who cultivates land out of financial necessity<sup>6</sup>. The idea of self-

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<sup>6</sup> For example, CityHarvest run by the National Food Alliance, described in Laurance (1999).

provisioning did not completely disappear by the end of the twentieth century. In fact, it was revived in response to various stimuli, in particular the television programme, *The Good Life* in the 1970s and, more recently, the influence of the green movement. However, by this point it represented a lifestyle choice rather than a financial necessity (West, 2000).

If this study was to include nineteenth century allotments, it might be expected to include the importance of allotments as a form of social control as part of the stereotype. However, the moral value of allotments does not feature significantly strongly in the literature relating to twentieth century allotments to form part of the stereotype in relation to this study.

Strong stereotypes of allotments and allotment holders exist and these have been embedded over time. As Humphreys has commented, "...the allotment became part of the national identity" (Humphreys, 1999). At first sight, it may appear that allotments have changed little during the course of the twentieth century; their image remains trapped in the past in a number of ways. However, it is clear that the stereotype of allotments and allotment holders has shifted during the course of the century, largely as a result of allotments becoming a leisure activity rather than a financial necessity. The key characteristics of allotment holders might be defined as poverty in the first half of the century, old age in later years, and, to a more limited extent, 'green' towards the end of the century. This third stereotype is fundamentally different from the previous two because it does not define the allotment holder as male and working class as the earlier stereotypes did.

The stereotype of the allotment plot has not changed so noticeably. However, this may be partly due to the fact that there has been less research in this area so it is less explicit. The stereotypical allotment site has remained a ramshackle, messy place. The other aspect of a stereotypical allotment site relates to the overall atmosphere and culture. They are seen as tranquil places where it is possible to escape for a time from busy contemporary life. Both these aspects of the stereotype contribute to an impression that allotments do not have an obvious place in modern life and are, therefore, of little significance, beyond immediate benefits to the individual, such as enjoyment or relaxation.

The lack of in-depth research has meant that allotment stereotypes have largely been accepted without question not only in the mass media, but among academics and even within the allotment community. By exploring the traditional stereotypes in greater depth in this study it is hoped to determine whether the stereotypes of allotments and allotment holders outlined above were ever accurate depictions of the allotment community; if so, to what extent they held true throughout the twentieth century; and what patterns of continuity and change can be identified.

## **Approach to the research**

### **Aims and objectives**

The research investigates patterns of allotment use in the main industrial centres of the Black Country: Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton<sup>7</sup>, spanning the period from the outbreak of the First World War until the present day. The focus on a limited geographical area is necessary in order to examine the phenomenon of urban allotments in depth over almost a century. The main themes explored are: the characteristics of allotment holders; their motivation for allotment gardening; the appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotment sites; and the importance of allotment activities for individuals, their families and wider society. In each case, the evidence from oral and documentary sources is compared with the traditional stereotypes of allotments and allotment holders derived from the literature review in order to determine the extent to which these have held true throughout the course of the twentieth century.

The aim of this research is, therefore, to investigate the extent to which the stereotypes described above held true for allotments and allotment holders between the outbreak of the First World War and the end of the twentieth century. The intention is to take advantage of the strong traditional images of allotments and allotment holders which exist and consider how accurate these

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<sup>7</sup> For the purposes of this study, Wolverhampton is considered as part of the Black Country, although it is acknowledged that this view is contested. The three centres studied are sufficiently congruous with regard to allotment holding to allow them to be considered as a single region within which comparisons and contrasts can be made.

general perceptions have been throughout the twentieth century. Did the stereotype ever hold true? Did the way it developed conform with what might have been expected, or can other patterns be detected?

Four aspects of the traditional stereotype of allotments are examined in turn. The first two relate to allotment holders themselves. Firstly, the characteristics of allotment holders and, linked to this, their motivation for having a plot: do these follow the pattern suggested by the literature? If so, it would be expected that the typical allotment holder in the early part of the twentieth century would be a working man providing for his family. After the Second World War, the stereotypical allotment holder was a middle aged working class man who gardened as a hobby. The final development occurred towards the end of the twentieth century with the emergence of middle class, often female, growers with political interests. The characteristics and motivation of Black country allotment holders are examined in order to determine the accuracy of these stereotypes and their development over the course of the century.

The other aspects of the stereotype to be considered relate to allotment plots and sites and the activities which take place on them. The appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotments has rarely been investigated in detail so the stereotype is less well-developed here. There is a general perception of allotment as neglected, ramshackle places which are a blight on the local environment and a barrier to more productive uses of urban land. The degree of care allotment holders take over their plots, as well as the level of organisation involved in the allotment movement, are considered to determine how accurate this view might be. Furthermore, allotments are seen as rural idylls where people can escape from the pressures of urban life. The extent to which this has been true throughout the twentieth century is also considered.

The final aspect of the traditional allotment stereotype concerns the importance of allotment activity for individuals, families and wider society. This is, perhaps, the most complex aspect of the stereotype and is less explicit in the literature than the other factors have are considered. As might be expected, traditionally, allotments have been acknowledged to be important for working class families, and to some extent communities, in economic terms. However, they have also

been believed to have a moral value by those who promoted allotments as a means of controlling workers and avoiding social unrest. However, allotments may be important for individuals, families and society in other ways, beyond the economic and moral considerations, for example, health benefits, opportunities for interaction among family members and relaxation.

From initial contact with allotment holders, it was clear that urban allotments and allotment holders have, in fact, altered considerably over the course of the twentieth century. It is now difficult to talk about the 'typical' allotment holder as more women, members of ethnic minorities, middle class professionals and other non-traditional allotment holders have taken on plots. The way in which allotments are managed has also changed, through the introduction of self-management for example, as have the types of crops grown and the methods of cultivation employed. Perhaps one of the most important developments has been the move from cultivating an allotment to provide economic support for the family, and perhaps the local community, to cultivation motivated, primarily, by leisure interests. This is linked to broader changes in society such as growing affluence and increased leisure time.

## **Sources**

### *Documentary sources*

Although the majority of documentary sources relate to the Black Country, a number of national sources were also identified which deal with allotment holding during the period. As the Black Country is not an area which has, traditionally, had a particularly strong allotment community, these sources contained few local references. However, they were valuable as contextual information and allowed comparisons to be made between the local and national situation in a number of respects. The Colindale newspaper library in London has a selection of magazines and journals relating to allotment holding in the earlier part of the century, for example *The Smallholders' Gazette*<sup>8</sup>, *Allotments and Gardens*<sup>9</sup> and

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<sup>8</sup> No 1-96, new series 1-15 (1925-26); continued as *The Allotment and Smallholders' Gazette* no. 16-123 (1926-27); continued as *Smallholders' Gazette* no 1-3 (1927-28).

the *Food*<sup>9</sup>. These proved extremely useful in scoping the national picture in the early part of the century, for example, they provided reports on contemporary debates, conferences and meetings and highlighted a number of issues and campaigns which were considered important within the allotment community at this time. They do tend to represent allotments in an almost exclusively positive light; their main aim appears to be to promote allotment holding as a worthwhile activity. However, these represented the views of the allotment community at an official, national level and how closely the views expressed in such publications tallied with those of ordinary allotment holders is not known. It is, perhaps, unlikely that the majority of allotment holders were actively engaged in political debates. Although they do contain some practical advice, the majority of articles in these journals would appear to be written for a middle class readership, rather than ordinary working class allotment holders. They promote those aspects of allotment holding that would be likely to appeal to the middle classes, in particular, its role in ensuring social stability. Another telling factor is that allotment holders are frequently referred to as 'they', rather than 'we'.

The Mass Observation archive at the University of Sussex was also visited. Mass Observation has sent regular 'directives' to a panel of self-selected volunteers consisting of open-ended, loosely structured questionnaires designed to encourage volunteers to write at length and in detail. The directive most obviously linked to allotment holding was that issued in spring 1998. This asked volunteers to reflect on their memories of gardening as children; to describe their own garden; to identify how they obtained 'gardening knowledge'; and to comment on gardening and the environment. Another directive which offered the potential for volunteers to write about allotment holding was that for autumn 1988 on regular pastimes. These national responses provided some support for the conclusions reached from local sources in terms of motivation for allotment holding and the declining popularity of allotments towards the end of the century. However, there are a number of problems with Mass Observation data

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<sup>9</sup> New series Vol 2 (1918-26); previously *Vacant Lots and the Allotment Holder* Vol 1 (1916-17).

<sup>10</sup> Vols 1-5 (1917-19); continued as *The Smallholding and Allotment* new series Vols 1-5 (1919-22); continued as *Small Holding* Vols 5-6 (1922); continued as *The Holding, Poultry Run, Garden and Allotment* new series Vol 1, 1-27 (1923); continued as *The Little Farm* new series Vol 1, 1-26 (1923-24).

for this study. Mass Observation volunteers are not representative of the general population in a number of ways: women outnumber men by a ratio of 3:1; ethnic minorities are under-represented; the majority of volunteers come from the higher end of the social scale; and there is a bias towards the South of England. It would, therefore, be expected that the sample would contain few stereotypical allotment holders<sup>11</sup>.

A variety of documents offering primary evidence directly relating to allotment holding in the Black Country throughout the period were identified. The majority of these were located in the local studies centres in Walsall, Wolverhampton and Dudley. Allotments Officers at each of the three councils were contacted and asked to supply details of any relevant records they held and suggest potential contacts. Dudley and Walsall provided details of the current level of allotment provision<sup>12</sup> and Dudley also supplied allotment society contacts. In the main, however, the councils said they held few relevant records; those which were publicly accessible had been passed on to the relevant local studies centre.

For each borough, the most important sources were committee minutes for Allotments and Smallholdings or similar committees. The type of information contained in these was very wide ranging and included: grievances about fellow allotment holders; complaints from local residents; reports of meetings to ascertain the opinion of allotment holders on issues such as the purchase of new allotment land; details of rent collection arrangements; reports of pilfering and vandalism; and threats from developers. The chronological range and level of detail varied between boroughs. The minutes for Walsall are the most

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<sup>11</sup> For a discussion of the uses made of Mass Observation data and its limitations see: Sheridan, Dorothy (1996), "Damned anecdotes and dangerous confabulations: Mass Observation as life history," *Mass Observation Archive Occasional Paper 7*, Brighton: University of Sussex.

University of Sussex (2001), *Mass Observation Archive website*, available at <http://www.sussex.ac.uk/library/massobs/index.html>

Bloome, D., Sheridan, D. & Street, B. (1994), "Reading Mass-Observation writing: theoretical and methodological issues in researching the Mass-Observation Archive", in *Auto/Biography* (Bulletin of the BSA Auto/Biography group), Spring issue.

Bloome, D., Sheridan, D. & Street, B. (1993) "Reading Mass-Observation writing: theoretical and methodological issues in researching the Archive", *M-OA Occasional Paper 1*, Brighton: University of Sussex Library.

<sup>12</sup> Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council (1997), *Allotment Sites in Walsall*, Walsall: Walsall Metropolitan Borough Council and Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council (2002), *Allotments Survey Update 2001*, Dudley: Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council.

comprehensive, running from the late nineteenth century to the 1980s<sup>13</sup>. They are also extremely detailed, especially for the earlier years of the twentieth century. The earliest committee minutes for Wolverhampton are missing from the archives, but they run from the early 1920s until the 1980s and are also very detailed<sup>14</sup>. The records for Dudley are slightly less complete, being patchy after the early 1950s<sup>15</sup>. Nevertheless, these are particularly useful because they include a number of documents which the council received from central government, such as Ministry of Food directives, and indicate how such directives were interpreted locally, helping to explain many of the committee's decisions and priorities. Minute books are, therefore, important sources and have the advantage that they were agreed by the whole committee to be an accurate record of discussions held and agreements reached. However, they only present the official council perspective; the views of allotment holders feature extremely rarely. In addition, the entries are brief; there is little indication of debates and the discussion of ideas. The degree of detail varied considerably; in general, entries became terser later in the century. The items discussed by the committee would be those which were important to the council, rather than those of prime importance to allotment holders. These sources, therefore, contain little information about some of the main themes of this study, for example, the motivation of allotment holders, their methods of cultivation and the importance they attached to their plots.

Allotment registers survive for Walsall from the 1920s<sup>16</sup> and these proved useful in order to map the residence of allotment holders in relation to their plots and to ascertain the number of plots worked by a single household. The use of these records is limited by two factors. As similar records were not available for Wolverhampton or Dudley, it was not possible to compare the situation across the Black Country. Additionally, the fact that registers were only available in

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<sup>13</sup> Walsall Borough Council, Allotments Committee Minutes 1892-1982, Ref: 352/106/107, 237-9.

<sup>14</sup> Wolverhampton Borough Council, Smallholding and Allotments Committee Minute Books 1920-1976, Ref: CMB-WOL-C-SHA(2-10) and Wolverhampton Borough Council, Public Works & Highways Committee (Allotments Sub-committee), Ref: CMB-WOL-C-PW.

<sup>15</sup> Borough of Dudley and Dudley County Borough, Allotment Committee Minutes Dec 1916-Jan 1940, Apr 1940-Mar 1960, June 1960-Mar 1971 Ref: 3/1-3; Borough of Dudley and Dudley County Borough, Estates and Cemeteries Committee Minutes, October 1971-Mar 1974, Ref: 26/2.

<sup>16</sup> Walsall Borough Council, Registers of allotments c. 1923-40, Ref: 408/19, 20.

Walsall for the 1920s meant it was not possible to determine how these patterns changed throughout the century. A few local allotment associations, such as Palfrey & Delves and Dudley & District, have deposited their records in the local archive centre<sup>17</sup>. These include items such as minute books, rules and objects of association, lists of prizewinners and rent books. These are usually, but not always, dated. These provide further detail regarding the management of sites and the characteristics of allotment holders. These records tend to be more detailed and provide information at a more local level than the council records. It was sometimes possible to cross-reference items in the association minutes with items discussed by the council. Individual allotment holders appear more frequently in these records and they provide a better indication of the issues which were important to a group of allotment holders rather than council officials. However, like the council minutes, these are brief and rarely give a full indication of the discussion which surrounded each issue.

All the local archives hold copies of maps and plans showing the location of allotments and, in a few cases, the layout of sites. Most of these were produced by the local authority at times when they were involved in town planning exercises and they occasionally include details such as the number of vacancies. There are also more general maps such as those in trade directories which show the location of allotment sites, indicating the spread of allotments at various points in time. These records allow the size and layout of allotments to be determined as well as their distribution across the borough and their location in relation to other types of land use. One difficulty is that production of maps was not spread evenly throughout the twentieth century; they were found in the greatest numbers for the late 1920s and early 1930s, 1950s and 1970s onwards. Unfortunately, their production rarely correspond with the dates of other sources such as allotment registers, so they are of limited use in comparing information from different types of sources.

Local newspapers, the *Express and Star*, *Wolverhampton Chronicle* and *Walsall Observer*, were searched for references to allotment activity. The approach

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<sup>17</sup> Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association records, 1916-2000 (unaccessioned)

taken was to sample the newspapers every ten years from 1914<sup>18</sup>. With the exception of regular gardening columns and annual reports of allotment shows, this exercise did not prove particularly fruitful. However, all three archives had cuttings folders devoted to allotment holding and similar issues and these resources furnished further examples of allotment coverage in the local press. In addition, for recent years online editions of these local newspapers were searched for references to allotment activities<sup>19</sup>. Furthermore, it was occasionally possible to follow up references from other documentary sources, such as council minutes or from oral testimony, to find related newspaper articles. The combination of a small systematic sample together with the identification of pertinent articles via other sources resulted in an adequate, if imperfect, exploration of newspaper coverage of allotments and allotment holding in the Black Country.

The majority of reports to be found in the local press relate to allotment shows and competitions and instances of vandalism and other forms of crime on allotments. There were also some reports relating to threats from developers and problems relating to self-management. Newspapers proved to be useful sources because they often include interviews with allotment holders. Although these are usually brief, they do allow allotment holders' voices to be heard. In addition, there are often also interviews with other actors in particular debates, making it possible to compare the opinions of allotment holders with other groups in the local community. This also gives an indication of those issues which were of wider interest beyond the allotment community. However, as is indicated in the previous section outlining allotment stereotypes, journalists may have a tendency to promote and elaborate stereotypes when writing about allotment holders and this needs to be taken into account when using these sources. In addition, newspapers may be likely to emphasise the more controversial or dramatic aspects of issues in order to appeal to a broad readership. So, where possible, reports need to be cross-referenced with other sources to ensure they are not exaggerated.

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<sup>18</sup> This meant that in total 10 years (out of a possible 86) were searched (ie just over one-tenth). In the case of the *Wolverhampton Chronicle* 1930, 1947 and 1985 were searched rather than 1934, 1944 and 1984 due to gaps in coverage.

<sup>19</sup> The *Express and Star* and *Chronicle* online archives date from 2002. The *Walsall Observer* website covers the current year.

A number of other sources<sup>20</sup> are also available in local archives. These include show programmes indicating the types of crops grown at certain dates. There are also photographs; these are rarely dated accurately and many are obviously posed for newspaper photographers or other purposes. There are few photographs in record offices which show allotment holders engaged in everyday activities on allotments, but individual allotment holders who were interviewed did have some photographs of this type. The appearance of allotment holders, even in posed photographs, indicate the characteristics of typical allotment holders, such as age and class for broad time periods to which the photographs can be dated. Many were taken on allotment sites, so they show the appearance of sites, something which is especially difficult to determine from written sources.

Record offices hold some scrapbooks and copies of magazines such as the National Vegetable Society newsletter. Individual allotment holders who were interviewed also provided examples of this type of ephemera. In addition, trade directories for each of the boroughs, such as *Walsall Red Book* and *Blockridge's Illustrated Dudley Almanac*, provide very basic details of allotment associations. Local archives also hold copies of local authority planning documents which contain references to allotments. The extent of such sources varies considerably between the three authorities. One of the most detailed is Wolverhampton's 1952 report of the Town Planning Committee which sets out the land use problems facing the borough and recommends future developments. It is important to consider the purpose of these documents. For example, the 1952 report by Wolverhampton Town Planning Committee was intended to plan for the expected increase in the number of houses required in the borough over the next twenty years. While this report also referred to a lack of open space, its main priority was to identify suitable land for housing development.

To follow up references found in the documentary evidence, a number of local companies were contacted<sup>21</sup>. Some did not either keep, or allow access to, archives, but Bass Breweries agreed to make relevant records available. These

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<sup>20</sup> The majority of these sources were not accessioned and/or catalogued, but were produced by archive staff in response to the author's request for information about local allotments.

<sup>21</sup> Bass Breweries, Goodyear Tyres, TI Group (bought out Bolton Paul Aircraft), and Courtaulds Textiles.

included maps of the allotment site it owned in the 1940s and records relating to sale of the land and subsequent relocation of allotment holders. In some cases, it was possible to cross-reference correspondence in the Bass archive with letters referred to in Wolverhampton council records. Another important allotment provider in the area was the Society of Friends. A Quaker whose parents had been actively involved in allotment provision in Wolverhampton was interviewed and offered further documentary sources. Wolverhampton archives holds the minutes for the local Society of Friends and these include references to the group's activities in local allotment provision. However, these are not released for forty years so it was only possible to examine records dating from 1964 and before. When using both these sets of records, each organisation's agenda and the reasons why it was interested in allotments needed to be taken into account. The work of the local Society of Friends would obviously be influenced by the beliefs and policies of the Quakers nationally. These records, like the council minutes, relate the views of organisations which provide allotments rather than those of allotment holders.

A range of primary documentary sources was examined. It is fortunate that these are, generally, fuller and more complete for the earlier part of the century as they are often the only sources available for this period. While the documentary sources have a number of advantages, the fact that they were usually written shortly after the event they describe and minutes were agreed by a group for instance, they were not sufficient on their own for this particular study. There were very few instances of allotment holders themselves presenting their views. Without this, it is not possible to consider allotment holders' motivations, personal characteristics, individual cultivation techniques or the importance they attached to their plots, all of which are key considerations of this thesis. Even when such concerns do appear in documentary sources, they are not examined in sufficient depth. This makes the oral evidence collected for this study extremely valuable.

### *Oral evidence*

The majority of oral history work has concentrated on recording memories of everyday life and giving a voice to individuals and groups who are marginalised

in written historical sources. Thompson emphasises the shift in focus from the history of 'leaders' to that of ordinary people which could be facilitated through oral history. He argues that oral evidence can open up new areas of enquiry and bring recognition to groups which have previously been ignored, such as women, the working class and ethnic minorities. He states that: "Oral evidence, by transforming the 'objects' of study into 'subjects', makes for a history which is not just richer, more vivid and heartrending, but truer" (Thompson, 1978: 90). While the documentary sources to be found in local archives provide the official view of the development of allotments in the Black Country, the views of allotment holders themselves are rarely to be found in these sources. One of the key advantages of using oral evidence in this research is that it allows the opinions of allotment holders themselves to be heard.

In his overview of the development of oral history, Grele points out that while the technique has publicly been greeted with enthusiasm, it has been criticised in private by many historians. Common criticisms include the accuracy of memory and an insufficiently rigorous methodological underpinning. It has been argued that oral history is a "movement without an aim" due to the "sad condition of our theoretical knowledge about oral history and the lack of serious efforts to think through exactly what an oral interview is or should be, how it is to be analysed, or for what purposes" (Grele, 1985: 42).

A question which is a key concern in the field of oral history is: how reliable is oral evidence compared with other, more traditional sources of historical evidence? Does the fallibility of memory lessen the worth of oral evidence? Problems identified by Perks (1995) include: forgetfulness; a person's memory playing tricks, for instance telescoping or changing the order of events; subconsciously repressing memories; or artificially highlighting their own role. In addition, he claims that the dynamics and atmosphere of the interview can influence the results, as can the researcher's selection and interpretation of the information.

As Perks states, "Memory is a mixture of fact and opinion" (Perks, 1995: 13). However, this does not necessarily make the information less valid. According to Porrelli (1985), oral history frequently tells the historian less about events themselves than about their meaning to the individuals involved. This is important in considering factors such as the motivation for, and importance of, an activity such as allotment holding. Perks claims that "Oral sources are credible, but with a different credibility; even "wrong' statements are still psychologically 'true'" (Perks, 1995: 68).

Humphries (1984) suggests two methods which can be used to validate the information obtained. The first, he terms 'internal consistency', that is, whether the evidence provided by one interviewee is supported by that of others. The second method is to cross-reference with other sources; these might be printed materials or publicly available interviews conducted by other researchers. As Ritchie (1995) has pointed out, difficulties remembering names and dates can normally be dealt with fairly easily by consulting contemporary written sources. This can be difficult in this study given the lack of previous research into allotment holding, but the extensive records in local archives make the cross-referencing of local details possible.

Perks (1995) claims that the most drastic transformations of events in a person's memory take place immediately after an experience, when events are initially shaped and organised by the individual. In a life review, when a person comes to re-evaluate events of earlier years he argues that memories, rather than becoming more unreliable and confused, actually become clearer and franker. Similarly, Ritchie (1995) argues that the passage of time enables people to make sense of earlier events and may mean that actions they previously considered insignificant may take on a new meaning. According to Perks (1995), repeat patterns are remembered better than single events; this is significant for the investigation of regular activities such as allotment cultivation.

As Thompson states, "Accurate memory is much more likely when it meets a social interest and need" (Thompson, 1978: 103). This suggests that when people are recalling information about something in which they have a genuine interest, such as allotment holding, they are more likely to recall correctly and

also to remember specific details. The same is true if the interview concerns a subject which the interviewee is especially proud of, again, this would apply to allotment holders, particularly those who are interested in showing and competitions.

It would seem that few of the objections raised in relation to oral evidence are unique to this source. As with any type of evidence, the historian needs to be aware of the purpose behind its original creation and to take account of how this may affect the reliability of the source. All forms of evidence have their own pitfalls and none could realistically be argued to be completely impartial. To give a few examples, newspapers are likely to reflect the bias of the journalist or newspaper owner; letters will have been written with a particular recipient in mind; and photographs are often 'staged'. In many cases written documents were produced some time after the events they describe and were often written by non-participants. In fact, many written sources are based on information given in interviews, including many local and national government sources.

One caveat when using oral evidence is that the historian needs to be aware of changes in social values and norms which have occurred over time, as these may, unconsciously, alter interviewees' perceptions. Oral evidence is often criticised because people are not able to distinguish between their current views and those held in the past (Lummis, 1985). The interviewer also needs to be aware that their own age, gender, social class or ethnic origin, in relation to that of the interviewee, may affect responses.

Despite its problems, oral history does have a number of advantages. The historian can question the interviewee and ask them to clarify or expand on certain points. As Grele points out, the oral historian can return to their source at a later date to explore the "varieties of historical vision" gained from a number of interviews in greater detail (Grelle, 1985: 46). For this reason, an oral history interview could be argued to be more reliable than information gained from a published autobiography. Another advantage of the oral history interview is that the interviewee can be reassured that the information they give is confidential; their name will not be linked to any quotes or other details which are published; they may, therefore, be likely to give more truthful responses than might

otherwise be the case. In addition, Thompson (1978) points out that the interviewee may not feel that things worth writing down are more likely to be expressed during an interview.

The fact that interviews are clearly constructed by the active intervention of the historian brings its own problems; the focus of the research and the historian's own preconceptions are likely to influence the structure of the interview in terms of the questions asked, and which topics are explored in detail and which are glossed over. Porrelli (1985) agrees that the historian controls the discourse by deciding who to interview; what questions to ask; the way they react to the answers; and the analysis of the interview. However, this concern is equally true for other historical sources. The historian decides which sources to consult; what details he or she considers to be relevant and so forth.

As Thompson (1978) points out oral history is particularly useful for the investigation of activities which rarely leave written records, such as the history of the family, not just in terms of its internal relationships, but also to discover more about external relationships between the family and the 'outside world' of the community. Other common uses for oral history are to discover more about informal organisations, leisure activities and patterns of everyday life. Oral history can also provide personal experiences to back up generalised comments.

Oral evidence may also be used to fill in gaps in documentation or to support written evidence. As Perks (1995) points out, even when written sources exist, they may not be accessible because they are subject to restricted access for a certain number of years or are missing for some reason. In this study, for example, the records of most local allotment societies had either been lost or were not publicly available. While detailed records of local allotment activity were kept in the earlier years of the twentieth century, in the post-war years, these became more minimal, especially when the allotment committee merged with a larger committee such as environment or planning.

This suggests that oral history is an appropriate technique to investigate allotment holding in the twentieth century. The information regarding the motives for allotment holding and the importance of allotment activity for

allotment holders, their families and the wider community cannot be gleaned from written documents alone. Much of the information is expected to relate to patterns of everyday family life, in particular, the household economy; the division of household chores; and leisure activities. Informal organisations and relationships within the local community also clearly play a key role in allotment holding. Previous researchers who have used this technique to investigate allotment holding include Roberts (1995) who considered the role of allotments in family relationships and household management; Badger (2002) who focused on working class self-provisioning; and Kay (1988), one of the few researchers to look at allotment cultivation.

As Grele (1985) suggests, historians can learn much about interview techniques from other disciplines and can adopt analytical tools developed by anthropologists and linguists. However, there are important differences, for instance, in contrast to oral history, social science interviews are often not recorded. While some historians favour detailed questionnaires which can be cross-checked and used for comparative analysis, others aim to avoid too rigid a structure which may cut off interesting, but unforeseen, avenues which occur naturally during the interview process. Perks (1995) suggests using a questionnaire as a "memory jogger" and to establish a clear chronological framework to guide the interview, as people tend to recall chronologically (Ritchie, 1995). However, as Counce (1994) suggests, the interviewer needs to be prepared to alter the order of the questions as necessary. The approach taken for this research was to draw up a semi-structured questionnaire, but not to follow it rigidly. It was used as a checklist to ensure that the same themes were covered in each interview rather than a strict schedule. One approach suggested by Thompson (1978) is to begin with a freer form of interview in order to explore a variety of responses which can be followed up with a more standardised survey. However, it was decided not to take this approach because, although pre-interview meetings can help to put interviewees at ease, they can mean that the actual interview itself is less spontaneous and crucial information may not be repeated. (A copy of the interview schedule can be found in appendix B and profiles of interviewees are given in appendix A.)

Group interviews are another possibility; they may bring out conflicts in tradition or recall of particular events as well as stimulating memories. However, overall, they are likely to give a less detailed individual picture. Perks (1995) suggests that a one-to-one interview encourages greater honesty and more trustful responses. It was, therefore, decided to interview allotment holders individually, although in a few cases, couples who worked an allotment together took part in a joint interview. The location where the interview takes place is important. It should be a place where the interviewee is comfortable, such as their home, and at a time when the interview is unlikely to be interrupted. The majority of interviews were conducted in the allotment holder's home, although others took place on their allotment site.

Videotaping interviews allows the interviewee's records facial expressions, gestures, mannerisms, dress and environment to be taken into account as well as the content, language and vocal expressions which are recorded on an audio tape of the interview. However, this may be intimidating for some interviewees. Some people were even wary of their voices being recorded. For the two interviewees who did not wish to be recorded, notes were made during the interview. A further allotment holder who was too ill to be interviewed provided a written account of the history of his site. As well as oral evidence, some allotment holders provided additional documentary sources such as maps of sites, show programmes and lists of prize winners.

As Porrelli (1985) points out, transcription changes aural objects into visual ones, implying changes in interpretation even if this is just in the tone, volume, speed, length of pauses and so forth set out through punctuation. Samuel too claims that, "The spoken word can be easily mutilated when it is taken down in writing and transferred to the printed page" simply through the imposition of grammatical forms or rearranging the text. He considers it essential to "preserve the texture of the speech...to convey in words the quality of the original speech" (Samuel, 1985: 391) rather than the historian imposing his or her own order of speech on interviewees. Some oral historians take a particular interest in the linguistic, grammatical and literary structure of testimonies and in the interactions between the interviewer and the interviewee. However, this

approach was not felt to be appropriate for this particular study so these issues were less relevant.

Humphries (1984) stresses the need to ensure that the participants selected represent a broad cross-section. Similarly, Lummis (1985) reflects on the need to consider the degree to which the individual experience described in an interview is typical of others in a similar situation at that particular time and place. However, as Tosh (2000) has pointed out, not only does restricting the research to a localised area mean that references can be crosschecked more easily, but it also means that all those who are willing and able can be canvassed, making for as comprehensive a study as is practically possible. It was intended to conduct a total of thirty interviews, identifying approximately ten interviewees from each of the three industrial centres studied. These were contacted through local allotment societies such as Wolverhampton Leisure Gardens' Association, Walsall and District Mutual Gardeners, Coseley Allotment and Smallholders' Co-operative Society Limited. To make contact with a wider range of people, including those who had held allotments in the past, letters were published in local newspapers (*The Express and Star*, *Walsall Chronicle*, *Dudley Chronicle* and *Wolverhampton Chronicle*) asking for participants. In total thirty-one face-to-face interviews were carried out, ten with allotment holders from Dudley, nine from Wolverhampton and twelve from Walsall. At four of these interviews, there were two allotment holders present, in two cases this was a husband and wife 'team'. In other cases, allotment holders' wives were present at interviews and offered occasional comments about the wider impacts of allotments on the household. A further two telephone interviews were carried out with people who had more limited knowledge of allotments, for example, they could remember members of their family owning allotments. Therefore, the total number of people playing a major role in interviews was thirty-seven.

A justified criticism of the methodology would be that the sample is clearly limited in a number of ways. This research appeared to attract those more 'traditional' allotment holders who had a personal interest in recording the history of allotment holding. Just three allotment holders were female; all the interviewees were white; all were over fifty; and all except one were born in the West Midlands. Within such a small sample, it is not possible to be

representative of the whole allotment community and how accurately this reflects the make up of allotment holders across the Black Country is unknown. Interviewees' comments suggest that it is the lack of involvement from ethnic minorities which is most likely to make this sample atypical of the allotment community as a whole. However, despite these shortcomings, the interviewees were a diverse group in terms of a number of important factors including occupation (or previous occupation); length of time they had held an allotment; and family involvement in allotment holding.

In order to identify potential interviewees, it was decided to use the general methods of contact described above rather than targeting specific groups as the latter approach would imply assumptions about the socio-economic make up of a typical allotment community. Although it may have been possible to obtain a wider spread of interviewees, a more diverse ethnic mix for example, by involving community groups, there is little existing research about the composition of the allotment community so it is not possible at this time to determine whether a sample obtained in this way would be representative of the overall composition of the allotment community.

In general, people were happy to talk about this topic; those who volunteered to be interviewed were enthusiastic and often talked at length, but did not deviate significantly from the issues under consideration. The broad questions on the interview schedule (see appendix B) were covered in all interviews. There were a few obvious examples of rehearsed stories which, it might be suspected, were exaggerated through retelling. Where this did occur, in the main, they related to contentious incidents at allotment shows. However, as most of the discussion related to day-to-day activities which took place on allotments, this was not a significant problem in this research.

It was difficult to corroborate the evidence provided by each interviewee because they were relating unique experiences. However, in a small number of instances more than one allotment holder from the same site was interviewed and some provided newspaper cuttings, medals, photographs, programmes, minutes and other documentary evidence to support their oral testimony. Also, when an allotment holder's spouse was present at interviews, this often proved useful in

several aspects, in particular, in order to examine the importance of the allotment for household food supply and family relationships. With hindsight, it may have been useful to carry out some group interviews in addition to the one-to-one interviews, in particular to look at the community aspects of allotment holding. It was useful in this respect to be able to observe the informal interaction between allotment holders before and after interviews which were carried out on sites.

## **The Black Country: local background**

The three authorities chosen for the focus of this study of urban allotments are the main urban centres of the Black Country in the West Midlands region of England. Although it is inevitable that some comparison between these towns will occur during the course of the study, this is not intended to be the focus of the research. The area studied for each of these towns broadly corresponds to the present local authority boundaries and reflects the coverage of documentation housed in local archives. Restricting the research to a relatively homogenous area could be seen as a flaw in the approach, making the study of limited interest beyond the region. However, the Black Country could be considered to be a fairly typical urban conurbation, as the features outlined below indicate. In addition, the three urban centres vary in a number of ways, for instance, Wolverhampton is the largest town with the greatest diversity in terms of socio-economic characteristics and employment opportunities. Dudley is more rural overall than Walsall or Wolverhampton and includes a number of smaller settlements such as Cradley Heath and Old Hill. Walsall lies between the other two towns in many respects, but it also has unique characteristics, such as a local leather industry.

As this study considers allotments in the Black Country in relation to the people who worked them and the use of the land, the following section briefly describes the characteristics of the region in these respects.

### *Characteristics of Black Country communities*

The population of the Black Country rose rapidly in the early decades of the twentieth century. Although family size in the Black Country did decline in line with national trends from 4.71 in 1921 to 4.22 in 1931, it remained higher than the national average (West Midlands Group on Post-War Reconstruction and Planning, 1948: 97). Between 1931 and 1951, the population of Walsall rose by 11.1%. However, in the following decade, population increase slowed to 3.5%. In 1961, the total population stood at 118,498. The population was greater in Wolverhampton, and it also rose more rapidly between the 1930s and the 1960s, increasing by 17.3% between 1931 and 1951 and 7.3% between 1951 and 1961, when the total population was 150,825 (National Statistics, 1963). During the 1970s, the population of Walsall and Wolverhampton declined by 2% and 6% respectively. However, Dudley continued to expand slowly as the population increased by 2%; by 1981, Dudley was, in fact, larger than Walsall in terms of population, having 187,367 inhabitants compared to 179,293. However, Wolverhampton remained easily the largest of the three towns at 254,561 inhabitants (County Planning Department, 1984). This pattern continued over the next two decades and towards the end of the twentieth century, there was evidence of a declining population in Dudley too (National Statistics, 2003).

According to the stereotype, throughout the twentieth century, allotment holders were most likely to be working class, poor, possibly unemployed, white men. It is, therefore, important to outline the socio-economic characteristics of the three towns being studied throughout the twentieth century to determine whether there was likely to be a significant number of people who met the criteria of a stereotypical allotment holder.

As its name suggests, the Black Country has, traditionally, been an area with a high percentage of the population employed in manufacturing and other types of semi-skilled and unskilled manual work. In 1911, the most commonly listed occupations for Walsall were mining, metal trades and railway work, while in Wolverhampton, railways and the iron and steel industry were the major employers (National Statistics, 1914). However, even at this date, traditional heavy industry was in decline and an expansion in light and medium engineering

had begun. Many of these newer industries were based on the traditional iron smelting and wrought iron manufacture synonymous with the area, for example, nuts and bolt, screw and chain manufacture. These industries, along with the traditional leather industry in Walsall, offered more opportunities for female employment. In the first half of the twentieth century, the proportion of the female population in employment in the Black Country as a whole was slightly above the national average, being higher in the industrial centres of Wolverhampton and Walsall than in Dudley or in the surrounding more rural districts (West Midlands Group on Post-War Reconstruction and Planning, 1948).

By 1931, service sector industries, for example commerce and finance, were accounting for a higher percentage of jobs (HMSO, 1938). In the 1950s and 1960s, the major types of work for men were engineering, labouring, construction and transport, although management and professional posts were growing in number. For women, the most common occupations were clerical work, jobs in the textile industry and the service sector and recreation. However, many women also worked as machine tool operators, press workers, stampers and similar jobs and, in Walsall, they found employment in the leather industry (National Statistics, 1966). In 1961, just over 11% of the economically active population of Walsall and Wolverhampton occupied a managerial or professional position. In Wolverhampton, 14% were in intermediate or junior non-manual or service posts; the figure was slightly less for Walsall at 12%. Four in ten occupied skilled manual posts in Wolverhampton and the figure for Walsall was slightly higher at 47%. The percentage of semi-skilled workers was also slightly greater in Walsall, 19% compared with 16.5% in Wolverhampton and the same was true of unskilled workers, who accounted for 9% of the economically active population of Walsall and 7.2% in Wolverhampton (National Statistics, 1966). By the early 1970s, approximately one-third of workers in the Black Country were still skilled manual workers and a further third were semi-skilled or unskilled (County Planning Department, 1984). Forty-five percent of the population of Walsall was employed in the manufacturing industry (Department of Engineering and Town Planning, 1983). The Black Country has, therefore, remained a largely working class area with high numbers of unskilled and semi-skilled workers throughout the twentieth century.

Unemployment was a problem in the Black Country in the 1930s and again in the late 1970s and early 1980s. In the early 1930s, the unemployment index for Walsall and Wolverhampton was higher than that for the country as a whole. Unemployment remained higher than average in Walsall in every year during the decade except 1936, but from 1934, the figure for Wolverhampton was below that for Great Britain as a whole (Brennan, 1946). In 1931, there were 8,556 people in Walsall who were unemployed (18.7% of economically active men) and 5,248 in Wolverhampton (15.7% of economically active men) (HMSO, 1938). In 1971, the unemployment rate for Walsall was 5.1%; in Wolverhampton it was 5.6% and in Dudley just 3.5%. By 1981, these figures had increased dramatically, to 16.4%, 12.1% and 12.1% respectively (County Planning Department, 1984).

The number of pensioners in the Black Country rose from the 1950s. In 1951, just over 9% of the population in both Walsall and Wolverhampton were aged sixty-five or over (National Statistics, 1954). Ten years later, there were 25,220 pensioners in Walsall, 13.7% of the population; by 1981 the number had increased to 28,234, accounting for 15.7% of the population. The numbers and percentages were almost identical in Dudley. In 1971, there were 27,062 pensioners in Wolverhampton, as a percentage this represented the same proportion of the population as in Walsall. Again, the number of pensioners increased during the 1970s; by 1981, there were 41,792 or 16.4% of the population. In 2001, 7.0% of the population of Walsall was aged 75 or over; the percentage was marginally higher in Dudley, 7.4% and, in Wolverhampton, 7.8% (County Planning Department, 1984; National Statistics, 2003).

Throughout the twentieth century, there have been fewer people from ethnic minorities to be found in Dudley than Walsall or Wolverhampton. In 1971, there were just 3,488 people who had been born in New Commonwealth countries (1.9% of the population of Dudley). This compares with 19,842 in Wolverhampton (7.4% of the population). In 2001, the largest ethnic minority group in Dudley was from Pakistan, but even at this date, they only accounted for 2.0% of the population (National Statistics, 2003). The ethnic minority population was higher in Walsall. Although, in 1951, there were just 1,531 people belonging to ethnic minority groups (1.3% of the total population), by

1961, these groups accounted for 3.1% of the total population of the borough, the largest group being from the Indian subcontinent (National Statistics, 1966). The increase was even more noticeable during the 1960s; by 1971, there were 8,907 people living in Walsall who had been born in New Commonwealth countries (County Planning Department, 1984). The largest ethnic group in 2001 was Indian, accounting for 5.4% of the population; while Pakistanis represented 3.7% (National Statistics, 2003). The ethnic minority communities in Wolverhampton were much larger than in either Walsall or Dudley. As in Walsall, they expanded dramatically during the 1950s. In 1951, there had been just 2,200 people from ethnic minority groups (1.3% of the population), but by 1961, they accounted for 10.3% of the total population of the borough. The largest group were Jamaicans followed by Indians. The range of countries people had originated from was also much wider in Wolverhampton than elsewhere in the Black Country; there were significant numbers from Poland, Italy and Russia for instance (National Statistics, 1966). Indians were the largest ethnic group in Wolverhampton in 2001; they accounted for 12.3% of the total population, with Black Caribbeans being the next largest group accounting for 3.9% (National Statistics, 2003).

#### *Land management in the Black Country*

Unlike the nearby city of Birmingham which, since 1875, has been subject to fairly tight planning control, the Black Country towns have developed as agglomerations of previous settlements; urban development has taken place on a largely piecemeal basis. A number of older, scattered settlements have been incorporated into the urban structure over time. The pattern is one of small industrial centres scattered throughout the area (West Midlands Group on Post-War Reconstruction and Planning, 1948).

Although there is generally little open space to be found in urban areas of the West Midlands, within the Black Country, there has been a significant proportion of wasteland throughout the twentieth century due to subsistence, pit mounds, spoil banks and worked out quarries for example. On occasions, such land has been put to more productive use as allotments. Wolverhampton had the greatest proportion of built up area in the 1950s when two-thirds of the land was

classed as 'built up'. In contrast, 57% of Dudley and just 45% of Walsall was built up at the same date (West Midlands Group on Post-War Reconstruction and Planning, 1948). The main areas of open land in the mid twentieth century were to be found to the west and south of Dudley, surrounding Walsall and between Walsall and Wolverhampton.

There were generally larger factory buildings to be found than was the case in the centre of Birmingham where land was more expensive. Although there is relatively little pattern to industrial development in the Black Country, much of the development has taken place along roads, railways and canals. Housing and industry is often not well segregated. The major housing areas are to be found to the west of Wolverhampton and to the south and east of Walsall. Housing in Dudley is less obviously concentrated, but is spread throughout a number of smaller settlements. Allotment sites are normally located close to concentrated areas of housing.

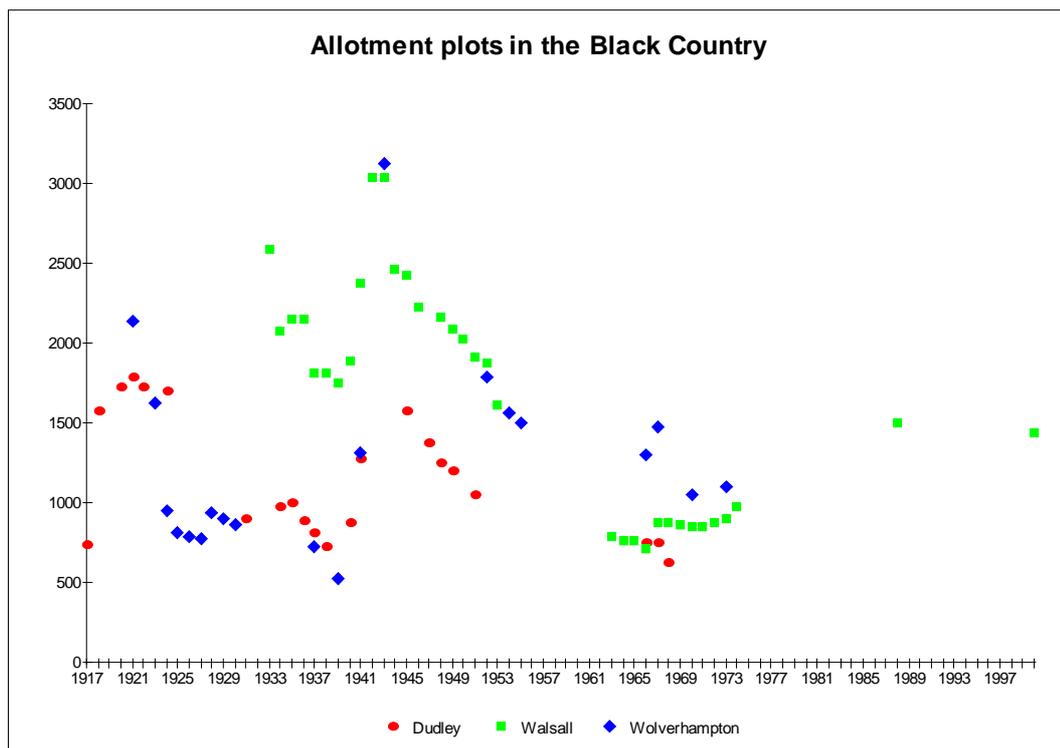
To accommodate the growing population and smaller households, a number of new housing estates were built in the Black Country in the inter-war period. In the following decade, council house provision became more important; an average of five hundred council houses a year were constructed. In addition, private building continued with the development of suburbs. Housing development continued after the Second World War as, in 1945, 4,600 houses in Dudley, 2,600 in Wolverhampton and 4,100 in Walsall were classified as in need of immediate replacement (West Midlands Group on Post-War Reconstruction and Planning, 1948: 91). This activity sometimes competed with existing allotments for land.

#### *Allotment provision in the Black Country*

Looking more specifically at allotment provision, in general, the practice of making small portions of land available to the rural poor was most common in southern counties in the early nineteenth century. Although there were isolated examples of allotment schemes run by wealthy Midlands landowners from the eighteenth century, these tended to be small in scale. Before 1830, allotments were a rarity in the West Midlands. There were, however, exceptions such as

the nailors of North Worcestershire and South Staffordshire who were noted for being keen allotment holders in the 1840s. As the century progressed, allotments became a more noticeable feature of the region. By 1873, there were 5,444 allotment plots, covering 1,116 acres in Staffordshire and by 1887, this had risen to 6,561 plots (Burchardt, 1997: 240-5). Despite the lack of evidence of rural allotments in the Midlands, the region did provide some of the earliest examples of urban allotments: guinea gardens were a noted feature of urban life in Birmingham from the early nineteenth century (Crouch and Ward, 1997; Gaskell, 1980).

There a number of gaps in the data available, but Graph 1 shows the number of plots in each borough throughout the twentieth century for those dates for which figures are available.



*Graph 1: Number of plots in Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton 1917-2000 (sources: Dudley, Walsall and Wolverhampton Committee Minutes)*

In general terms, there was an expansion in allotment provision in the Black Country during the First World War, followed by a slight decline before the popularity of allotments rose again during the Second World War. There was then a second period of decline which, except for a brief resurgence in the late

1960s and 1970s, continued until the end of the century. However, there were variations to this general pattern at both borough, and individual site, level.

The popularity of allotment holding during the First World War is evident from the fact that, in October 1918, only twenty-three of the 1,483 wartime plots in Dudley were vacant. The site with the largest number of vacancies was Buffrey Park, but even here, only fourteen plots were uncultivated (Dudley Committee, 22.10.18). The situation differed somewhat in Walsall. During the earlier years of the war, the demand for allotments was not consistent throughout the borough. For instance, in April 1915, while allotments at Bescot, Reedswood, Ryecroft and Wallow's Lane were all let, there were vacancies at Darlaston Road, Lord Street, Proffitt Street and Raybould's Bridge (Walsall Committee, 16.4.15). Some land taken for war allotments was never in fact used and some sites were withdrawn because they attracted no applicants at all.

Despite the fact that, nationally, vacancies never accounted for more than 6% of available plots in the 1920s and 1930s (Thorpe et al, 1969: 61), locally, the pressure on allotments eased in the early 1920s. In October 1923, there were fifty vacancies in Dudley, but only thirty-one applicants. However only six of the vacant plots were really suitable to meet the applicants' needs, for example, by being in convenient locations (Dudley Committee, 23.10.23). Similarly, the number of vacancies in Wolverhampton rose in the early to mid 1920s. In the early part of the decade, there were forty-three vacant plots in the borough; the largest number being on Claremont Road (Wolverhampton Committee, 23.3.23).

This decline continued, in Walsall at least, during the latter years of the decade. In 1928, there were 372 vacant plots in the borough (Walsall Committee, 24.3.28). However, while in some areas, cultivated plots were being taken over for housing, other sites were given up because it was impossible to find tenants. Similar problems were experienced in Dudley. Although there was a decline in the number of plots available in the late 1930s as sites were developed for other uses, the demand for plots fell even more rapidly, so the number of vacancies in fact rose. Even after the start of the Second World War, difficulties letting all the plots in the borough remained. In April 1940, there were eighty-six vacant allotments in Dudley (Dudley Committee, 16.4.40). Wolverhampton reflected the

national situation more closely; there were very few vacancies in the borough at this time. In January 1933, the only sites with vacant plots were Jones Road (20 vacancies), Nicholls' site on Carter Road and Dunstall Lane (9 vacancies) and Gibbons Road (1 vacancy) (Wolverhampton Committee, 18.1.33).

As can be seen from Table 1, in 1940, there were more allotments in Wolverhampton than in Dudley, but less than in Walsall where there had been greater development during the pre-war years. Sites in Wolverhampton tended to be larger on average than those elsewhere in the Black Country. Based on the mid-point of the 1931 and 1951 census figures, there was one allotment for every 56 inhabitants in Walsall and one per 125 inhabitants in Wolverhampton (National Statistics, 1954).

	Pre war allotments	Wartime allotments	Total allotments	No of sites	Average number of plots per site
Walsall	1795	144	1939	60	32.3
Dudley	728	305	1033	39	26.5
Coventry	430	674	1104	58	18
Wolverhampton	832	369	1201	30	40.0

*Table 1: Number of pre-war and wartime allotments in Black Country boroughs (source: Wolverhampton Committee, 20.3.40)*

Although there were very few vacancies in any of the three boroughs for most of the war period, numbers began to rise in the late 1940s when the gap between the availability of plots and demand widened again. Yet more sites in Dudley were given up, but the number of cultivated plots declined even more rapidly than the number available. By mid 1946, there was a reported, "falling off in demand for allotments" in Wolverhampton too. Very few, or in some cases no, plots were being cultivated on a number of sites by this date (Wolverhampton Committee, 19.6.46). However, in most instances, the number of vacancies per site was fairly low. Only three sites were identified as presenting a real problem: Jones Road (51 vacancies, 38% of the site); Showell Road (60 vacancies, 44%) and Mount Road (18 vacancies, 28%). Some of the unpopular allotment sites were retained simply because the land was not suitable for other purposes.

The number of vacancies in the Black Country is not surprising given that, in 1965, almost 20% of plots were vacant throughout the country (Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998). Continuing to mirror the national picture, the number of vacant plots in Walsall decreased quite noticeably in the early 1970s. This indicates that there was an increase in real terms in the number of allotment holders at this time as the number of available plots was rising while the number of uncultivated plots fell.

However, in the late 1970s, it still proved difficult to let plots on several sites in Dudley. While some remained popular, only ten of the thirty-eight sites owned by the Housing Committee were fully cultivated, and on eighteen sites less than half the plots were dug. A resurgence in interest occurred in the early 1980s. In January 1982, all sites in Dudley were fully occupied except if they suffered from adverse soil conditions and most had waiting lists (Dudley Committee, Jan 1982).

In 1997, the National Survey of Allotments reported that the total area devoted to allotments in the West Midlands was 1,404 acres; 92% of this being given over to statutory allotments. This represents approximately sixteen households per allotment, making allotments more prevalent than in counties such as Greater Manchester and Merseyside, but less common than in many rural counties such as Suffolk and Lincolnshire or areas with a strong tradition of allotment holding like Durham. This survey reported that 15% of plots were vacant nationally. Locally, the situation varied for different boroughs; the figure for Dudley was below the national average at just 11.5%, but in Walsall, it was higher; 19% of allotments were vacant or unworkable (NSALG, 1997).

In summary, the extent and scale of allotment holding in the Black Country during the twentieth century would appear to conform to national patterns in the main. The region is not an area which has traditionally been closely associated with allotment holding; this may be seen as related to the local population's limited involvement in working class activism such as trade unions and Chartism. However, as an urban, industrial centre, it is inevitable that allotments were widespread in the Black Country by the end of the First World War. Although it is misleading to make generalisations, it might be considered to be fairly typical and representative of the national average in terms of allotment provision in

urban conurbations. The development of allotments in the Black Country has been largely overshadowed by Birmingham where they were a stronger feature of urban life. For example, at the outbreak of the Second World War, the city had approximately double the number of permanent allotments that could be found throughout the Black Country (Wolverhampton Committee, 12.7.39) and at the end of the century, Birmingham was the largest British allotment authority (Hyde, 1998). It is hoped that this study will help to redress the balance to some extent, focusing on an area which is close to the national average rather than one seen as a model of allotment provision. The fact that the Black Country might be considered fairly representative of the overall picture of allotment holding means that it is a suitable region to use to investigate the validity of the various aspects of the allotment stereotype which have been identified in the literature.

The characteristics of allotment holders are discussed in chapter 2. This chapter asks whether characteristics such as gender, age, social class and ethnicity have changed over the course of the twentieth century and to what extent these have conformed to the stereotypes of allotment holders outlined above. The following chapter considers allotment holders' motivation for cultivating their plots. The importance of economic, compared to more personal, motivators are explored to determine whether this has changed during the twentieth century in line with developments in the characteristics of allotment holders as might be expected. The appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotments is the subject of chapter 4; this includes a consideration of the type of crops grown, other uses of allotments and methods of cultivation to be found. The ways in which this has changed over time and also how it varies between sites and individuals is examined. This chapter also looks at the management of sites in a more administrative and political sense, considering issues such as self-management and the role of allotment associations. All these issues are related to the prevailing stereotype of allotments as disorganised, but essentially peaceful, places. In chapter 5, the importance of these activities for individuals, families and wider society is considered. Again, the question of whether allotments are important primarily for economic reasons, or whether they also have personal and social importance forms the focus of the investigation.



## 2. Characteristics of allotment holders

The aim of this chapter is to investigate whether the traditional representations of allotment holders accurately reflect the characteristics of those in the Black Country throughout the twentieth century. As was discussed in chapter 1, three distinct stereotypes can be identified from the literature. The first, a working class man with a family to support, was prevalent in the first half of the twentieth century. The second stereotype, an older working class male, emerged after the Second World War. Towards the end of the twentieth century, this image co-existed with a third stereotype of a younger, female, middle class allotment holder with an interest in 'green' issues.

The majority of allotment holders interviewed for this study are clearly representative of the second, dominant, stereotype of a middle aged or elderly male, working class allotment holder. They ranged in age from fifty-four to eighty-six; all were white British and thirty-three out of thirty-seven were male. The majority were from working class backgrounds, although a number could be described as middle class as they or their parents had held professional jobs. However, they were keen to point out that not all allotment holders conformed to the stereotype. A number emphasised the diverse range of people who cultivated allotments:

*We've got a great mix of people here. It is cosmopolitan, there's no doubt about that...but the one thing we have got in common is they all like gardening...councillors...as different as chalk and cheese...Never once do you have them arguing on the site; they may argue in the council chamber, as far as I know, you know, but...on here they don't. And we've got Asian ladies...up here, on their own, just digging away and...we've got a retired vice chancellor from the university up here...until the last election as the MP for the south west constituency, her husband's got a plot (RC-WV).*

This chapter will consider the key characteristics of social class, age and health, gender, ethnicity and other personal or family traits to determine whether the characteristics of Black Country allotment holders have changed in line with the development of the three stereotypes of allotment holders described in the

literature, or whether alternative patterns offer a more accurate reflection of the local allotment community.

### **Social class**

For much of the twentieth century, allotment holding was associated with working class areas and, although most interviewees taking part in this study were aware of a few allotment holders on their sites who held professional or managerial positions such as teachers or lecturers, most were manual or clerical workers. However, according to interviewees, allotment holders had “all sorts of occupations” (AM-WS), a claim which is reflected in the diverse occupations (or previous occupations) of interviewees. To give a few examples, JH-D had been an electrical engineer and then a school laboratory technician; RB-WS had worked in the council rating office; JR-D had been a teacher; LW-D had worked as an engineer and later as a school photographer; and BH-WV worked for a newspaper. Several allotment holders were involved in horticulture through their work as well as it being a leisure interest. LT-D was a retired horticultural wholesaler who had supplied allotments throughout the West Midlands. HM-D worked as a landscape gardener; LM-WS had worked in a council Parks Department; and, although he was now retired, DH-D still did part time gardening jobs.

In the earlier part of the twentieth century, when the first stereotype described in chapter 1 might have been expected to be dominant, allotment holders appeared to conform more closely to the working class stereotype, coming from a narrower range of occupations; the majority were manual workers such as ironcasters, other metal workers and carpenters. Indeed, some sites were only let to particular groups of workers. For example, Walsall Locks and Gears Limited had a site in Wolverhampton Street specifically for their work people. Many of the allotment holders in parts of Dudley and the south Walsall area were railwaymen:

*...it was a lot of railway men because Bescot was a massive terminal junction, goods junction and years ago, railway men worked most oddest hours imaginable. They used to do what they'd call split turns; they'd go on at six o'clock in the morning for about four hours and then they'd be*

*off for two and a half hours, then back on again for another two and a half and they'd finish up working from six in the morning 'til ten at night...Lord Street was quite close to the Bescot Junction, so consequently, it was these railway men that got allotments and when they used to have these hour and a half off a turn, they used to come onto the allotments and do a bit, then, "Oh, I've got to go now and back on again at quarter to two" or something (FPr-WS).*

There were some more unexpected occupations represented however. For instance, a number of allotment holders were members of the police force. This is noticeable in written records because they were often given responsibility for collecting rents, presumably because they were believed to be trustworthy (Walsall Committee, 26.4.15).

There appeared to be some diversification of occupations, and therefore social class, towards the end of the century and this sometimes resulted in disputes between working class and middle class allotment holders. JR-D thought she was resented by working class, male gardeners because she was a professional woman. She complained that some ploholders received preferential treatment as a result of their social status:

*We had a councillor who was a ploholder and he...didn't do his plot, but was never told about it. I mean, one year, he hadn't harvested onions in March. He was given a plot which had just been dug... he was just handed it on a plate!*

In addition to having a manual occupations, the stereotypical allotment holder at the beginning of the twentieth century was expected to be poor, often unemployed, and living in poor housing located in obviously working class areas of towns. In accordance with the development of the stereotype, during the twentieth century, the links between allotments and poverty in the Black Country gradually diminished, especially after the Second World War. The dire financial position of allotment holders in the earlier part of the century is indicated by the fact that significant numbers were unable to pay their rents. According to the council minutes, during the First World War, a number of allotment holders in Walsall were in arrears and the same was true in Wolverhampton in the early

1920s. The scale of the problem is demonstrated by the fact that, in 1924, sixty-six members of Woden Allotment Association were in arrears, owing almost ninety pounds in total (Wolverhampton Committee, 2.7.24). In an attempt to solve this problem, Walsall Borough Treasurer issued cards for rent collectors so allotment holders would be able to pay in small instalments.

However, there is some evidence to suggest that, even as early as the end of the 1920s, some allotment holders had become more affluent; a number owned cars for instance. Nevertheless, many continued to be afflicted by poverty. There was still a problem with allotment holders owing arrears during the Second World War, but there appears to have been a clampdown in the 1950s. In 1950, 240 notices were sent out regarding rent arrears in Wolverhampton and by 1958, there were just two tenants owing money. Although the problem was not completely resolved, it had become a relatively minor issue by the 1960s; there were just twelve allotment holders in arrears in Wolverhampton in 1965 (Wolverhampton Committee, 6.12.65).

Again conforming to the stereotypical allotment holder of pre-war years, unemployment clearly affected allotment holders throughout the Black Country in the 1920s and 1930s. EE-WS's father was an electrician by profession, but he first took an allotment when he was out of work in the 1920s. EE-WS remembered a lot of unemployed people on allotments "because they could make ends meet by tilling the land". From 1933, Dudley was included in the Scheme for the Provision of Allotment Gardens for the Unemployed and during the following year, nineteen people from the Occupational Centre took plots on the Birmingham New Road site (Dudley Committee, 15.5.34). In Wolverhampton there were more than 500 allotment holders on plots created especially for the unemployed in the early 1930s (Wolverhampton Committee, 23.11.34). In 1931, Walsall Committee noted that there were a number of allotment holders who had been unemployed for several years and this meant that losses had been incurred by allotment societies when these members had been unable to afford their rents. The unemployed and partly unemployed were therefore given plots rent free. In 1931, 171 plots were let free to the unemployed and in 1932, this increased to 197 (Walsall Committee, 15.2.33).

Wolverhampton Allotments for the Unemployed Committee was established in 1931 as a result an appeal from the National Friends' Allotments Committee to help organise local groups of allotment holders. The original national scheme was drastically revised to meet local needs, for example, by providing assistance with rent in some cases. By May 1932, the scheme had assisted 270 men in Wolverhampton to obtain seeds, seed potatoes, fertilizer and tools. A further twenty-four had been placed on allotments at a special reduced rent; and eleven existing allotment holders who were in arrears with their rent had been assisted. A year later, the committee had assisted 600 men and a further hundred joined the scheme in the following year. Unemployed allotment holders had their own associations in both Walsall and Wolverhampton. However, there were also attempts to try to make them part of the general allotment community, for example, "genuine unemployed" were allowed to enter the Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association competition for free (Society of Friends Preparative Meetings 1906-60 Minutes).

Although the Society of Friends' national scheme waned with the outbreak of war, work continued in Wolverhampton. The number receiving assistance gradually declined, but there were still 144 applicants for seeds in 1941. The committee continued to meet until the early 1950s, but by this time there was less obvious need for subsidised allotments (Society of Friends Preparative Meetings 1906-60 Minutes). The Society of Friends in Walsall also assisted allotment holders and others unable to cultivate allotments or gardens because they lacked the money for rent, seeds and manure. As in Wolverhampton, a local committee was set up to run the scheme. The Friends made use of 200 to 300 vacant allotments and supplied cheap or free seeds (Walsall Committee, 9.4.29).

As would be expected under the changing pattern of stereotypes outlined, unemployment did not have such a noticeable influence on allotment holders after the Second World War, though a number of interviewees did refer to the high levels of unemployment in the 1980s as a factor in the increased popularity of allotments at this time.

By the end of the twentieth century, it was more difficult to define allotment holding as a predominantly working class activity. The majority of allotment holders interviewed were homeowners, living in fairly large houses and most had extensive gardens. This does not correspond to the traditional stereotype of allotment holding as being associated with working class areas, but it could be argued that by the time they retired, as most of the interviewees had, people were likely to be living in more expensive housing than they had earlier in their lives. Nevertheless, even in the 1920s, some allotment holders in Walsall lived in large houses with substantial gardens attached. Houses in Rowley Street, where a number of allotment holders from Cartbridge Lane lived, tended to be larger semi-detached homes with three or four bedrooms and front and rear gardens. There were thirteen allotment holders in Birmingham Road, where the houses were similar in style. Many of the houses in Borneo Street, where there were at least thirty allotment holders, were Victorian semis with three bedrooms and rear gardens. Although the houses in Lumley Road, where eleven allotment holders lived, were terraced, they were larger than those to be found elsewhere in the town and had small gardens to the front and larger garden area at the rear. It is likely that the residents of all of these streets would be wealthier than residents from other parts of the town and, therefore, did not conform fully to the stereotype of a poor, working class allotment holder (Walsall Borough Council Registers of Allotments, 1923-40).

In other localities, however, it was clear that allotment holders would have nowhere other than their allotment available to grow produce. Houses in Dora Street, where there were twenty-five allotment holders in the early 1920s, were turn of the century two-bedroomed terraces without gardens. Similarly, the houses in Moncrieffe Street, where sixteen allotment holders lived, were small terraces fronting onto the street. The thirty-nine allotment holders in Prince Street occupied two-bedroomed terraced houses with just a small yard at the rear (Walsall Borough Council Registers of Allotments, 1923-40).

In the 1930s, it was argued that the types of houses being constructed would affect the demand for allotments:

*With the developing Housing Estates with the provision of large gardens there has been a falling off in demand for allotments and it is practically impossible to let any plot unless it is with reasonable distance of the man's home* (Wolverhampton Committee, 12.1.37).

For example, in 1935, Wolverhampton Allotments and Smallholdings Committee took over twenty-two allotments at School Lane, Fordhouses, but these proved difficult to let in this marginally more middle class area because "most of the residents in this area have their own gardens and this no doubt accounts for there being no demand" (Wolverhampton Committee, 18.12.35). However, in the 1940s, there remained, "large numbers of houses in the borough which have little or no gardens attached to the houses", indicating potential demand for allotments (Wolverhampton Committee, 28.5.41). In addition, in some cases, homeowners with gardens took on allotments with the intention of extending their land. For instance, in 1940, some of those with gardens in Windsor Avenue abutting the allotments took over plots (Wolverhampton Committee, 20.3.40).

It can, therefore, be seen that the stereotype of a poor, manual worker or unemployed allotment holder living in a working class neighbourhood was, to a large extent, true in the Black Country during the earlier years of the twentieth century, but this began to break down after the Second World War as there was a wider mix of occupations and the links between allotment holding and working class communities became less strong. Belonging to a working class community was a key feature of allotment holding in the earlier years of the twentieth century, conforming to the first stereotype. However, social class was a less noticeable feature of those allotment holders who, broadly, conformed to the second stereotype of elderly male gardeners; those who took on allotments after the Second World War came from a slightly wider social group than might be expected from the literature. Furthermore, there is much more limited evidence of a shift from working class to more noticeably middle class gardeners at the very end of the century than might have been expected from the literature.

### **Age and health**

According to the prevailing stereotype, allotment holders in the second half of the twentieth century were middle-aged or elderly retired men. However, there

is some evidence from the documentary sources that this was actually the case even earlier in the century. Old age pensioners formed a significant proportion of the total number of allotment holders in Walsall during the interwar years. For example, in February 1938, sixty of the allotment holders on Slater's Lane were old age pensioners and there were twenty-three old age pensioners on Darlaston Road (Walsall Committee, Feb 1938).

The age of the allotment community was discussed by most interviewees. In general, they agreed that there were few young people taking on plots:

*...there's not many young people...unless they take their sons down...The majority of people today that have got them have had them say in the 1940s, '50s and '60s, you know, they took them on, but there's not many youngsters take them on (GG-WV).*

*I think the biggest change is the fact that nearly everyone on the site are now old age pensioners, whereas previously, when I started, the vast majority were not; there were just one or two older ones; the majority were working age, but now the situation's reversed, most are retired (AM-WS).*

While acknowledging that there were some young people taking on plots, most interviewees claimed the majority of allotment holders was middle aged or older. They had more time available and was looking for a relaxing hobby to occupy themselves:

*There is a tendency for one or two younger people to come...I mean people think of people with cloth caps, that's gone...I think the majority are 40 plus, the way I view that is, they've reared their family; the children have grown up; they've left home, maybe in the process of leaving home. Suddenly him and her think, "Oh, we've got a bit of spare time on our hands. What we gonna do?" ...And those are the people I think you can see coming towards allotments more so than the younger generation, but that's not to say we don't have younger generation... (AR-WV).*

BH-WV, who was in his 50s, said he was the youngest allotment holder on his site and also at meetings where sites across Wolverhampton were represented. He admitted that, for a time, the image of allotments as something for older people had dissuaded him from taking one on.

In the minds of many interviewees, allotment holding was associated with retirement. DM-D estimated that the average age of allotment holders on his site was sixty. The majority tended to be people in the early years of their retirement, when they had plenty of time, but were not too old or frail to dig an allotment. BM-D had taken a plot on partly in expectation of his retirement and KM-D moved to the site in 1985 when he retired.

The demographic profile of allotment holders concerned a number of interviewees. GW-WS thought that allotments, and in particular allotment societies, were "dying on their feet" because older people were giving up and there were not enough young people prepared to take over. Although a number of allotment holders expressed fears that allotments would die out because of a lack of young people taking on plots, not all thought that this was necessarily a problem. Some of the most active allotment holders on JH-D's site were those who had recently retired; these people had taken on roles such as secretary and chairman of the association because they had the necessary time and skills. BS-D pointed out that it was only to be expected that there were few younger people who were interested in allotments because an interest in gardening and allotments came with age:

*Really it isn't a young person's thing is it, you know? I got no interest in having an allotment when I was twenty...it's only when you're getting a bit older that...you develop these interests...*

AM-WS speculated that younger people were not interested in allotments because of the hard work involved; there were now much easier ways to obtain food for the household. MW-WS agreed that there were very few younger gardeners taking over allotments, perhaps because they did not have sufficient time. BP-D also believed that there were few younger people because other activities competed for their time.

Some allotment holders disagreed with the general consensus however:

*...no not all old people, no there's quite a few young people down here now...At that time, when I first took one on, yes there was a lot of older people, but now... (BS-D).*

LT-D believed that, although young, single people were unlikely to have an allotment, when people got married and settled down they were more prepared to consider taking on a plot:

*When they get settled down and married, begin to have a family...If they're interested...I think that, that's the trend. So, you can say, people in their...twenties, early thirties are the people that sort of do most of the allotmenting. There are quite a few older people who do it of course, who've done it all over their lives.*

On most sites, there were two distinct groups, one of established allotment holders and another of more transitory gardeners. For many people, allotments were a lifelong interest, whereas others only became involved later in life or for short periods. At times, allotment holders were forced to give up their plots for a period, perhaps for health, work or domestic reasons; while some gave up allotment holding permanently, others returned when their circumstances changed:

*I had a twelve-month break whilst I was tidying this place [his house] up because this place had been...vacant for about two years when we moved in (EH-WS).*

JR-D identified "a hard core of people who are more permanent" on her site, but even those eventually moved on or died. When elderly allotment holders had to give up their plots, there was little chance that younger members of their families would want to take them on as may have been the case in the past. A number of interviewees also had relatives who were longstanding allotment gardeners. JH-D's father had been on the allotment for more than fifty years. RB-WS believed his grandfather took on a plot during the First World War and he continued to work his allotment until he died at the age of ninety-two in 1969. FPr-WS was one of several interviewees who thought that the tradition of

allotments and vegetable gardening, which had been passed through earlier generations, was in danger of dying out:

*I think it's the way they're brought up today, because I mean, when we were children you see, our fathers, our grandfathers, they always used to...from the Victorian years, they all sort of dug their gardens, grew their own food, grew some, what they could like, in their back gardens you know...*

Many interviewees had been involved with allotments for a considerable period of time so had, obviously, taken on plots when they were still relatively young. To give a few examples, BA-D and BP-D had both leased allotments for thirty years; LM-WS first took on a plot in 1965; and KM-D had had one for almost fifty years. Some longstanding allotment holders had stayed on the same site throughout, but others had moved, for example, when they moved house or if their site was closed. Others had come to allotment cultivation more recently. BH-WV and BM-D had only taken on plots in the late 1990s. However, for most, this was not their first experience of cultivation. Although PD-WS had only had an allotment for about nine years, like many allotment holders, his interest in gardening predated this; he had been growing vegetables for around twenty-five years.

Ill-health was a problem for older allotment holders. Those who were getting older sometimes went onto a smaller plot because they were not able to manage a full-size one. Alternatively, some older allotment holders had a younger gardener who helped them. Interviewees acknowledged that a reasonable level of fitness was required to maintain an allotment, but a number suffered from health problems which restricted their gardening activities. RB-WS said he was forced to give up his plot because "it was getting a bit too much for me, 'cause I'm afraid I hadn't got the strength". BM-D and DM-D could not do any heavy lifting due to back and heart problems. JR-D also had heart problems so needed help with heavy digging. However, some interviewees were aware of allotment holders who had overcome severe health problems to continue to cultivate their plots:

*There was a man as used to be on Sutton Road....and he had bad heart and the last couple of years before he died he had to dig it on his knees and they made him special tools didn't they? (DPr-WS).*

The stereotype of older people as typical allotment holders after the Second World War, therefore, appears to have largely held true in the Black Country through to the end of the twentieth century. Even before 1939, there were some older allotment holders, although the majority at this time appear to have been of working age; there is evidence of this from the occupational data described above and the links between allotment holding and unemployment. However, one factor in relation to the age of allotment holders which has been overlooked in the literature is the involvement of children in allotments. In fact, encouraging children to develop an interest in allotment holding was seen as important throughout the twentieth century. During the First World War, the Education Committee was asked to grant children a half-day holiday to visit Walsall Annual Show, and to allow older children free entry with their teacher (Walsall Committee, 13.6.17). From the 1920s, there are reports of school children working allotments in Dudley and during the Second World War, schools cultivated plots for those gardeners fighting in Forces. Scholars were given advice on cultivation, including film shows, and taken on visits to a demonstration garden; there was a school allotment competition. In all, during the first five months of the war, 291 school children from Dudley gave their names to the council to say they were willing to assist on allotments. The borough was regarded as a leading authority in this aspect of allotment provision and pictures of Dudley school children featured in a *Dig for Victory* film (Dudley Committee, 18.2.41). Similarly in Walsall, the Education Committee supplied tools, seeds and manure; produce was sold to parents, with any revenue going into the education fund. However, these ventures presented problems. By 1950, many schools in Dudley had to give up their allotments because they proved too difficult to oversee. There were complaints about the lack of supervision of children in gardening classes. However, Dudley council remained keen to encourage schools to cultivate allotments and in 1961 offered tenancies at peppercorn rents to schools. At the end of the 1990s, Groundwork revived this idea in Walsall and further schemes were run by individual sites on an ad hoc basis to encourage children to take an interest in allotments. Children have,

therefore, been active on allotments throughout the twentieth century, but they do not feature in any of the stereotypes of typical allotment holders.

The age profile of Black Country allotment holders would, therefore, appear to conform to the first two stereotypes outlined in broad terms; there was a noticeable shift towards an older allotment community after the Second World War. Allotment holding ceased to be seen as an activity for working men; instead a strong association between allotments and retirement developed. Once again, however, there is little evidence of the emergence of the third stereotypical allotment holder in the Black Country; there is little to suggest that significant numbers of younger people began to take on plots towards the end of the century.

## **Gender**

Although, according to the two earlier stereotypes, allotment holding is perceived as a male dominated activity, even in the early years of the twentieth century this was clearly not always the case. During the First World War, thousands of women worked on allotments; many housewives spent their afternoons involved in horticulture, often helped by schoolchildren. A newspaper article addressed to women urged them:

*...to be patriotic, to keep up with wartime fashion, you must have a plot of ground (Weekly Dispatch, 1918).*

However, in an article from *Allotments and Gardens* published in the same year, it was suggested that women were "shy and uncomfortable" to be seen digging (*Allotments and Gardens*, 1918: 29). In 1916, it was thought to be unacceptable for a woman to be an allotment holder in Walsall. When Mary Billingsley asked to be allowed to take over her uncle's allotment after his death, permission was refused for this reason (Walsall Committee, 23.10.16). However, by 1921, this attitude had softened and a Mrs Thompson was allowed to continue to cultivate her husband's allotment after his death (Walsall Committee, 14.9.21). Records show that, by 1920, there were at least three women with plots on Bentley (West Side), at least two on Gower Street and one on New Mills Street (Walsall Committee). The earliest record of a female allotment holder in Wolverhampton

was in 1924, when Elizabeth Groom was listed among the allotment holders who were in arrears with their rents (Wolverhampton Committee, 2.7.24). Therefore, women were not totally excluded from allotments even during the earlier part of the century.

Four of the thirty-seven allotment holders interviewed were women; this equates to 12%, a figure reasonably close to the national percentage for the 1990s, 15% (Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998). Many interviewees discussed changes in the number of female allotment holders during the time they had held their plots. The general view was that numbers had risen in recent years:

*There's quite a lot of women got allotments down here now. A woman's got this one; you see a lot more women down here now than you used to. Not only men who've got allotments, their wives come and help, but women who, it's their allotment, you know (BP-D).*

Until recently, there had only been one woman on LM-WS's site, but in 2000, another two had taken on plots; both were professionals, one worked at a university and the other was a retired teacher and might, therefore, be considered examples of the most recent stereotypical allotment holder to emerge.

In some cases, it appeared that male interviewees had difficulty recalling details of female allotment holders because this subject was of little interest to them. At first, LC-WV thought there might be slightly more women today than in the past, but he then reflected that, in fact, there had always been significant numbers of women who cultivated allotments. MS-WV said he could not recall any women owning plots when he had an allotment during and just after the Second World War, although he acknowledged that they probably did work on them.

However, the majority agreed that, in the 1950s and 1960s, it was still fairly unusual to find female allotment holders. RB-WS did recall one woman who had a plot on the same site as his grandfather. He remembered her as "a very good gardener" who spent a considerable amount of money on her plot; she was the director of a furniture firm and was believed to be quite wealthy, "quite a well-to-

do woman". Those women who did take on allotments when it was considered to be a fairly unusual hobby for a woman were sometimes seen as slightly eccentric. For example, interviewees remembered women who spent more money than was usual on their plot or worked on the allotment after dark.

Although most interviewees claimed women were welcome on their sites, some appeared to be decidedly hostile towards women. BH(WV) had strong views about the types of people who should be allowed to take on plots, at least on his site:

*They want to give it to a single mother with four or five children, when the mother's over tending to her plants and all her kids are running...it sounds mean, but they don't want the trouble and I don't blame 'em...We don't want eight kids running around when mum's looking after her things and the [association] secretary really has kept the riffraff out of there.*

He was clearly not keen to encourage allotment holders who fitted the newer stereotype more closely than the traditional image of an allotment holder.

JR-D had experienced conflict with the chairman and secretary of her site; she attributed this to the fact that she was a woman. This meant that, instead of the allotment being "a haven", it had become "a hotbed". She felt that some of the more traditional male allotment holders resented her as a professional woman:

*...because you speak differently, and they're not used to assertive women, I had a dreadful time. I had, I didn't realise, but having a new car...I realise now, the tremendous resentment... I don't know what it is about some Black Country men...they just cannot tolerate an intelligent woman. They're used, perhaps, to someone who's not...as positive and as resilient.*

There were no other women on this particular site, except one who cultivated a plot with her husband. Although she did not have problems with the other allotment holders, they were not keen to get involved in a dispute which they did not feel concerned them and there was little sense of camaraderie between JR-D and the male allotment holders:

*...there's a peculiar embarrassment; they don't want to, obviously, get involved because it wasn't directed at them.*

She felt that it was only her stubbornness which made her continue with the allotment.

However, some men were more open towards the idea of female allotment holders. AM-WS thought that those he had come across were, "just as good as the men". GW-WS agreed that there were "some damn good gardens, I mean one in particular, I mean very, very good." There were several women on BA-D's site and, in his estimation, they were "really good gardeners; they did very, very well". FP-WS knew of only a few female allotment holders; he had found they were enthusiastic, but thought there were some aspects of allotment cultivation which they might struggle with:

*They're quite keen actually, they've got a very nice plot...two ladies who come down...they seem quite keen actually...I don't know whether the manual part of it is, might be a bit too much, the digging and things like that. I doubt very much, you'd have to be a pretty robust lady to handle the rotavator...it really needs some handling, but usually there's some bloke who'll just do it over for you, you know, just plough it up...but these two ladies, they seem very keen...*

Similarly, the one or two women on LT-D's site reportedly had problems digging the ground. However, the women on RM-WS's site seemed to want to be independent; many refused help from men on the site when it had been offered. As he noted, they were, in fact, quite able to manage by themselves:

*We have a certain many ladies...they were pretty good you know, but of course, the boyos, they'd always give'em a hand if they wanted anything heavy, but a lot of them, they'd refuse, especially the coloured ladies, they could manage that quite easy.*

Unlike the majority of their male counterparts, most women on this and other sites had half-allotments, which they shared with another woman. Other women worked on their husband's plot or leased one jointly as a couple. Unsurprisingly, women were still in the minority on all the sites where interviewees had plots. However, the ratio of men to women varied considerably between sites. On one,

about one in five of the sixty-five plots were leased by women, while other sites were exclusively male.

It was suggested that there might be variations between male and female allotment holders in terms of the types of crops they grew. Some women tended to grow mainly flowers and salad crops. Men were less likely to admit to growing flowers except to give to their wives; most were more interested in traditional allotment crops which required heavy digging.

Practical constraints also played a part in restricting the number of female allotment holders. LM-WS acknowledged that, although they did try to encourage more women, until there were proper toilet facilities on the site, the numbers were bound to be limited. Other problems were more entrenched and operated at a national level. JR-D felt that the lack of female committee members and officers in the NSALG meant that allotments continued to be viewed as a male-dominated activity.

Therefore, although the stereotype of allotments as a male environment largely remained accurate, there were significant numbers of women who have cultivated allotments not just at the end of the century, but much earlier than might have been expected according to the stereotypes outlined. Indeed, the actual number of female allotment gardeners is hidden because many cultivated a plot held in her husband's name. Although there may have been a noticeable shift nationally in recent years, women are still clearly in the minority on allotment sites in the Black Country and the lack of understanding, and occasionally hostility, many face suggest that allotments sites remain male-dominated places.

## **Ethnicity**

Ethnicity is a less explicit aspect of the established stereotypes of allotment holders than characteristics such as age, class and gender. However, the underlying assumption is that the stereotypical allotment holder is white, linked to the fact that allotment holding is perceived as a traditional 'British' pursuit.

However, this aspect of the stereotype has not been explored in the same depth as the other characteristics.

In the Black Country, the number of allotment holders from ethnic minority groups varied from site to site. Although all the allotment holders interviewed were white British, several commented on the increasing numbers of Asians, Afro-Caribbeans and Eastern Europeans taking on plots over the last few decades:

*In the old days, there were only...English people used to do allotments, but in the '70s and '80s, I think there were quite a few coloured, ethnic people: Indians, Pakistanis used to do the allotments (RB-WS).*

LW-D estimated that six in ten plotters on his site were from ethnic minorities, mainly Indian or West Indian backgrounds. In contrast, there were few ethnic minorities on BP-D's site; he could only name one.

Interviewees noticed distinct differences in the way in which gardeners from ethnic minorities cultivated their plots. For instance, it was noted that in Asian communities, women tended to be more actively involved in growing food:

*...they're families, the wife is there a lot and she's doing her share of work.*

Some also mentioned the fact that gardeners from different ethnic backgrounds tended to grow different types of crops:

*We've had our Asian friends, Caribbean friends here who do a good job, I mean, they'll take anything on and they grow a terrific amount of produce, not the crops that we grow, but they grow...garlic, coriander, red beans and what have you and onions by the score...the Jamaicans, Caribbeans grow a few onions, but not like the Asians, but they're more red beans and pumpkins, I see one allotments...half is pumpkins and half of it is red beans (AR-WV).*

FPr-WS commented that Sikh gardeners on his site tended to grow different crops such as onions, coriander and garlic. According to a number of interviewees, ethnic minority allotment holders not only grew different types of

crops, but also grew them using different methods and also used them differently in cooking. LW-D felt there had been "quite an exchange of ideas":

*...beans, well we eat them in this country and we eat the flesh and everything. They don't; they let them go to seed and then they harvest them like haricot beans and they don't eat the pod, they just eat the beans inside...Then again, they've introduced the chillington hoe as a tool, whereas we used a spade, some of 'em use a chillington hoe...no end of ideas (LW-D)*

*Maybe we're too staid in our ways, you know, what we grow comparative to them...(AR-WV).*

GG-WV noted that, although a Jamaican allotment holder he knew would not use a spade or a fork, "his stuff was just as good as anybody else's". However, a number of interviewees felt that their own way was best and the methods used by allotment holders from ethnic minority communities were inferior to traditional British growing techniques:

*We cannot educate them relevant to onions; they mainly grow sets, both winter and summer and buy kilos of them and they just place them about that far apart all over the allotment. Well the thing is, it's created disease, particularly botrytis, onion rot, because they're that dense, they can't get to them... so they move off that plot, somewhere else up the site you see, and then the same pattern starts forming again you see, so this plot is riddled with botrytis, so you can't educate 'em, saying "Look, space 'em, give 'em enough room". I mean, they keep 'em clean, don't get me wrong, they're on their hands and knees throughout... (AR-WV).*

Possibly as a result of these types of differences in growing methods, FPr-WS thought that allotment holders from ethnic minority groups were less tidy gardeners.

Interviewees also commented on community relations between gardeners of different nationalities. On some sites, different races and nationalities mixed freely. LM-WS said that on his site, there were Indians, Pakistanis, West Indians and Italians. He explained how different nationalities swapped crops. EC-WS had also noticed this:

*...they're a nice crowd and you know, you mix up with 'em alright and you share like; they'll give you some of them and then...like you give 'em some back.*

There were a significant percentage of ethnic minority allotment holders on BA-D's site. Just over one-quarter were of Indian origin and there were also a few West Indians and he felt that all the allotment holders got on well together:

*And I got on very, very well with the coloured people over there, never any problems at all and they all came to the meetings...*

However, in general, it was thought that allotment holders from ethnic minorities were less keen to become involved in the more formal allotment activities such as joining the committee and helping with site improvements. Indeed, many interviewees had noted difficulties or disputes between different ethnic groups. In some cases, there were noticeable divisions between more traditional, or stereotypical, allotment holders and those from ethnic minorities:

*Now you've got four or five of them, they'll all help one another out, but it's not often they help whites and it's not often whites help them, you know (AR-WV).*

In other instances, it was noted that the various ethnic groups on some sites did not get on well with each other:

*The one down the road has got quite a big contingent of Eastern Europeans...they don't get on with one another, oh, terrible they are (AR-WV).*

Although ethnicity is not a particularly strong aspect of the stereotype, the increasing numbers of ethnic minority allotment holders in the Black Country is one of the main ways in which the traditional stereotype has been challenged. This is, perhaps, more significant than changes in the social class and age of allotment holders. This has created problems on some sites because, like female allotment holders, ethnic minorities appear to face a lack of understanding and occasional hostility from those who conform more closely to the traditional stereotype.

## Personal and family characteristics

The more personal characteristics of allotment holders are difficult to discern through written records and, as a rule, they are not considered in the literature. It is, therefore, more difficult to establish a stereotype in this respect. However, many interviewees commented on the characteristics of successful and unsuccessful allotment holders. One of the most common themes was the need to appreciate that cultivating an allotment could be hard work:

*...it can be hard work, but you have to pace yourself you see and some people, they come and have a go...and they dig all the plot over...and then they fade away, they realise, "Oh, this is hard work this is" and when the weeds start to grow... and those are the sort of tedious jobs that people get fed up of doing you see and they think, "Oh, I can't be bothered with this" and that's what happened. You've got to be resilient; gotta keep at it otherwise you just fall by the wayside. There's quite a lot...but most of the chaps are older like myself and they've got the patience to do it...dogged, you've gotta be dogged, don't give up... (GGo-WV).*

JR-D believed that it was fairly obvious soon after someone took on a plot whether they were "the right kind" for allotment holding:

*They come in a frenzied burst and then you don't see them and then it gets longer and longer and you know they're not really keen, they think it's easier than it is.*

LM-WS agreed that qualities such as perseverance and determination were important:

*Always persevere, I mean if you have a failure, you ain't gotta think, "Oh, don't wanna do this again" you know...keep going.*

In BP-D's experience, those allotment holders who had plots for years were very reluctant to give them up; they "physically can't do it before they give it up".

Nationally, some commentators have appeared to believe that certain people were naturally more suited to allotment holding. In 1930, Prime Minister Ramsey Macdonald argued:

*There is a very large section of our people who, like myself for example, have come from the soil in whose blood and bones and heart there is the reminiscence of the soil and who even if at the present moment, we were to take a spade in our hand or get between the stilts of a plough, would within the first half day be able to recall arts and crafts that have been disused, but are waiting very near the surface of our beings to be called into operation and put into use again (Macdonald, 1930: 4).*

Similarly, interviewees suggested that allotment holding was common hobby in some families largely because of tradition:

*It's how they're brought up actually. Like traditionally, you know, I think we take them on through tradition. I think it's how their parents and their grandparents... (FPr-WS).*

Some allotment holders came from families with a professional interest in cultivation. GG-WV's father was a keen gardener who also worked in the horticultural trade:

*Me dad was always interested in gardening. He worked for a nursery before the war...he used to work for a firm called Knight's Nurseries in Claregate...he was always interested in gardening wasn't he me dad was, yes.*

Another interviewee recalled that his father had two greenhouses to grow tomatoes in the summer and chrysanthemums in the winter to sell. This was a small family business; his mother sold the produce on a market stall which she shared with some other women. A number of interviewees related a history of family involvement in allotment holding. One expressed the view, "it's inherited in you if you're self sufficient" (GG-WV) and many other plot holders thought that they had 'inherited' their interest in allotments:

*I've always done horticulture all me life, gardening, me father was, me grandfather was and I was brought up, so I've always grown vegetables (AR-WV).*

The practice of more than one member of a family working an allotment and sharing produce among the extended family was something several interviewees believed had been prevalent during the 1920s and 1930s:

*The money wasn't about, so the only thing they could do was to grow their own vegetables and it probably kept the one family, and the brothers and the children, it was like...a commune sort of thing you know, not just for one family (GG-WV).*

There were a number of examples of members of an extended family owning several plots on a site and working these cooperatively. JH-D told how both his father and his uncle had allotments and they often helped each other, for example, runner beans for both plots were started in his uncle's greenhouse. LT-D said his brother had the plot next to his and, in practice, they worked the two together:

*I've always had an allotment, a full plot you know, and my brother always had one next door to me; he had the next one to me you know, so actually we used to work them both together...there was one in my name and one in my brother's name.*

In a number of cases, more than one member of the same household was an allotment holder in Walsall in the 1920s. For example, the Freeman family at 65 Cecil Street cultivated three plots on Lichfield Road and a further one on Borneo Street; the Jones family who lived at 28 Tong Street cultivated a total of five plots; and the three allotment holders in the Buck family at 43 Wolverhampton Road had plots at Bentley Lane and Naylor's Field (Walsall Borough Council Registers of Allotments, 1923-40).

A few interviewees commented on changes in the attitude of allotment holders which reflected developments in society at large. MS-WV perceived a difference in the degree of formality between allotment holders in the past and those today. He remembered allotment holders addressing each other as "Mr..." and wearing a tie and waistcoat, and even a bowler hat, to garden. RB-WS recalled his grandfather, who had been an allotment holder, as "a true gentleman", who was chivalrous and did not swear.

Other interviewees commented on some of the less appealing characteristics of allotment holders. Several criticised other gardeners for not being prepared to put themselves out to improve conditions for the whole site. They felt that a minority of allotment holders did the majority of work to improve sites:

*We had to work hard to get all those dog roses in; some of them wouldn't put them in and they were principally the people where the break-ins was occurring. What can you do? What can you say? (BA-D).*

JR-D had a particularly low opinion of fellow allotment holders on her site. She thought that many were "penny-pinching", refusing to pay a little more in rent to allow improvements to the site:

*Okay, none of us wants to put more money out than we should, but it means that we can't enjoy things that we might otherwise do. I mean, six pounds for a year, which is very, very paltry for a plot, so that if repairs are needed...the lack of toilet facilities has been very difficult.*

She also felt that many allotment holders were selfish and had an introverted attitude. The description RM-WS gave of allotment holders would make them appear to be suspicious of outsiders and not particularly welcoming:

*You go down Borneo Street now and ask for an allotment you'll get one. They might be a bit funny at first, say they haven't got none, but that's a load of bull that is...the only trouble is, unless you're in the know, they might give you a rough one you know, hasn't been cultivated for a good many years, but it's up to you...*

Having to deal with attitudes like these might well be off-putting to new allotment holders who do not conform to the traditional stereotype.

Although demographic characteristics are important in defining each of the stereotypes outlined in chapter 1, personal and family characteristics are given little consideration in the existing literature. Allotment holders are generally seen as harmless eccentrics. There are a few examples of this from interviews, for instance, allotment holders who worked their plots in the dark, but such individuals were regarded as unusual by fellow allotment holders. Perseverance was regarded as an important shared trait among allotment holders despite the fact it does not form part of the stereotype. Family tradition was also significant

and, although this is linked to social class, it is a theme which has not been fully considered in the existing literature.

## **Conclusions**

If allotment holders in the Black Country were to conform to the stereotypes outlined, it would be expected that a typical allotment holder of the earlier twentieth century would be a working class man with a family; there would then be a shift in the age profile, but not the gender or social class, of allotment holders prior to the emergence of a new type of allotment holder at the end of the century who was more likely to be younger, female and middle class. The first two stereotypes would appear, in broad terms, to be fairly accurate, although there are some slight discrepancies, such as a wider range of occupations than might be expected among allotment holders who otherwise fit the second stereotype. However, there is relatively little evidence that the third stereotype is represented in significant numbers among the Black Country allotment community.

In terms of social class, it would appear that allotment holders have become a slightly more diverse group. However, there is little evidence that significant numbers of middle class gardeners are taking on allotments in the Black Country as is suggested in some of the literature. The majority remain manual workers; professionals are still in the minority. The composition of allotment holders in the Black Country reflects local employment patterns to a large extent. As was the case nationally, allotment holding was common among the unemployed during the 1920s, 1930s and, to some extent, the 1980s. Conforming to the stereotype, the links between allotment holding and poverty have gradually diminished as society generally has become more affluent; this is no longer a defining characteristic of a typical allotment holder.

In the earlier part of the twentieth century, there were a number of younger people who worked allotments to provide for the household. However, the movement towards allotment gardening as a leisure pursuit meant that the age profile of allotment holders rose in the latter half of the twentieth century; the majority of interviewees were in their early years of retirement. It is not

surprising that, like other forms of gardening, this activity is most popular among older generations. Evidence of younger allotment holders returning to allotments towards the end of the century is extremely limited in the Black Country.

Although the number of female allotment holders rose, they were still firmly in the minority. However, the actual number of women involved in allotment holding is hidden. Although few had their own plots, many more worked on those owned by their husband; this has been the case throughout the history of allotment holding. Within the Black Country, the proportion of women varied between sites and women were made more welcome on some sites than others.

A characteristic which changed somewhat is ethnicity. The size of ethnic minority communities in the Black Country grew dramatically from the 1950s and it would appear that significant numbers of Asians and Afro-Caribbeans in particular became interested in allotment holding during this period, although none volunteered to take part in this research. This characteristic has been overlooked in most existing research, perhaps because of similar difficulties engaging ethnic communities. This has meant that this important shift is not awarded the attention it may well deserve and ethnicity does not feature obviously in any of the existing stereotypes.

To a large extent, the main characteristics of Black Country allotment holders conformed to traditional stereotypes throughout the twentieth century. Most sites appeared to consist of two groups: a core of established allotment holders who have held a plot for a number of years, along side a group of more transitory gardeners who come and go, many giving up their plots when they become aware of the work and time commitment involved. The importance of family tradition, another factor which has been overlooked previously, may, in part, explain the slow rate of change in the composition of the allotment community, especially with regard to social class.

This study provides a greater depth of information about allotment holders than is present in much of the literature. In addition, a number of characteristics have been uncovered which are not prominent in the literature. Although these

represent much less obvious aspects of the stereotype, they do indicate the ways in which the composition of the allotment community is changing and diversifying. One example is the type of housing occupied by allotment holders. Although allotment holders might be expected to have small or no gardens, it has been suggested that in the 1920s, in Walsall at least, a number lived in relatively large houses with extensive gardens. A number of less obvious characteristics of allotment holders have also been suggested, including perseverance and insularity. However, given the small scale of this study, it is not possible to say whether these characteristics would be shared by allotment holders nationally as there are few comparable studies.

Throughout the twentieth century, some groups and individuals attempted to widen the appeal of allotments. However, others attempted to keep the allotment community as homogenous as possible. Local associations had a significant degree of control over the choice of the type of people which they thought would make suitable allotment holders. In the 1920s, Palfrey Allotment Holders' Association stipulated that new allotment holders needed to be "recognised as suitable applicants by this association". Those who did not conform to the association's idea of a suitable allotment holder would be denied a plot. Even in the later years of the twentieth century, many allotment holders displayed hostility towards those who do not conform to the stereotype of a typical allotment holder, women or members of ethnic minorities for example. This attitude may, in part, account for the slower than expected emergence of the third stereotype of a young, middle class female allotment holder in the Black Country.



### **3. Motivations for allotment holding**

Chapter 2 examined the stereotypical characteristics of allotment holders. The stereotypes relating to motivation for allotment holding follow naturally on from these, so just as there are three stereotypical allotment holders, there are also three motivational stereotypes.

The first type of allotment holder from the beginning of the twentieth century would have been motivated, primarily, by financial considerations. Traditionally, allotments were taken on by poorer families to supplement the household diet directly or to provide additional income through the sale of produce. This survival mechanism was particularly important at times of heightened need, in response to unemployment for instance. Further, during the First and Second World Wars, the alleviation of national poverty was a motivation for allotment holding. During the latter half of the twentieth century, motivations for allotment holding became more diverse as it was more commonly adopted as a leisure activity rather than a financial necessity. This meant that the second stereotypical allotment holder discussed in chapter 2 was more likely to take on a plot for personal reasons including childhood experiences, competitive instincts and simply a love of gardening. However, perhaps the most pressing motivation for this second type of allotment holder was a desire to escape from the pressures of everyday life: home, family and work. So, rather than being another means of providing for their family, allotments came to be seen as a way for working men to escape, temporarily, from their family obligations. For the most recent stereotypical allotment holder, another range of factors acted as motivators; this individual was more likely to be interested in allotments as a way of expressing political beliefs such as the value of organic food or the need to preserve the environment and encourage biodiversity in urban areas.

This chapter will examine each of these motivating factors, financial, personal and political, in turn to consider whether they have changed over time in the way which might be expected if the stereotypes which were established in chapter 1 hold true or whether, in practice, motivating factors are more complex than can be explained through this schema.

## Economic

According to the first stereotype, prevalent in the earlier part of the twentieth century, allotment provision was traditionally connected with the alleviation of poverty. The most likely times for households to fall into poverty were when children are young and in old age (Scott, 1994:57). Indeed, these were the points when several interviewees said they had taken on an allotment, confirming the stereotype of allotment holding as a means of providing for the household. A number of interviewees said they took an allotment at a time when they needed to provide for a growing family. For instance, LM-WS took on an allotment after his first child was born:

*When the kids came along, you know, I thought, "Well, supplement me income" sort of thing. And I carried on from there...had the allotment to supplement me income and I've been at it ever since.*

GW-WS applied for an allotment shortly after he was married. It was intended to help to provide food for the family. Both these allotment holders had taken on plots in the 1950s or 1960s. However, according to the stereotype, it might be expected that the practice of having an allotment for financial reasons was more relevant in earlier decades of the twentieth century. Indeed, many interviewees argued that, at the end of the twentieth century, there was little financial incentive to cultivate an allotment. For example, LC-WV thought that, while in the past the main motivation for taking on an allotment may have been financial, this was largely irrelevant now:

*...it might have been perhaps for a bit, but it certainly isn't now to save money at all...possible when I first started...there wasn't the money about, but now it's the recreational aspect.*

Nevertheless, a number still referred to the financial benefits of growing their own food. KM-D commented that, it was cheaper to grow his own than to buy vegetables from supermarkets and money was a consideration for BH-WV who explained that he did not bother to grow potatoes on his allotment because they were so cheap to buy.

Urban allotments originally provided labourers, many of whom had moved to towns from the countryside, with an opportunity to supplement low wages and

the traditional stereotype has its roots in this experience. During the First World War, many people took on allotments for the first time because they needed to provide food for their families as the price of vegetables rose more than two-fold and even potatoes became scarce (Marrack, 1942: 186). By 1917, there was a shortage of even basic foodstuffs. Several interviewees commented that food shortages in wartime first motivated them or their relatives to cultivate an allotment. RG-WV related what he had been told by his father about allotment holding during the First World War:

*What happened was there was a desperate need for food and the idea came of course of digging, well grow your own...*

Even when the emergency had passed, economic motivation continued to be significant as economic depression in the 1920s and 1930s motivated some people to take on an allotment. EH-WS was unsure of the reason why his father first took on an allotment, but thought it was likely to be to support the family when food was in short supply:

*I was one of eight children...So in 1937, my parents had three children that were eating, you know what I mean? ...you gotta look after yourself, so that was why I would imagine that my father first started to dig an allotment, to look after his family...for the table mainly...*

When EE-WS's father was out of work in 1920s, he took on an allotment to feed his family. EE-WS recalled that this was a common occurrence at this time:

*In the '20s there was quite a lot of unemployment, there were about three million people on the dole you see and of course, allotments were very, very popular in those days with people who were unemployed or had very mean jobs...I'm talking about the early '20s and that's when people were very poor and did want allotments, you know, for growing vegetables.*

MS-WV thought that, in the past, an allotment was seen as an acceptable way for a man to support the household; it was not beneath his dignity in the way other households chores were considered to be.

Particular efforts were made during the 1930s to encourage people to take on allotments to provide for their families during the depression. In November 1930, the 'Conference on the Subject of the Provision of Allotment Gardens for Unemployed Persons and Persons not in Full Time Employment' resolved that, when deciding on the allocation of allotments, preference should be given to those with the greatest financial need, that is, married men with families to feed. Even amongst those with jobs, allotments were seen as security against unemployment. However, as Wolverhampton Smallholding and Allotments Committee acknowledged:

*It is fully recognised that these allotments cannot be a substitute for full-time employment, but on the other hand, they will provide the means for a substantial alleviation of distress* (Wolverhampton Committee, 18.11.30).

The Society of Friends did much to promote allotment holding and established its own sites, for example, at Merryhill and at Woodhall Road in Wolverhampton. Like its national counterparts, the Society of Friends in the Black Country took action to improve the general appearance of allotment sites, thereby encouraging greater interest in the allotment movement.

During the Second World War, although vegetables were not rationed, locally there were reports of "exorbitant prices demanded for various articles of food particularly vegetables" (Walsall Committee, 1940-41). The fact that prices were not controlled, meant that many people were forced to rely on what they could grow themselves. A number of interviewees confirmed that during the Second World War the main motivation for allotment holding was to grow food for survival. Others felt obliged to contribute to the national effort, including AM-WS who had his first allotment when he was just ten years old. His school took on a number of plots as part of the Dig for Victory campaign and his family had a substantial amount of land, so he also had an allotment at home.

The Dig for Victory campaign encouraged everyone who was able to take on an allotment or grow vegetables in their garden. From the outset, this campaign was most successful in urban areas, "where the potentialities were greatest and where the cessation of imports from pre-war Continental sources was most likely

to be felt" (Ministry of Agriculture, Fisheries and Food, 1950:2). Efforts were made locally, as well as nationally, to extend the popularity of allotment holding. The effort local authorities devoted to publicising allotments depended, to some extent, on the pressure from central government to do so. In a Ministry of Agriculture and Food Circular of August 1940, it was stressed that, "the driving power in the allotment campaign must come from the local authority". The role of the council was "firstly stimulating demand and secondly satisfying it by the provision of land" and also "the creation of a body of local opinion and emulation which will ensure that vegetables are substituted for flowers" (cited in Wolverhampton Committee, 9.8.40). Another circular fifteen months later claimed that, "success in each district depends largely on local initiative and drive" and "intensive local publicity along lines best suited to local circumstances" (cited in Wolverhampton Committee, 12.11.41). The efforts made by individual councils varied, but the pressure from central government persisted. For instance, in a circular letter of October 1941, the Ministry of Agriculture and Food called on authorities to make a special appeal to older children and women to take allotments.

The pool of potential allotment holders expanded beyond the poorest families to those who had not previously felt the need to have an allotment for financial reasons. This was reflected in the methods of advertising. In Walsall, for example, there were advertisements in the press; handbills delivered to all properties by gas and electricity meter readers; and stick-on labels were used by the corporation in their correspondence. Licensed premises and clubs were asked to obtain more allotment holders from among customers. The clergy were also asked to encourage their congregations to consider taking on an allotment. Wives or dependents of allotment holders called up for service who continued to cultivate their plots, as well as pensioners and the unemployed, were exempt from paying rent or paid a reduced amount for their plot. Wolverhampton council also placed advertisements in the local press and posted notices at the Town Hall and at sites with vacant plots. Notices were also exhibited in transport committee vehicles. Dig for Victory propaganda was sent to large factories; films and slides shown in picture houses; posters and leaflets displayed in shops; and horticultural displays arranged by larger stores. The committee became even more inventive as the war progressed. In 1942, allotments were advertised

using a loudspeaker van and a children's slogan campaign was organised. It was thought that some people might be deterred from taking on an allotment because they "do not care to approach the officialdom of the Town Hall". Allotments were advertised in the press in 'gossip' columns, with an allotment holder as a contact rather than a council official. MS-WV recalled attending a talk by the radio gardener, Mr Middleton at Wolverhampton Civic Hall with his father at the start of the Second World War which he believed was sponsored by the government as part of the Dig for Victory campaign. The Hall was "packed with people standing as well as sitting" who were all very enthusiastic. In 1940, Dudley council instigated a "vigorous advertising campaign" consisting of posters and *Dig for Victory* leaflets sent to schools and clubs; sermon notes for clergy; advertisements and editorials in the *Dudley Herald*; advertising slides in cinemas; film shows; and the distribution of Ministry of Agriculture and Food pamphlets. There was, therefore, a noticeable attempt to widen the appeal of allotments beyond the stereotypical allotment holder of the 1920s and 1930s, to encourage those who were not in such dire need to take a plot in order to support the war effort.

Allotments were still clearly making an important contribution to the financial position of some families even at the end of the 1940s. For example, in 1949, a Mr Bennett applied to Wolverhampton Smallholdings and Allotment Committee to be allowed to erect a greenhouse on Goldthorn Hill reservoir site. The committee heard:

*Bennett is seventy-eight years of age – an old age pensioner – and desires to utilise the greenhouse for the production of food to help his financial position (Wolverhampton Committee, 11.10.49).*

The review of the literature indicated that, in the post-war years, rising living standards, reduced financial need and the availability of convenience foods reduced the demand for allotments. The introduction of frozen food meant that vegetables were more readily and cheaply available, making them accessible to even the poorest families. MS-WV, for example, confined himself to his garden from the mid 1950s because "times were not so hard". He associated allotments with the privations of the 1920s and 1930s and with the Second World

War. Allotments seem to have remained tied to their charitable origins in the minds of many older people.

However, even during the latter half of the twentieth century, economic motivators did not disappear completely. In the 1980s, redundancy and business closures were seen as opportunities to fill vacant plots and schemes such as pooling unwanted tools and sharing or swapping surplus seeds were suggested. Like many authorities, Wolverhampton were keen to encourage allotment holding at this time:

*To enable the unemployed to make more constructive use of their enforced leisure time [and] to encourage greater use of the leisure facilities available when 'spare capacity' exists at certain times of the day, at this time, Wolverhampton and Walsall introduce a 50% reduction for the unemployed in addition to that already offered to pensioners (Wolverhampton Committee, 6.1.82).*

Nevertheless, by 1997, it was claimed that less than one-fifth of allotment holders were motivated by the potential to save money (Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998). Several interviewees agreed that, at the end of the twentieth century, few people were interested in allotments because there was no longer the financial incentive which had existed previously.

In the minds of many older people, allotments are still associated with hardship and poverty and, therefore, viewed as something which people would prefer to move on from. The stereotype of allotments as a response to poverty is obviously deep-seated, especially for those who remember allotments from the Second World War. A frequent argument voiced by allotment holders was that greater affluence and the prevalence of supermarkets meant there was now little need for anyone to take on a plot to keep the household supplied with food:

*I mean...we in England don't suffer for shortage of anything do we? It's there, provided. We go to the supermarket; we buy anything at all... (FPr-WS).*

LT-D, too, thought that the wider variety of vegetables now available in supermarkets had contributed to the decline in demand for allotments. This view was supported by a poll in 2002 which found that 77% of people bought most of their fruit and vegetables from supermarkets (MORI, 2002). In HM-D's view, "supermarkets have killed gardens", but although they made life easier and the food was cheaper, it was "not necessarily better". Several interviewees thought that people were now more inclined to buy food rather than grow it simply because they had more money:

*I suppose they've got so much money now, they can go out and...all this lovely stuff that's in the supermarkets from all over the world, they can go and buy it can't they? They've lost interest in growing their own* (MW-D).

A number of interviewees linked the decline in allotment holding to the introduction of state benefits. BA-D thought that an increasingly reliance on state benefits meant that people were less likely to be interested in taking on an allotment as a means of self-sufficiency. Even in 2000, however, for some allotment holders, the aim of being at least partially self-sufficient was still an important motivation for having an allotment<sup>22</sup>.

One advantage of allotment holding was that, for those with little spare money, it remained an inexpensive hobby to start; little financial outlay was required. A number of interviewees felt that the low cost of renting an allotment was an attraction. The rents on JH-D's site were set at ten pounds per year and he argued, "we don't want to charge more because we want more people to come". LW-D agreed that rents were very reasonable and could not understand why this did not encourage more people to take on an allotment:

*I wish that there was a way we could attract more people to grow their own food. How you'll do that? I do not know because the incentive's there because the rent for allotments in the Midlands are very, very reasonable.*

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<sup>22</sup> For a more detailed explanation to this see pp. 192-95.

However, others argued that changing a higher rent might make allotments seem more desirable and would also allow repairs and improvements to be made.

No interviewees mentioned the sale of produce from their allotments; most said they gave away any surplus to friends and family. There is limited evidence from the documentary sources that allotments have, occasionally, been used for commercial purposes<sup>23</sup>. However, the potential to make a profit from allotments in less obvious ways did motivate some people to take on plots. For instance, as an upshot of the interest from developers in the privately owned Jeffcock Road site, people were reluctant to give up plots even when they had no intention of cultivating them.

One notable economic influence on allotment holders towards the end of the twentieth century related to the growing demand for organic produce. Several interviewees mentioned that the expanding market for organic food, which was often expensive to buy, augured well for allotments; being able to pick crops from your own plot was better than buying organic produce from a supermarket:

*I certainly think that organic food is, you know, taking off in a big way, but I think the prices have got to come down, but you see, even if it's organic and it's on a supermarket shelf under those lights it's not doing it any good. (JR-D)*

*There's a lot of people now buy organic grown food don't they? But it's expensive I would imagine...but this is what I do, I grow organic food and it's cheap. If only people would grow their own rather than going down the supermarket and pay through the nose for it... (GGo-WV).*

Therefore, although some people still saw financial benefits to be gained from allotment cultivation, the links between allotments and financial hardship became noticeably weaker in the later years of the twentieth century. Despite this, the traditional stereotype of allotments as a survival mechanism still influenced many

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<sup>23</sup> For instance, in 1932, a Wolverhampton allotment holder kept a horse and cart on his plot which was used to sell greengrocery and in 1945, a Walsall allotment holder wanted to use a number of plots to produce pig and poultry food commercially.

people's perceptions of allotment holding even when the stereotypical allotment holder associated with this motivating factor had long since disappeared.

## **Personal**

Most gardeners at the end of the twentieth century rejected the first stereotype of allotment holding as a response to financial hardship. Conforming to the second stereotype of an allotment holder as an elderly working class man, they saw the allotment was a hobby rather than a necessity. Although it was often tricky to define, something had to stimulate this interest in allotment holding. It is clear from the documentary and oral sources consulted that the reasons for an individual's interest in gardening varied considerably and these are not easy to categorise. In addition, for the majority of people, their interest was likely to be triggered by a combination of factors. Among the many motivations for leisure activities are: enjoyment of nature, escape from civilization, escape from routine and responsibility, exercise, opportunity for creativity, relaxation, social contact, family interaction, recognition, social power, altruism, stimulus, self-actualisation, challenge, achievement and avoiding boredom (Kelly, 1983). Most of these could easily apply to allotment holding. Like all forms of leisure, allotment holding could be argued to be determined to some extent by social factors such as age, gender, ethnicity and social position and also by opportunity factors such as income, space and transport.

As several interviewees emphasised, it required a genuine interest to cultivate an allotment:

*If you're interested, it's a fine, fine life, no doubt. I had many, many, many happy hours. It was better for me than going on holiday to go to the plot (EH-WS).*

*...you've got to be interested to start with. People aren't going to grow and take on an allotment if they're not keen, but you've really got to be interested, you know, you can tell that very early on when people take over the plot (JR-D).*

When an allotment was a hobby rather than a necessity, allotment holders were able to work at their own pace; it was only if people felt compelled to cultivate their plot, rather than doing it out of interest or enjoyment that it became hard work:

*...we'll do a little bit and we'll have a little walk and we'll have a little sit or whatever, you know what I mean? That's the way things were done because, like I say, if it was a pastime and a leisure for you then it was okay, but if it's a chore, it's hard work...if you're interested and you're interests are there, then you don't worry about hard work, well, it's not hard work to a man that's interested, that's what I'm saying (EH-WS).*

After they had taken on a plot, some people found it difficult to sustain the interest. BM-D felt that looking after her allotment was becoming a chore. It had been a novelty when she first took it on, but for the last two years had been hard work. She had considered giving it up, but as she was due to retire in eighteen months' time, she had decided to keep it going because she saw it as an activity which she would have more time for then. Like others, she had taken on an allotment as part of her plans for the future rather than for the immediate benefits.

Despite the common view of allotment holding as a financial necessity during the earlier years of the twentieth century, even in 1920, it would appear that recreation was a motivation for having an allotment, at least for some people. Describing what it saw as a typical allotment holder, the National Union of Allotment Holders claimed:

*He wants recreation, the health obtainable both by getting fresh air and exercising his muscles as well as getting fresh vegetables and improving his diet; while the hobby side appeals to him as an entire distraction from his general work (NUAH Journal, 1920: 86).*

This was supported by interviewees' testimonies. According to RB-WS, the main reason for his grandfather's interest in allotments had been simply enjoyment:

*I mean he really enjoyed his work on the allotment and I can tell you this, he was so keen that he died in February 1969 and the previous winter, he'd dug his allotment in preparation for the next season you know. That's how keen he was on his allotment.*

In addition to the practical benefits of allotments for the unemployed, GG-WV thought that, in the 1930s, people had been encouraged to take on allotments to keep themselves occupied:

*The idea of the allotments in Tettenhall were for people such as me dad, probably me granddad...the unemployment was that bad that growing their own vegetables was something to keep them active...keep 'em occupied, and that's probably where allotments...they were doing something, where they were being, occupying themselves...*

Even with the acute financial and food supply problems of the Second World War, some allotment holders still had more personal reasons for taking on a plot. MS-WV thought that allotments were popular during the Second World War because, as well as ensuring a supply of food, they afforded people a degree of independence from the many restrictions they experienced.

LM-WS took on an allotment close to his house soon after he moved there in the early 1950s. He wanted to be able to provide his growing family with fresh vegetables, but crucially, he did not think that relying on an allotment for vegetables made sound financial sense and a genuine interest was, therefore, needed as well:

*I've always been interested in growing things, number one, and the other thing was the advantage of providing for the family, fresh food you know. It's a love, you know and there's advantages, but believe me, if you weigh up the time you put in, cost effective, you'd be far better going down the shop and buying stuff. There's no question at all about that, the time you put in and if you value your time, it's just the love of the thing I suppose.*

A love of gardening and the fact that allotments were cheap motivated LW-D, but he too believed that a genuine interest was the most important factor:

*I do genuinely like growing things and I spend quite a lot of time here... I think this is the crux of the matter, you gotta really be interested in it.*

LM-WS too had been interested in horticulture for many years before taking on his allotment, having worked on a farm and in the council Parks' Department. A wider interest in horticulture was obviously a key motivator for some:

*If I could turn the clock back and go through my life again, I think I'd like to have gone in horticulture because it's so interesting, so absorbing, it's so rewarding; it's more rewarding than working in a factory (GGo-WV).*

The peaceful atmosphere of allotments was attractive to many people. Even those who did not require an allotment as a place to escape the pressure of everyday life commented on the overall undisturbed atmosphere of allotment sites. JR-D's allotment was intended as a haven she could escape to:

*As much as anything, it was intended to be a bolthole for me because it's...you could almost think you were in the country, you know, it goes down to a brook and...these days, there's far more sirens and helicopters over...but even so, it's still quite a haven.*

Although gardening is an activity which could be seen as "work-in-leisure", similar to car maintenance and do-it-yourself, it differs from these types of activities because it is less family- or home-centred and provides allotment holders with a place to escape, away from the house. It has also been argued that allotments were popular as a form of escape from work. In the early twentieth century; allotments offered factory workers an opportunity to spend time in the open air. In the post war years this was also an argument used in relation to office workers; the exercise and physical activity of gardening provided a contrast to, and compensation for, a working life spent at a desk. However, a number of interviewees worked in urban horticultural industries, such as Parks' Departments or nurseries. This pattern of leisure activity being, in some ways, an extension of their work, rather than an escape from it, links back to the cultivation of allotments by labourers in rural areas in the nineteenth century.

According to the stereotype, middle-aged gardeners spent almost all their spare time on their allotment in order to avoid conflict and obligations at home. Naturally, cultivating an allotment took a considerable proportion of allotment holders' spare time, but the time devoted to allotment gardening varied considerably. There was no consensus regarding the amount of time interviewees felt should be devoted to maintaining a plot, but most agreed it was a significant commitment:

*If you're going to have an allotment, over the year, you gotta do about five hours a week. Now that isn't like an hour a day five days a week all the year, I mean, middle of December, January, February, there's hardly anything to do. But from the middle of February onwards, March, April, May, June, you will need to be able to put some time in. Now of course, you've got the light nights in, so you really ought to be able to. And then, after June, it probably goes off a bit, 'cause if you've got it done, you gotta keep it tidy (RC-WV)*

*Saturday morning, Sunday morning, three hours each time, this time of the year [autumn]. Spring and summer time, still Saturday and Sunday morning, but try to get at least two evenings in as well, again about three hours, the lighter nights. So, shall we say summertime, I like to get a minimum of ten, maybe twelve hours a week, anything else is a bonus. Wintertime, probably six, three to six 'cause of the weather conditions you know in the winter, but there's always something to do. You prepare...there's always things to do (AR-WV).*

Although some interviewees admitted they preferred to visit their allotment when the weather was good, it was clear that many were prepared to endure inclement conditions. GGo-WV's wife said her husband:

*...goes in all sorts of weather, not just the nice weather, all sorts, pouring with rain, cold...*

Some allotment holders had difficulty working out how long they spent on their allotment; BS-D estimated that he would spend around ten hours each week, but this was divided into a number of short sessions because he lived very near so could just visit for a few minutes at a time. Those with other commitments, such as work or more pressing family obligations, had to establish a more fixed

routine than those who were retired. Like many who worked full-time, BD-WV and RD-WV spent the bulk of each weekend on the site, usually arriving early on Saturday and Sunday mornings and staying until early afternoon. In addition to going at the weekends, BM-D visited her allotment after she finished work in the afternoon. In the summer, this gave her several hours, but she acknowledged that this was not really enough time to cultivate her plot in the way she would have liked. RM-WS acknowledged that someone who was working would have less time to spend on their plot. It was a question of 'sneaking out' in the evenings for these people:

*...you gotta remember, the man who's working...it's much harder for him, he has to go home from work, have his bit of dinner and then sneak out and do two hours then, but of course, us oldies, you know, it's a much easier job, 'cause you take your time like.*

This statement supports the traditional stereotype of allotment holding as a self-indulgent activity, which men felt slightly guilty about indulging in and something which was frowned upon by their wives. However, some couples cultivated plots jointly. These were, generally, slightly younger than the average age of interviewees.

Another consideration is that the amount of time allotment holders spent on their plots did not necessarily equate to the length of time they spent working the land. Again, this tallies with the stereotype of an allotment holder as one who spends a considerable amount of time on his plot, not necessarily gardening, but 'pottering', primarily to escape from other responsibilities, in particular, family life. JH-D spent a considerable amount of time on his allotment, but he admitted that not all of this was spent working. Because he had been cultivating the same plot for many years, it required very little work to keep it going:

*...you can just talk to it and look at it, sit on the seat for ten minutes in the sun if it's shining, 'cause we've always had a seat up there. Have a cup of coffee on the wall...I come and have me cup of coffee and then go back and then she [his wife] calls me for me dinner.*

EH-WS had often spent all day on his plot, but he too adopted a relaxed attitude:

*I've gone from here, Saturday morning say at 7.30, eight o'clock, I've gone down to my plot and I've never got back here until maybe six o'clock in the evening...been there all day...I used to have a gas ring with a gas bottle, I'd have a cup of tea or a cup of coffee and I used to always have a bacon sandwich or whatever...you'd get whatever was in the garden and put it in a bit of water with an Oxo or whatever...*

Many allotment holders devoted more time than they had originally anticipated, either through necessity or because they became so passionate about their hobby. Although frequently joking about this, many interviewees said that they spent more time than their families would like them to on the allotment. Perhaps exaggerating a little, EH-WS described allotment holding as "a full-time occupation", almost an "obsession". LT-D acknowledged that, at one time, he spent too much time on his allotment, visiting every evening and most weekends:

*I would go into the allotment before I went to work in the morning to see if everything was all right. Go onto work. I'd come back home in the evening; have my meal there.*

Perhaps one reason why allotment holders spent so much time on their plots was an attempt to fill a gap left by the cessation of other activities. GGo-WV described how his allotment had helped to fill a gap after he had retired:

*When I retired, I felt that, when you're working all your life, then all of a sudden you stop working, you need a focus, so I decided to take an allotment.*

In other cases, people took on an allotment because they found they had more time when their children had left home. Another motivating factor was being made redundant or becoming unemployed for other reasons.

For allotments to survive, people need to have sufficient leisure time to cultivate a plot and they also have to choose to use their leisure time for gardening, rather than other activities. Several interviewees believed that there was a declining interest in allotments, linked to the growth of alternative leisure activities, especially for younger people:

*Generally speaking, there is a demise in allotments...you've got soap operas, you've got football...that's my opinion, that's what's happening, the younger section, they haven't got that in them.*

*See, there's so many other distractions nowadays for young people. There's television, there's video games...*

Allotment sites were usually located in the heart of working class communities. So, while they offered an escape from the home, they were usually within easy reach. When allotments were cultivated, primarily, for financial reasons, this was obviously of practical importance. In the 1920s, it was argued that, "the chief value of an allotment to the working man is to have a piece of land in the centre of the Borough so that he...could get to his allotment within a few minutes of his house" (Wolverhampton Committee, 11.11.29). Records of the addresses of allotment holders from various sites in Walsall in the same decade indicate that the allotment holders on most sites lived in fairly well defined areas of the town. The most common pattern at this time was for the majority of allotment holders on a site to live close by, within easy walking distance. However, there were usually also a few ploholders who lived fairly long distances from the site. This may have been because they had moved house after taking on a plot and were reluctant to see the work they had put in go to waste by giving it up. Distance was clearly a barrier to allotment holding during the 1940s, when Wolverhampton Smallholdings and Allotments Committee reported:

*People will not travel any great distance in order to cultivate allotments largely because of the long hours which are now being worked and the additional complication of Civil Defence Duties (Wolverhampton Committee, 30.3.42).*

The 1947 Wolverhampton Structure Plan claimed that allotment use was highly localised, with gardeners rarely being prepared to travel further than one mile. The need to provide plots close to allotment holders' homes was still an issue in the 1950s. When the site at Godsall Road was given up, care was taken to offer tenants plots at sites that were felt to be "within a reasonable distance of their residences" (Wolverhampton Committee, 13.7.54). The main reason for the unpopularity of Jones Road, for example, was believed to be the distance from potential allotment holders' homes in the town centre: "prospective tenants are

not prepared to travel long distances to their plots" (Wolverhampton Committee, 9.11.54).

Most interviewees agreed that, in the early years of the century, it seemed that distance had been a major consideration for allotment holders. EH-WS's father originally had a plot on Barlow Road, but he later moved to Dingley Road because it was marginally nearer to home; it would seem that the distance of just a few hundred yards was important when allotment holders were travelling to and from their plots with tools and produce. GG-WV also commented on the short distance between the homes of most allotment holders and their plots. He linked this to the need for allotment holders in the past to carry tools to work on their plots:

*Anybody from Aldersley Road, they've only gotta walk up Sandy Lane, until probably just past...and they'd be on the allotment you see...Walking along Codsall Road with their wheelbarrows and spades and forks...to go down the allotment...You'd go by Aldersley Road and you'd probably see a fella with just a rake, carrying a rake on his shoulder sort of thing you know and probably that was all he wanted to rake if he was raking up something. Sometimes he'd probably take a spade or a fork you know.*

As leisure needs became more significant as motivating factors, the fact that allotments were close to the home was less important as time spent travelling to the plot was not such a chore. Nevertheless, having a place which was near to, yet separate from, the home could still be an advantage as it enabled allotment holders to escape for a few minutes. However, another implication of this was that attempts to create leisure gardens from the 1960s did not meet with great success. GW-WS reflected on the feasibility of people spending whole weekends 'holidaying' on an allotment, as was the case in other parts of Europe, but pointed out that as most allotments in the Black Country were so close to people's homes, there would be little point.

Wolverhampton Allotments Committee minutes suggest that, by the mid 1970s, the requirement for a site to be close to an allotment holders' home was less crucial. For example, it was thought that Howell Road would be a suitable site for gardeners with their own transport although it was not located in an area of

the borough where there was likely to be heavy demand for plots (Wolverhampton Committee, 9.6.76). In the 1970s, car parks were constructed on some sites to accommodate the growing number of allotment holders travelling to their plots by car. A decade later, it appears that, at least according to the official records, having to travel a distance to their plot was no longer an issue for the majority of allotment holders:

*It is difficult to obtain a true assessment of demand for allotments in many areas as mobility does not seem to be a restraining factor (Wolverhampton Committee, 18.7.84).*

Most sites now had car-parking facilities. However, transporting tools and produce even relatively short distances was difficult for some allotment holders, especially those who were older or less physically able. On JH-D's site, the association had turned over a couple of empty plots for use as car parking. This was necessary as the area from which the plotheholders were drawn had expanded. Using a car was agreed to be more practical for carrying tools and produce between home and allotment. For instance, BM-D usually travelled to her plot by car; she would only go by bicycle when she did not need to take tools or bring produce home. This suggests that the traditional pattern of sites being located close to allotment holders' homes in working class areas of towns and cities had changed and it could no longer be assumed that the majority of allotment holders lived close to their plots. While in some areas, potential allotment holders had a choice of sites within easy travelling distance, elsewhere in the Black Country, allotment holders were compelled to travel considerable distances to their nearest allotment.

However, some sites still drew the majority of gardeners from close by. Around half those on BM-D's site were within easy walking distance and some lived in houses surrounding the site. However, others travelled up to three miles. As DM-D pointed out, it was rarely possible to fill a site with people solely from the immediate vicinity. Although some allotment holders on BP-D's site lived close by, the furthest travelled about seven miles. Convenience, or nearness to home, was often cited as a reason for taking a plot on a particular site. For example, KM-D took on his allotment "to make life easier", so he did not have to carry bags of vegetables from the shops. RG-WV's garden backed onto his allotment

plot, so he viewed it as an extension of his garden and BS-D's plot was also located at the rear of his garden and, for him, this was a major reason for having the plot:

*...if I'd of had to of travelled, put the tools in the back of the car, I probably wouldn't have bothered, but being as they were here, I thought, I'll have one...*

However, many other allotment holders were happy to travel to their plots in their cars. In other cases, having a plot near to their home might not be most important; allotment holders might have a plot on a particular site because it was convenient for another location they visited regularly such as work or a relative's home.

On some sites, association secretaries tried to give preference to those who lived close by when allocating new plots, but people still travelled fairly long distances especially if they wanted a plot on a particular site:

*I made a preference, anybody living in Borneo Street, wanted allotment...they got preference, anybody that's living right by the allotment, they get preference over somebody who lives far away, but you'll get anything up to five, six mile away'd come, they wanted allotment with us, see. They had to give a reason; we'd say, "Why us?" "Well, 'cause you're a better site". If you'd got anybody waiting...I used to keep a waiting list at the back of a book and I used to look, if there was nobody waiting, I say, "Yes you can have allotment"(RM-WS).*

It is clear that some sites were rated more highly than others and, consequently, were more popular; they might have waiting lists at times when there were vacancies on other sites nearby. Some interviewees felt that plots on their sites should be restricted to those who lived nearby. In one case, an interviewee argued that plots should be restricted to those who actually lived in the street and even people who lived on the estate behind should not be allocated plots:

*We don't want nobody else in; we just wanna keep...maybe we're greedy, we wanna keep the allotments for us in this street, 'cause that's who's only got it, just local...it's a very close knit place (BH-WV).*

Allotment shows and competitions are another personal motivating factor which was important for the second, predominant, stereotypical allotment holder. For those whose competitive drive is focused on their leisure activities, competitions present an important motivator for allotment cultivation. Interviewees were aware that, for some, entering competitions was their main reason for cultivating a plot:

*Personally, I grow for competition; I've exhibited all my life (AR-WV).*

*Some people they say, they go in for shows don't they? And they, like, they're showmen. They like to show and they like to win... A chap...he always said "I'm a showman; I grow 'em on allotment to show; I won't grow if I didn't" (FPr-WS).*

This indicates that economic necessity was not the primary motivation for many allotment holders. It was clear that taking part in competitions was part of the nature and character of some:

*...somebody said to me once...How would you describe yourself?". I says: "As a competitor; I've always liked to compete" and I think that's probably true (GW-WS).*

One allotment holder who did not take part in shows himself agreed it was largely a question of inclination:

*Well, I'm not a showman, though I mean a lot of people, they go in for allotments and they like to show you know, they're all, like the biggest onion, the biggest, parsnips you know, all that and I've never been that way inclined (FPr-WS).*

There were clearly a number of well-known 'showmen' in each of the boroughs:

*The man in the next plot, two plots away from me...he's won every year now for the last...twenty-five years or more, so I don't compete (LM-WS)*

*I remember there was a man called R... who used to compete with me grandfather; there was always a rivalry as to who got the best cabbages, the best cauliflowers and those sort of things, you know (RB-WS).*

Even if taking part in competitions had not motivated someone to take on an allotment originally, it was an activity which became an important aspect of cultivation for some. One allotment holder who rarely entered shows believed that it was the natural result of people reaching a high standard of growing:

*...the better you are, the more you go at it...I think this is why they have the competitions; they find they're getting that good that they have to...(DM-D).*

Another echoed this:

*...as times goes on and you cultivate an allotment...and you're cultivating the ground, the fertility gets better and you grow better and better crops you know, it goes up over the years and before you realise, it, you can grow vegetables which are good enough to put into shows and then when you begin to get really interested in it and you get down to it, you do specialise... (LT-D).*

Even those who were not interested in shows sometimes enjoyed comparing their produce with that of other allotment holders:

*Well, we look at other people's and say, "Oh, look at the size..." You do that sort of thing... (BM-D).*

Unsurprisingly, this habit was even more common among those who were involved in competitions.

*...the plots used to be inspected about thirty-five times because the judges'd come first and they'd pass judgement and then, when they'd made the judgement and that had been announced, well, the different allotment holders'd be judging them again themselves...they'd do the judging on a Saturday, but all day Sunday and the following week was taken up with 'em being judged again by..."Well I wouldn't have given him eight for that"... (FP-WS).*

Competitions were held in the Black Country since the early twentieth century and were frequently used as a means of stimulating interest in allotments and encouraging new gardeners to take on plots even when economic factors were considered to be the primary motivators for allotment holding. The first Vegetable Exhibition of the Walsall Allotment Holders' Association was held in

September 1916 and quickly became established as an annual event. At around the same time, Dudley Allotments and Smallholdings Committee was supporting allotment shows by donating prize money to the two local societies. Wolverhampton lagged behind the two other boroughs slightly. Although a Floral Fete had been held since 1889, it was not until 1926 that vegetable classes were introduced. At the first Wolverhampton Allotments Show, there were 700 exhibits attracting 900 visitors; it was deemed a success and it was immediately decided to make it an annual event (Wolverhampton Committee, 27.8.27). A comment made by Wolverhampton Smallholdings and Allotments Committee in 1928 indicates that the value of competitions in motivating people to take on allotments was well-recognised at this time:

*Your committee are of the opinion that the holding of this show does much to stimulate interest in the allotment movement, not only amongst the plot holders themselves, but also the townspeople (Wolverhampton Committee, 3.10.28).*

Even during wartime when financial considerations and self-provisioning would be expected to be crucial, competitions remained important. With the outbreak of war in 1939, most allotment shows were cancelled. However, it was recognised that competitions had a role in encouraging greater interest in food production. So in 1942, when the situation had become more stable, Walsall council introduced a prize for the best allotment and also decided to hold a Town Show. Some competitions were introduced specifically for sites which had been created during the war. To encourage both established and novice allotment holders, Palfrey Allotment Association held two separate growing crops competitions, one for 'old gardens' and another for wartime plots. This recognised that those who had taken on plots for the first time during the war would be unlikely to win in an open competition. The Annual Show of the Wolverhampton Allotment Societies also included a special section for the encouragement of wartime allotments. The popularity of competitions among the allotment community at this time is indicated by the fact that, in 1941, there were seventy-three entries for the Wolverhampton Horticultural and Allotments Society prize competition (Wolverhampton Committee, 22.4.42). In Dudley too, competitions were popular in the early years of the war; in 1941, there were seventy entrants for the annual show (Dudley Committee, 9.9.41).

It would appear that competitions became less important in the post-war years, appealing to a relatively small hardcore of allotment holders. During the 1950s and early 1960s in particular, it was the same clique of allotment holders who won most of the prizes each year. In earlier years, the names of the winners had generally been more changeable. To try to encourage more interest, novice cups were awarded and from the late 1960s allotment holders in Walsall and Wolverhampton participated in an Inter-town allotment competition with Stafford and Sutton Coldfield. While inter-town rivalry could motivate some allotment holders and perhaps encourage a greater sense of community within the borough, continually failing to win could be off-putting. Wolverhampton, which had had little success competing against other towns, withdrew in the late 1970s, arguing, "it will be more profitable to stimulate further interest in allotments with Wolverhampton by increasing the prize money" (Wolverhampton Committee, 30.3.77). By the 1990s, even well-established competitions had ceased due to general lack of interest. Just a few, such as the Dudley competition, were still being run. Some self-management associations organised their own competitions, but these were generally small scale affairs and even these vanished as the organisers died or gave up their allotments. HM-D felt that things had changed noticeably over the last twenty or thirty years of the twentieth century and there was less interest in horticultural shows. Another interviewee agreed that, by 2002, competitions were no longer popular among the bulk of the allotment community:

*...there's about 1,200 plots within the borough. If I've got six people who are really dedicated to competition, allotment competition, not flower shows, allotment competition, that's about it (AR-WV).*

Although shows had largely finished, growing crops competitions were still held. This may be because these place greater emphasis on the overall standard of cultivation of the plot and the condition of produce actually growing in the ground, making them seem less artificial than traditional shows with their emphasis on presentation. However, even these were less popular than they had been in the past. Although a significant number of those allotment holders interviewed regularly entered growing crops competitions, most felt they were in the minority:

*We still have the Growing Crops Competition, but there's nothing like the competition that used to be. I mean there'd be, on the original judging, say Lord Street, there'd be about fourteen plots to judge on the first Saturday, well now there's only about fourteen in the whole of the town...*  
(FP-WS)

*...when the judge used to come down to judge the Growing Crops, he used to have ten or fifteen allotments to look at; now if he gets five, he's lucky, you know, 'cause people ain't interested, you know, it just...well, they're not interested in shows (LM-WS).*

Some interviewees suggested reasons for the decline in interest in competitions. The most common was the fact that most allotment holders cultivated their plots to grow vegetables to eat rather than to display and compete for prizes. The vast majority were not motivated by shows and competitions:

*People go up there to grow for the table; they don't want to grow exhibition stuff and have somebody come round pointing to 'em and saying, you know, "You're the best and you're the second best and you're the third best" and so on (AR-WV)*

*...I tried to get one or two of the lads to enter, but they weren't... "I only grow for meself, I ain't growing for anybody else". I think they was quite happy, their wives put 'em on the table when they had their vegetables, they weren't saying, "Oh, yours is better than mine" and all that...they were more interested in eating 'em (GG-WV).*

While produce grown for show is judged on its appearance, almost all the allotment holders interviewed spoke about the importance of taste of the vegetables they grew. One told a story which reinforced this assertion that growing to show was not always compatible with growing crops to eat:

*Carrots, parsnips, they grow a whip see and when they grow a parsnip, it'd be on the bench and the whip'd be right down on the floor...that's gotta be on. I saw a show once...and the judge come round...he says "look at that, he's lost the whip off his carrots", he says. He says, "Has he never heard of superglue? He could glue it back on!"...It's a condition*

*now, no one's supposed to use glue; they put that in the schedule! (FPr-WS).*

Conversely, those who were keen to win competitions were clearly not so interested in producing vegetables for their families:

*My wife used to go mad, she said, "I don't know, the damn stuff, it isn't for us; it's for the Town Hall. When are we going to have some stuff out the garden?"(FP-WS).*

One interviewee told how his grandfather had two allotment plots, one for food to eat and another to grow vegetables for show:

*He used to have an allotment there, which he used to grow his crops on for use, you know and he used to use the crops, but he also had one in the Pleck that he used to use for competitions (RB-WS).*

RM-WS pointed out that, in order to get sufficient crops of the standard required for shows, he might have to dig up all he had grown, leaving none for household consumption:

*...to show potatoes, you'll dig nearly all your potatoes up just to get enough to show, say five plates different kinds and you've gotta dig the lot up.*

Interestingly, even if an allotment was not cultivated primarily for economic reasons, growing for household consumption was still more important than the competitive aspects of allotment cultivation for many. Other allotments holders were not interested in shows because they did not want to base their planting on the show timetable:

*The trouble is with shows, you've got to produce stuff for the date of the show and it's tying you down... (GGo-WV)*

*The Growing Crops Competition takes place in July...you time it to be at its peak by then...and that's part of the experience of the Growing Crops Competition is knowing just when to sow that, so it'll be at its peak on the day of that judging (FP-WS).*

It was acknowledged that growing crops to the standard required for shows took a considerable time commitment which was why it was most popular among retired allotment holders:

*You can't do that and work full time; it's the sort of thing the retired men do on the site; there's one on our site, he goes to shows and wins prizes, but he's there all hours of the day and night, come rain, come shine, isn't he? (BM-D)*

Nevertheless, a number of allotment holders who worked also entered competitions. Also, age could also be a disadvantage; FP-WS felt that, while competitions had motivated him in the past, as he was getting older, there was too much effort involved in preparing for shows:

*...my showing days are over...I used to go to Sandwell Show, but last year was the last time; I shan't bother this year with the shows; it's too much trouble, messing around and carrying stuff and setting it up and breaking it down and fetching it out and...I used to enjoy it, but...*

Whether or not they entered shows and competitions, many allotment holders were clearly proud of their achievements and liked this to be recognised:

*...he often come down and he used to stand by the shed and he used to say: "Look at my garden". He used to have one of the best gardens on the site (EH-WS).*

This was a sentiment common to many allotment holders throughout the twentieth century. A report from 1918 quotes a housewife who had taken on an allotment for the first time during the war:

*What pleases me most is that my husband has no idea that I have taken part of an allotment and when he comes home on leave I shall be able to show him our vegetables growing in our own ground (Weekly Dispatch, 1918).*

Pride could, therefore, be a motivating factor for some.

The rising number of elderly people might have been expected to stimulate greater interest in allotments towards the end of the twentieth century as,

according to the prevailing stereotype, this group was most likely to take on a plot. Their participation in allotment gardening might be limited by aging and ill-health however. FP-WS pointed out that cultivating an allotment took a considerable amount of energy, so even if he still had the interest there might come a time when it was not longer possible to carry on:

*...as long as I've got the energy...I think I shall always maintain the inclination, put it that way, but it's the energy that's the thing.*

This could limit the amount of time an allotment holder was able to spend on his or her plot. DM-D and BM-D only spent about three hours at a time because of health problems:

*...which is as much as you can do really before you...the back doesn't want to know any more...*

Like several allotment holders, LM-WS had been forced to cut down as he had become older:

*I find that now I'm getting past it that I only do half of it...I find it rather tiring. I went down the allotment this morning. I only go down for two hours, that's enough for me...*

In other cases, a desire to improve poor health or safeguard good health motivated people to take on allotments. The benefits of allotment cultivation for people with health problems were not just relevant in the latter half of the twentieth century, but have been recognised for many years. For example, in 1929, a sixty-one year old allotment holder from Oxley sidings in Wolverhampton who had been gassed during the war was "advised to take as much outdoor exercise as possible" by his doctor and took on an allotment for this reason (Wolverhampton Committee, 7.3.29). Of course, allotments could also contribute to the good health of allotment holders' families through providing them with a regular supply of fresh fruit and vegetables. Although they may not have taken on an allotment primarily for its health benefits, a number of allotment holders acknowledged that this had become one of the main motivations for digging a plot. Several interviewees believed that the exercise that cultivating a plot provided helped to keep them in good health. It was seen as an activity which

they could continue beyond retirement age. However, this was rarely sufficient in itself to motivate them to take on a plot.

Therefore, personal factors were important motivators for allotment holding throughout the twentieth century, but more so in the post war years when allotment holding became more obviously a leisure activity rather than a financial necessity. Personal factors varied considerably depending on the interests of the individual; while some were motivated by competition, others were attracted by the peaceful atmosphere of allotment sites. Personal factors were more commonly associated with allotment holding in the post-war years, but even in the earlier part of the twentieth century when most allotment holders were motivated to take on an allotment for, primarily, economic reasons, personal factors did play a role. The stereotype does not, therefore, hold true completely with regard to personal motivation for allotment holding. The established stereotype tends to overlook the importance of personal factors which influenced decisions to take on an allotment during the earlier part of the twentieth century.

### **Political**

The most recent stereotype of an allotment holder is someone who has, typically, become interested in allotments as part of a political belief, such as a wish to improve the environment. However, this did not feature as a motivating factor for those Black Country allotment holders interviewed. Some may have become involved in the semi-political activities of allotment associations as a result of having a plot, but this did not influence their initial decision to take on an allotment.

According to the stereotype, towards the end of the twentieth century, the media was also important in encouraging the revival of interest in allotments. Awareness of issues around food consumption was heightened by the media and pressure groups. Vegetarians were mentioned by interviewees as people who would be expected to consume large quantities of vegetables and so might be expected to be particularly interested in taking on an allotment to grow their own food. Although none of the interviewees was vegetarian, a number could name people on their sites who were. Even if people were not vegetarians, they might

want to eat more vegetables for health reasons, perhaps linked to health promotion campaigns. In the 1970s, and again in the 1990s, a renewed interest in allotment holding was thought to be related to gardening-related information programmes and fictional series such as *The Good Life*. A number of interviewees believed that rising interest in allotment holding towards the end of the twentieth century was linked to the boom in television programmes about gardening and cookery. PD-WS, however, thought this had had little impact in Walsall and MW-D expressed surprise that the proliferation of gardening programmes on the television had not encouraged more people to take on allotments:

*I'm surprised that the allotments haven't flourished really. You know these gardening programmes that are on, really surprised.*

A number of interviewees thought that gardening programmes might encourage people generally to take on plots but they do not seem to have been instrumental for any individuals interviewed. BP-D thought that gardening programmes on television might encourage people to take on an allotment initially, but these people may not be sufficiently dedicated; they would "go so far then stop".

One area of political motivation which was widely discussed was organic produce<sup>24</sup>. AR-WV felt that the interest in organic produce was a minority concern and that too many people preferred to buy pre-packaged supermarket goods for allotments to return to the central position they had once occupied in many people's lives. However, those who continued to cultivate allotments believed they benefited from better quality food. Even if they were not politically motivated, most interviewees said that their current motivation for having an allotment was, at least in part, to produce fresh vegetables for themselves and their family. The freshness of produce and the fact that they knew how it had been grown and, for example, what chemicals had been used, were important.

Overall, political, and wider social, factors were of little importance as motivators for Black Country allotment holders. As there was little evidence of the newer

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<sup>24</sup> See chapter 4, pp172-73 for a more detailed account of these issues.

type of allotment holder on Black Country sites, it is not unexpected that the motivating factors related to this third stereotype did not feature strongly.

### **Other factors**

In addition to the factors which feature in the traditional stereotype of motivation for allotment holding, there were a number of other issues which were important in motivating some people to take on an allotment.

Housing conditions and the decline of traditional working class neighbourhoods and communities were one example of a change in living conditions and lifestyles which might have an effect on allotment cultivation. Allotments were seen as especially useful for those who would like to grow vegetables, but for spatial or aesthetic reasons were not able to grow them at home. For example, Wolverhampton Smallholding and Allotments Committee believed that new plots created in the Blakenhall area in 1941 would prove popular because “there are large numbers of houses in this part of the borough which have little or no gardens attached to the houses” (Wolverhampton Committee, 28.5.41). The development of affordable houses with gardens from the 1920s onwards may have limited the appeal of allotments for some. If they had a plot of land attached to their house which was large enough to grow vegetables, people might be less inclined to take on a separate allotment. Conversely, several interviewees felt that the fact that many houses built since 1945 tended to have small gardens was a reason why allotment holding should flourish:

*The thing is you see, all these houses that are being built now, there's hardly any gardens to them; they certainly couldn't grow them [vegetables], you know, in their own gardens (MW-D).*

Several interviewees said they had taken on plots to compensate for having small gardens at home. For example, RB-WS's grandfather was unable to grow as much as he wanted because he lived in a terrace house and only had a small area of land. JR-D took on her allotment to overcome the difficulty of marrying a “lifelong interest in gardening, but insufficient ground to grow vegetables”. Similarly, it was the lack of a garden large enough to allow him to grow

vegetables which motivated LW-D to cultivate an allotment. He believed that, if he had a bigger garden, he would not need an allotment:

*If I had a big garden now...I wouldn't have an allotment; I'd do it here. Because although I can go in my car and be down the allotment in five minutes, it's far easier to walk out here and do it; if I had a bigger garden, I certainly wouldn't have an allotment...*

Demographic changes, especially family size, could also have an impact on motivation. FPr-WS thought that an allotment could be extremely valuable for a larger family, but speculated that few families were now taking on plots because they had less children and their diets included relatively few vegetables:

*I should say people with a family, three or four children growing up...and then the man and his wife, you then get through some veg, but, there again, it's the diet today. When you, when I see the diet...and when I see what's in the supermarket trolleys...Oh, good god, pizzas by the dozen and packets of this and packets of that...And I think...where's the fruit and veg in this trolley? There isn't any! (FPr-WS).*

LT-D agreed that changes in lifestyle made allotments less necessary than they had been in the past:

*...they don't eat at home; they don't cook at home; people don't cook. There are lots of the younger generation, they just don't know how to cook and there are lots of city children who have never...seen or know how a carrot or potato grows...*

As the average size of families fell, few people required a large allotment plot. Indeed, a number of interviewees said that the size of a standard allotment was too large for many allotment holders now that families were generally smaller and the majority of allotment holders were retired; smaller sized plots might encourage more people to take up allotment holding. Although allotments have traditionally been standard in size, this disguises the variation in the amount of land worked by individuals and families. From the interviews, it was clear that not all allotment holders had the same requirements in terms of the amount of land they needed. For example, BM-D only cultivated a half-plot, but was still able to grow more vegetables than she and her husband could eat. She

expressed surprise that, while she found it difficult to cope with this amount of land, some ploholders were able to cultivate two or three plots. LT-D agreed that a full plot was too large for many people, so the whole of his site had been split into half plots. As a comparison, records from Walsall give an indication of the amount of land allotment holders in the borough were typically working in the early 1920s. On many sites, it was not so unusual for an allotment holder to have more than one plot. For instance, thirteen allotment holders on Green Lane leased two plots; this represented approximately one-fifth of the total number of ploholders. In addition, there were a number of examples of more than one ploholder per household. On Bentley there were three households with more than one allotment holder. In the early 1920s, more than twenty allotment holders in Walsall cultivated plots on more than one site, although it is not always clear whether these were held concurrently or consecutively. In most instances, the two sites were in very close proximity to each other, just a few hundred metres apart. This meant that, in practice, plots would be little further apart than might be the case for two plots on the same site (Walsall Borough Council Registers of Allotments, 1923-40).

Changing working conditions were also referred to. RM-WS thought that changes between the generations, particularly in working practices, were responsible for the decline in allotment holding:

*I'm used to heavy work, I mean steel work it's heavy work, but you see you get a young lad come out of office, and he starts work and after about ten minutes, you see him on his knees [laughs]...they don't seem to have the go in them, the roughness which we used to have.*

However, it was not just the type of work and people's perception of horticultural labour which had an impact. Longer working hours were mentioned as a factor which had contributed to the decline of allotments, as this meant people had less time to spend preparing food and also less time to spend on allotments. The average working week rose during the 1980s and 1990s, to reach 43.4 hours per week by 1996, with the majority of those working long hours being men, who make up the bulk of the allotment community (Morgan, 1996). GG-WV believed that a lack of time precluded many younger people in particular from taking on allotments:

*...it could be a thing of the past, allotments because I can't see many young people...they don't seem to have the time.*

A lack of time, usually as a result of changing working patterns, also forced some existing allotment holders to abandon their plots. A related problem was that the amount of time they believed they would need to devote to cultivating an allotment could be off-putting to some potential allotment holders. Many were not used to looking after such a large area of land. However, lack of time was not just a modern problem. For instance, in the 1930s, BL-WV's father would often go to the allotment for an hour or two on his way home when his afternoon shift finished. LT-D's father was a factory worker and visited his allotment during his lunch hour. RB-WS's grandfather attempted to cultivate his allotment during any times when he was not working:

*He did it in his spare time. He did it weekends, and at night you know. I mean he used to finish work about four, five o'clock at night and...in the summer, he'd be down there, you know, 'til it was almost dark you know.*

Working on allotments in the late evening was common practice during the Second World War. For instance, allotment holders on Bantock Park in Wolverhampton were allowed to stay for an hour after the park closed; this meant they could work their plots until half past ten in the summer.

In a similar way, when people have gained additional leisure time, for example through unemployment or the closure of munitions factories and ban on overtime after the First World War, they might be more likely to consider taking on an allotment. Towards the end of the twentieth century, it was suggested that people taking early retirement and remaining healthy and active long after they retire have both had an impact on allotment holding (Select Committee on Environment, Transport and Regional Affairs, 1998). For instance, PD-WS first took an allotment on after taking early retirement. Although he had grown vegetables at home for a number of years, he was not able to have an allotment before he retired because of the hours he worked.

Just as children are omitted from the stereotypes of the characteristics of allotment holders, childhood experience does not feature as part of the

stereotype relating to motivation. Nevertheless, many allotment holders said they had been interested in gardening since they were children. In many instances, this stemmed from a parental interest. The significance of this motivating factor calls into question the traditional view of allotments as a place for husbands and fathers to escape from their families. As well as learning about cultivation and acquiring an interest in allotment holding through relatives, some interviewees remembered being introduced to vegetable growing at school. For many allotment holders, a childhood pastime had led to a lifelong passion for gardening. RM-WS had been introduced to gardening at an early age because his father worked on a nursery. He believed this had prompted his interest later in life:

*I was in it all the time you see, so and it never leaves you; if you learn as a child, it's very rare it leaves you.*

However, some allotment holders admitted that, although they had memories of fathers or other relatives cultivating allotments from when they were children, they had not been interested themselves at this time:

*Of course I wasn't interested in gardening then when I was a young lad. You're not when you're younger; it's mostly when you get older.*

As several interviewees pointed out that, while in some cases whole families were interested in allotment holding, in other instances, children did not share their parents' enthusiasm:

*I think you do follow your father; if you like it, you like it; some don't want to know. I say, some of 'em actively hate it, they just want to...it drives them up the wall...(RG-WV).*

Despite the fact that several family members had leased allotments, cultivation still did not interest some people. BL-WV's father had cultivated two allotments, "for as long as I can remember" and several uncles also had allotments on the same site. He could remember helping out as a child, but said that the idea of taking on one of his own when he was an adult "didn't appeal". A number of interviewees admitted they did not enjoy helping with gardening as a child, but they thought that the experience had affected them and meant they developed an interest later in life. FP-WS remembered having to help his father. He saw

this as a chore at the time, but acknowledged that it did lead to involvement in gardening in later years:

*I'd gotta help him with this, I used to hate it [sighs] mixing compost and putting, washing pots and...but some of it must have rubbed off.*

Similarly, there were several examples of interviewees' children starting to help on family plots when they became older. KM-D said that his son was becoming interested now that he was middle-aged and BP-D said his daughter had become more interested in gardening since she got married.

A number of interviewees linked their decision to take on their own plot to experiences of helping on those owned by family members. EH-WS said he first took on an allotment because his father had cultivated one and he was used to helping him. He remembered going to the allotment with his father and brother from the age of about seven until he was sixteen. So, after he left the Forces, he took on his own allotment. Other interviewees had 'inherited' their allotments from relatives. In one case, an interviewee who had helped his grandfather on his allotment from the time he was a child took on it on when he died:

*I used to help him out when I was a boy you know in the '20s and I took the allotment on myself for about three years after he died, 'cause he died in 1969...I took it on and I dug it over and growed quite a few crops myself... (RB-WS).*

Similarly, FP-WS helped on his father's allotment for a number of years, then took this over when he became too old and ill to cultivate it himself. In some cases, what could be described as 'family plots' had been passed on directly through a number of generations. One interviewee's family had held plots on the same site for almost sixty years:

*My family came on the site, it was 1943... it was my mother's father and he died...I think it was '44, '45...he didn't have it very long...the shares become part of the estate. So it went to me grandmother on me mother's side, but she didn't do the plot; me grandfather on my father's side did it and he lived down...St Mark's Street as a baker, so he worked sort of 'til early in the morning and him and his wife would come up straight after; they'd spend most of the day here... (RC-WV).*

One interviewee knew of two brothers who had “taken over from their father and virtually their grandfather, the same piece of ground” and in numerous other cases, children had taken on plots on the same site as their father:

*...when I was eighteen, my father had got back up here and he'd got a plot down here, number eighty-one and he bought me number eighty next door...and I carried on with that until 1970...1980 (RG-WV).*

At least one interviewee believed that, in the past, the practice of allotments being passed through families was more common, but now younger people had less time and were not generally interested. Referring to one allotment holder he knew, EC-WS said:

*...he was one of the old staunch gardeners and his dad always used to have one an' all you know and I think that's how they carry on. But now, I mean, our children won't take it on...*

Many interviewees believed that younger members of their family had little interest in allotments. The pattern of children following their parents onto allotments was becoming much rarer. BA-D said that there had been a few instances of sons taking on their fathers' plots in recent years, but this arrangement was often short-lived because they lacked a genuine interest:

*We have had one or two sons who've come and said they'll take it on and in two or three weeks forgotten all about it. Hard work. It is hard work, cultivating an allotment.*

However, this was not just a recent problem. A few of those who were interviewed said that they had tried to continue with their father's allotment, but admitted that they did not have sufficient interest, so this arrangement did not last. For instance, PR-WV took an allotment on when his father gave it up in 1948, but he only managed to cultivate it for a single season.

However, not all allotment holders came from families with a history of involvement in allotments; they developed their interest through other experiences:

*There's nobody in our family ever had a garden in their life...my first inkling for growing stuff was, I went on a farm during the war (LM-WS).*

Sharing a plot was a common way for new allotment holders to experiment before committing themselves fully. RM-WS first shared a plot with another gardener, but later took on a plot of his own. Many first shared with a relative; the first allotment LT-D had was shared with his father. He took on his own after he married. RM-WS's brother-in-law first encouraged him to take on a plot; they agreed to share a plot at first before later going on to each have their own:

*Well, he knew what allotments was about and he said to me, he said, "I'd love allotment", well I said "I'll get one". He said, "Will you..?" and I went down the council and found out where the names of the people was who was running the allotments and they give him one, they give a shared between him and me.*

Alternatively, other allotment holders might start off working on a plot belonging to a friend or neighbour:

*...next door neighbour...got a plot at the top end and he said I could look after that, so I carried on going (RG-WV)*

*My neighbour had one and he was doing a lot of allotment digging and all that and we used to go over there and we used to have a couple of beers and we used to watch and give him a hand digging and it got to the point where he got a bit too old for it (BH-WV).*

Fluctuations in the amount of land allotment holders worked was often not planned, but occurred, for example, as a result of other allotment holders on the site giving up their plots. When one of the allotment holders on his site died, BH-WV took over half his plot, while another allotment holder took over the other half. Similarly, KM-D started off working a half plot, but when the man he was sharing with emigrated, he took over the whole plot, essentially to prevent it becoming overgrown. On FPr-WS's site, there were sixty-two plots, but only around twenty were taken; this meant that much of the site quickly became neglected. A number of ploholders had therefore taken on two plots simply "to try and keep things moving" and help to prevent the site appearing neglected:

*Every time we get someone who dies, nobody seems to come and take allotment on you see...I mean my mate died last year...he's got a lovely allotment; he was a good gardener; always kept his allotment good, you know, but nobody's took his plot; it's just back to nature. It only needs*

*six months' neglect; you can have twenty years' cultivation, six months' neglect, back to nature, that's the point.*

General changes in living and working conditions, such as leisure time or housing conditions are, therefore, important in helping to explain changes in the popularity of allotment holding throughout the twentieth century. However, such factors do not feature strongly in the stereotypes which have developed. Although these factors are considered in the literature relating to leisure activities in general (Clarke and Critcher, 1985; Jones, 1986; McKibbin, 1994), the lack of work specifically on allotments means that it is not known how these apply to allotment gardening. Allotment holding has maintained an old-fashioned image and this means that it is often not linked to contemporary social developments. It is interesting to note that the stereotypes of motivation appear to lag behind those of the characteristics of allotment holders, especially in the minds of older people interviewed. In particular, there is still a strong association between allotment holding and poverty in terms of motivation despite the fact that a working man who needs to provide for his family is no longer considered to be a typical allotment holder.

Many allotment holders were motivated by unique elements of their personality or background, such as a strong competitive instinct; the need for relaxation; or a childhood interest. Prompts from the wider community, such as the media, government pressure or the 'green' movement were much less important than personal interest in accounting for an individual's motivation for allotment holding. While external pressure, including financial obligation, might make it more likely that an individual would decide to take on an allotment, they would rarely be sufficient on their own. A genuine personal interest was necessary if someone was to take on an allotment, especially on a long-term basis. While many allotment holders did conform to the traditional stereotype of a solitary gardener wishing to escape from family life, even in the 1920s and 1930s, plots were frequently worked by more than one person to help to support an extended family and in later years, gardeners often shared plots. Personal contacts within the local community could, therefore, be an important motivator.

## Conclusions

It is clear that an interest in allotment holding might be stimulated by a range of factors. This chapter firstly considered the economic, personal and political factors to determine the accuracy of the traditional stereotypes of allotment holding as a response to financial hardship, a leisure activity or a way to demonstrate political beliefs. Holding true to the stereotype, in the early part of the twentieth century, the most important factors were financial ones, digging an allotment as a means of providing for the family. It is interesting that, although the traditional stereotype of an allotment holder as someone who cultivates a plot to support his family has largely disappeared, the links between allotment holding and financial hardship have not. However, in the second half of the twentieth century, personal motives assumed greater importance. In many ways, these are more difficult to identify as they depend on an individual's circumstances and personality. In addition, the distinction between the two main stereotypes is not always clear-cut. For example, even in the past, competitions and personal interest played an important role, and at the end of the century, the demand for organic food and a personal wish to be self-sufficient, or at least to provide vegetables for the household, were both significant. Any political motivation for allotment holding was extremely difficult to identify from the interviews conducted and there was little sign of the third stereotypical allotment holder to be found in the Black Country; political beliefs were not generally significant as a motivating factor. However, in addition to the factors which might be expected to feature as motivators for allotment cultivation according to the stereotypes, there are a number of issues relating to changing living and working conditions and to family background which, although they do not form part of the stereotype, are clearly important in motivating some people to take on allotments.

The factors which motivate people to take on allotments are clearly too complex to be explained by a crude stereotype. For most allotment holders, there was no single reason for taking on a plot. For instance, BL-WV believed his father had an allotment primarily as a hobby, but also "to help out at home" and save money. Some allotment holders admitted that, initially, they had doubts about

taking on a plot. BH-WV explained that it was his wife's idea and he was dubious, but gradually he became as enthusiastic as her:

*I come home one day and me wife said, "Oh, I've took on Trevor's allotment" and there was a bit of an argument; I said, "Well, it's so hard for me to keep my own garden at home, my house, let alone there", I said, "Well, one of them's going to suffer". So, I more or less just bit my lip and then she started doing things and digging and I started helping, one thing led to another and the first year when all the vegetables come, that's when I got stuck on it, that's when I was spending more time there than I was here.*

Motivating factors are, therefore, often difficult to pin down, especially for those allotment holders who have held a plot for a number of years. Moreover, allotment holders might be motivated by several factors which were not easily compatible, for example, wanting to grow crops to Show standards and also to provide nutritious food for their family. Others had taken on a plot for one reason, but continued to cultivate it for others. Some interviewees were unsure what had initially motivated them; for many it seemed to be a chance event:

*I don't know how we quite came to get on to doing an allotment...we just wanted to grow nice, fresh vegetables, so the idea came from, we knew somebody who was on an allotment and said, "Oh if there comes up any spaces, let us know", which, a few months later, they duly did (BM-D).*

Therefore, even those who might be considered to be stereotypical allotment holders in terms of their characteristics often did not conform to the expected stereotype in terms of motivation. This suggests that the stereotype is superficial and that allotment holding is, in fact, more complex than it appears from its popular image. Motivation for allotment holding is far too complex to be adequately described by a crude stereotype. Although broad patterns can be identified, for example, less emphasis on financial motives and more importance awarded to personal factors towards the end of the twentieth century, in general, the use of stereotypes is not particularly helpful in understanding motivation for allotment holding.



#### **4. The appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotment sites**

The stereotypes of allotment sites and issues relating to their cultivation and management have been less well developed in the literature than the stereotypes of allotment holders. However, as was discussed in chapter 1, there is evidence that the traditional image of allotment sites is of a rundown, ramshackle, uncared for environment which can be a blight on the local landscape, what Crouch and Ward have termed 'awkwardness' (Crouch and Ward, 1997: 4). There would appear to be little control over sites despite the attempts of local authorities to impose strict regulations on their use. The stereotype depicts allotments as old fashioned, a throwback to more impoverished times, having little relevance to modern lifestyles. However, this is sometimes seen in a more positive light as allotments are linked to a more rural and harmonious way of life without the pressures associated with urban living. This chapter will consider the accuracy of this stereotype by examining the visual appearance of sites and also the atmosphere and culture to be found there. In order to do this, it is necessary to consider allotment management at two levels: firstly the collective management of sites and, secondly, the management of individual plots. Little consideration has previously been given to the either of these aspects. The documentary and oral evidence collected during the process of this research allows these aspects of allotment holding to be examined, for example, how sites were managed; what standards allotment holders were expected to adhere to; and how plots were cultivated in practice, that is, what crops were grown; what other activities took place on allotments; how much land allotment holders owned; and how much time they devoted to cultivating their plots.

Before the appearance and atmosphere and culture of allotments are dealt with, the first section of this chapter outlines the patterns of allotment provision in the three boroughs under consideration throughout the twentieth century. Much of the information about the extent and scale of allotment holding in the three boroughs comes from records in the respective local studies centres. It should

be noted that the types of records available and dates covered varies between boroughs<sup>25</sup>.

## **The pattern of allotment provision in Walsall, Wolverhampton and Dudley**

### *Walsall*

The history of allotment holding in Walsall can be traced back further than elsewhere in the Black Country. In March 1896, a group of twenty-three ratepayers demanded allotments in the Palfrey district, so eleven acres of land was leased from Lord Bradford to create forty plots (Walsall Committee, 25.3.96). As was the case elsewhere, allotments became a noteworthy feature of the urban environment during the First World War. In 1926, looking back at the history of allotment holding in Walsall, the Small Holdings and Allotments Committee reported, that before the war, "allotments were few in number compared to those which were cultivated at the end of the war" (Walsall Committee, 9.6.26). In total, 272.25 acres of land was ploughed up for crops under the Defence of the Realm Act (Walsall Committee, 31.5.18). It was often difficult to obtain sufficient suitable land at a reasonable cost as other demands such as education and recreation competed for land even at this time when food production was a vital concern. Many of the parcels of land taken for wartime allotments were small, often under an acre. Experimental plots were established at Walsall Arboretum, Bloxwich Park and Palfrey Park. In some cases, landowners refused to turn their land over to be used as allotments and the council was then forced to take the land under the Land Cultivation Order (1916).

There were moves to make some wartime allotments permanent as early as June 1916, when allotment holders from a number of sites petitioned the council. In March 1918, new permanent allotments were created in Love Lane, Palfrey; Dark Lane, Chuckery; and Barracks Lane, Blakenall. However, many landowners and local inhabitants were keen for land to be returned to its original use and this was usually agreed to, provided satisfactory arrangements could be made with

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<sup>25</sup> See pp. 53-56.

the allotment holders. Some wartime plots were vacant by 1920, so there was no problem in these being given up for building or other alternative uses. As allotment holders were turned off war plots, demand rose in some areas and pressure for land to be put to more commercially profitable uses meant that it was difficult to obtain allotment land at a suitable cost. In January 1922, a Ministry of Agriculture circular urged councils not to give up war plots unless they were required for building or industry and a number of petitions for allotments to be made permanent followed. In Walsall, the committee decided not to continue with some wartime allotment sites because of the cost of leasing the land, but this did not mean all the wartime allotments were surrendered. Under the 1922 Allotments Act, sixteen areas of land were retained, but this reprieve was short-lived in most cases. By 1924, only Earl Street, Queen Street, West Bromwich Road, Hospital Street and Wednesbury Road remained and, of these, just Hospital Street was still being cultivated by the end of the decade.

After a period of the decline during the 1930s, the number of allotments in Walsall, as in other areas, began to rise at the beginning of the Second World War. During the first nine months of the war, 385 permanent and wartime allotments were let (Walsall Committee, May 1940). In February 1940, the council was authorised by the government to take any necessary steps to secure land for cultivation. As a result, a number of possible sites were inspected and new land pegged out. In some cases, these were new sites, but others were extensions of existing allotments. The importance of providing allotments at this time is indicated by the fact that the committee requested that the borough surveyor gave, "priority of attention to work requested in connection with the pegging out of new land, repairs to fencing and work generally associated with the allotment movement" (Walsall Committee, May 1940). From 1941, more than one hundred plots were provided in the Arboretum extension. As in other boroughs, playing fields were also brought into cultivation. The number of allotments in the borough peaked in 1942/3.

Towards the end of the war, the committee set out plans for the future development of allotments in Walsall:

*Your committee is endeavouring to provide suitable alternative sites for allottees who are likely to be deprived of their plots during the next ten years* (Walsall Committee Annual Report, 1944-5).

As had happened after the First World War, the committee attempted to turn some temporary sites into permanent allotments. In 1945, it adopted a policy of rationalisation similar to those undertaken in other boroughs. In all cases where allotments were not being cultivated fully, collectors were instructed to enquire if the holder intend to cultivate their land and if not, they were given authority to relet it, "at their discretion" (Walsall Committee Annual Report, 1945-46). As part of its post-war planning, the committee intended to establish some new allotment sites; for example, in 1949, it planned was to transfer allotment holders from the wartime plots on the land at the rear of the King's Head Hotel, Blakenall to Yew Tree Lane in order to release land for housing.

As a result of this policy, there was quite a steep decline in the number of plots in the latter half of the 1940s, but in 1950, the number of plots was still above its pre-war level. By the mid 1950s, the secretary of the Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association spoke of the lack of interest in the allotment movement and at the council's annual inspection, "it was evident to your committee that, with certain exceptions, the decline in cultivation of plots had not been arrested" (Walsall Committee, Feb 1955). The committee was forced to continue the process of consolidation, grassing down derelict sites and reorganising the remaining plots into compact groups to facilitate fencing and general maintenance.

Between 1953 and 1963, the number of allotments in Walsall more than halved. At the same time, the number of vacant plots also declined suggesting that at least some of the allotment holders who were forced to give up their plots took vacancies on other sites. In 1961, the annual inspection of allotments paid particular attention "to land not utilised to good advantage" so appropriate sites could be offered to other committees for development and grassing down for play areas (Walsall Committee, Dec 1961). By December 1962, the situation appeared to have stabilised; it was reported that:

*The general decline in the number of allotments being rented appears less than in previous years and it is hoped that the policy of the concentration of plots within smaller areas and the grassing down of the larger uncultivated areas is having good effect. The position is now reasonably static and groups where most of the plots are cultivated receive appropriate action with regard to continued repairs and improvements to existing facilities (Walsall Committee, Dec 1962).*

This period of consolidation was followed by limited expansion in the latter half of the 1960s. Under West Midlands Order 1965, an additional eleven sites and 185 plots were brought into cultivation and a number of sites were renamed (Walsall Committee Annual Report, 1966-7).

By the end of 1974, there were no vacancies and waiting lists were reported at all thirty-two sites in Walsall. In this year, two new sites were established and fifty-six other gardens were created or brought back into cultivation on existing sites. In 1975, the committee admitted that they had, "been unable to meet the ever-increasing demand owing to the unavailability of land and lack of finance" (Walsall Committee Annual Report, 1975-6). In the late 1970s, the committee secured small additional areas of land in Dingle and at Delves Green Road. This limited expansion continued in the early 1980s, when new sites were created at Winterley Lane and Grange Crescent. The number of allotments had returned to the levels of the early 1950s by the late 1980s.

In 1997, there were thirty-seven statutory allotment sites in Walsall, covering a total of almost forty-one acres, making the average site just over an acre in size. The smallest was a site of just three allotments, while the largest had 110 plots on 4.31 acres. There were 1,432 plots available overall; only 16% of these (223) were vacant or not used as allotments and two-fifths of sites (15) had no vacancies at all (NSALG, 1997).

## *Wolverhampton*

Many of the records relating to allotment holding in Wolverhampton before 1920 are missing from the Local Studies Centre. However, it is known that at least sixty-six sites were acquired during the First World War under the Defence of the Realm Act. These varied considerably in size, the smallest was a single plot of 320 square yards, while the largest could accommodate 176 allotment holders.

In the early 1920s, it was decided that some of the allotment sites acquired during the First World War were not large enough to justify permanent acquisition, while others had to be surrendered for building purposes or because of a lack of demand. Nevertheless, some new allotment sites were created in the 1920s. In total, there were 2,143 allotments in Wolverhampton in 1921, occupying 154 acres of land. This represented one allotment per 63 inhabitants (*Express and Star*, 19 Apr 1921). Over the next few years, the council sought to rationalise allotment provision. In March 1923, it gave up 305 plots, but this still left 136 acres of land providing around 2,000 plots. It was calculated that twenty acres would be needed to provide land for the displaced allotment holders, but this proved difficult to find. The Borough Engineer reported, "I do not think there remains any ground in the Borough which might now be purchased by the committee to let as allotments" (Wolverhampton Committee, 3.1.23). The corporation made enquiries about land outside the borough boundary, but tenants would have to travel and so there were doubts whether there would be sufficient demand.

By September 1925, the total number of plots in Wolverhampton had declined to 813. The largest site was Dunstall Road with 115 plots. However, there were also a number of very small sites, for example, Park Road West had just seven plots and Mill Lane, five (Wolverhampton Committee, 30.9.25). In 1927, the borough boundary was extended, bringing five additional sites under the control of the Small Holdings and Allotments Committee. This made a total of 714 temporary and 184 permanent allotments. The majority of sites were almost, or completely, tenanted; there were only eighteen vacancies in total in 1929 (Wolverhampton Committee, 2.10.29). However, acquiring land close to potential allotment holders' homes was still not easy. At the beginning of 1934,

the Borough Engineer reported, "there is considerable difficulty in obtaining land for allotments within a reasonable distance from the centre of the town" (Wolverhampton Committee, 17.1.34). However, by the late 1930s, there was generally no shortage of plots despite the fact that Wolverhampton had considerably fewer permanent allotments than neighbouring areas. The only permanent sites were Jones Road, where 97 of the 133 plots (73%) were tenanted; and Showell Road where 120 of the 178 plots (67%) that had so far been pegged out had been taken. On leased sites, there were 418 plots, 370 of which (89%) were tenanted. There were only four people on the waiting list and these were waiting for plots on particular sites (Wolverhampton Committee, 12.1.37).

As was the case elsewhere, immediately after the outbreak of the Second World War, a number of new applicants quickly came forward; there had been 150 enquiries by mid October 1939 (Wolverhampton Committee, 13.10.39). Even during the Second World War, demand varied considerably across the borough. For instance, land lay idle at Showell Road, while Penn experienced a significant increase in applications. The greatest number of applications at this time were received from Whitmore Reams, the Compton Road area, Bradmore, Fordhouses and Moreton Road and in early 1941, extra council land was brought under cultivation, creating some fairly large sites. Supplementing the 1,310 council owned allotments were sites provided by industrial concerns and private enterprise such as Bolton Paul Sports Club, Courtaulds and Goodyear Tyre and Rubber Company. The Society of Friends provided allotments in Woodhall Road. In addition, Blakenhall, Cyprus Road, Finchfield Road and Bradmore Road recreation grounds were all turned into allotment sites in 1941.

Despite the fact that 2,228 allotments had been created since the outbreak of war, in March 1942, 168 people were on the waiting list and the committee reported that more applications were being received daily. To accommodate additional allotment holders, it was decided to reduce the size of plots and take over gardens of unoccupied houses for allotments (Wolverhampton Committee, 19.3.42). By July 1942, all the identified demand for allotments had been satisfied. In November 1943, there were just over 3,000 council allotments in the borough. However, when Housing Committee and private allotments were

included, the figure was estimated to be 8,000 (Wolverhampton Committee, 10.11.43). Early in 1944, the use of allotment sites after the war began to be discussed. It was proposed to create permanent sites at Sandy Lane and Bushbury Lane. Petitions were also received from allotment holders at Victoria Avenue, Alderseley, Crowther Road, Newbridge, Coalway Road and Compton Road. The committee attempted to retain those sites which enjoyed a reasonable degree of popularity.

In 1950, it was noted that a significant proportion of allotment land had been out of production for the previous two years. As Table 2 shows, a number of sites were given up at this time. In some cases, this was due to a lack of demand, but in others, land was required for housing or recreational development. Alternative accommodation was usually offered to allotment holders, but very few did, in fact, apply for another plot.

<b>Site</b>	<b>Number of plots</b>	<b>Number of plots tenanted</b>	<b>Reason for surrender</b>
Springhill Avenue, Penn	6	6	Building
Bhylls Lane	8	0	Lack of demand
Massbrook Grove, Fallings Park	11	0	Lack of demand
Deans Road, Moseley Village	47	0	Lack of demand
Park Lane Nursery	70	20	Lack of demand due to rats and pilfering
Green Drive, Oxley	6	0	Required for Territorial Army
Bradmore Playing Fields	26	22	Recreation ground
Carlton Road Orphanage	18	18	Extension of playing fields
Marston Road	12	10	Proposed canteen
Windsor Road	43	25	Extension of playing fields
Trysull Road	20	20	Housing
Merridale Road	41	29	Flat building
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>308</b>	<b>150</b>	

*Table 2: Allotment sites surrendered* (source: Wolverhampton Committee, 14.11.50)

Under the Town and Country Planning Act of 1947, provision for allotments was to be made as part of local development plans. Four acres per thousand population was recommended, but Wolverhampton planned for less than this because land was so scarce in the borough. The areas least well provided for were Willenhall Road, Penn/Bradmore and Oxley/Fordhouses.

In the early 1950s, further sites were relinquished. Although in some cases, this was because of a lack of demand, the Small Holdings and Allotments Committee was unable to retain some of the most popular sites. This left 708 plots in the borough, 77% of which were under cultivation. In addition, there were twelve wartime sites providing a further 181 plots. Just 18% of these temporary plots were vacant, but these sites were generally small. Other council departments owned twenty-three sites, accounting for a further 774 plots (Wolverhampton Committee, 11.3.52). As late as 1954, wartime allotment sites were still in existence. In fact, some temporary sites created during the Second World War were still being cultivated as late as the 1970s. In some cases, the owners wanted to see the land returned to its previous use, but providing the majority of plots were cultivated and there was no other suitable land nearby, such applications were usually rejected. Nevertheless, a number of sites were given up around this time. Popularity varied considerably from site to site in the late 1950s and early 1960s. In general, small and medium sized sites tended to be the most popular. In 1965 provision was reviewed and it was found that the total acreage had halved since 1952 as allotment land had been developed for other purposes. In the following year, it was acknowledged that:

*Allotment areas are unevenly spaced in the town, particularly those on land which it is later proposed to use for other purposes and this is no doubt a factor behind the large number of vacancies* (Wolverhampton Committee, 6.6.66).

By 1967, there were twenty-three sites in the borough with a total of 1,470 plots (Wolverhampton Committee, 6.3.67). Between 1969 and 1971 a small number of large poorly cultivated sites were reduced in size or taken over for development, reducing the allotment stock to sixty-eight acres. However, it would appear that demand for plots had not declined quite so rapidly as provision. While only 53% of allotment land was cultivated in 1961 and just 42% in 1964, there appears to have been a resurgence in the latter half of the 1960s, so by 1971, 90% of the land available for use as allotments was being cultivated. In the early 1970s, the eighteen principal allotment sites in Wolverhampton covered 73.6 acres. There were also more than thirty-four small sites, but these were often poorly cultivated and regarded as temporary, even though some had, in fact, been in existence for twenty years. Most lacked basic facilities; many

were basically garden extensions with limited access and a good number had not been cultivated for a number of years and were overgrown (County Borough of Wolverhampton, 1971).

In 1971, a new site was proposed at Howell Road to replace the Birmingham Road allotments and in September 1972, a new allotment site was proposed at Parkfield to provide plots for the allotment holders displaced from the Borough Hospital site. However, the distribution of sites remained irregular, with the major sites being located in the west of the borough, close to the main areas of housing. In 1973, the *Wolverhampton Chronicle* reported a boom in allotment holding; there had been a 10% increase in the number of people applying for plots over the past year. There was limited expansion in the 1980s. A number of small sites were developed on new housing estates to provide allotments close to people's homes (*Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 5 September 1973).

In 2002, there were thirty-two council-owned allotment sites in Wolverhampton. The highest concentration of sites was to be found in the west of the town, in the Oxley, Tettenhall<sup>26</sup> and Merry Hill areas; there were few sites near to the town centre. As people moved further from the town centre during the course of the twentieth century, allotments followed. This meant that they gradually became, essentially, part of the landscape of the suburbs and housing estates rather than being situated at the heart of the urban landscape (Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council, 2000).

### *Dudley*

Allotment activity in Dudley appears to have effectively begun during the First World War; before 1916, there were no reported council allotments. However, following the Cultivation of Lands Order, Dudley Allotments Committee immediately requisitioned land in Simms Lane, Netherton; Wellington Road; and Buffrey. More land was required the following year and by the end of April 1917, a total of 375 allotments had been provided in the borough (Dudley Committee, 24.4.17). Some of this land was already owned by the corporation, but the other

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<sup>26</sup> As Tettenhall was not part of Wolverhampton until 1966, it does not feature in the analysis of Wolverhampton allotment holders.

major landowner involved in the provision of allotments was the Earl of Dudley. There were also a number of smaller landowners, such as Dudley Canal Company. This was not sufficient to satisfy demand for wartime allotments however and the council continued to requisition land. By early June 1917, there were 600 wartime allotments and the total reached 1,102 by the end of the year (Dudley Committee, 4.12.17). Although the pace of expansion then slowed, more land continued to be requisitioned, suggesting the demand for allotments had not been met even at this late stage of the war. This meant that at the start of the 1918 growing season, there were 1,473 war plots and ninety-seven permanent allotments in Dudley (Dudley Committee, 5.3.18). The rate of expansion slowed noticeably during 1918, but small areas continued to be requisitioned to meet demand in certain areas of the borough.

There was soon pressure on allotment land to make way for post-war building and those allotment holders who had been provided with land in the public parks for the duration of the war were given notice to quit. To attempt to compensate for these losses, the Small Holdings and Allotments Committee acquired new land in Netherton and Coseley. This meant that, ironically, the number of wartime allotments continued to rise even after peace had been declared; there were 1,689 by mid 1921 (Dudley Committee, 24.5.21). Although there were vacancies in certain areas, there was a need for yet more land in other parts of the borough to provide plots near to potential allotment holders' homes.

The pressure on allotments eased in the early 1920s. In particular, there was a falling off in the demand for very large allotments. Some sites were measured and remodelled, partly in response to changing needs, but also to reassert the committee's control over the sites where tenants had been exchanging plots without authority. The total number of allotments almost halved between 1924 and 1931 as areas were taken for alternative uses. However, overall, the number of allotment holders rose slightly during the early to mid 1930s. This was followed by a gradual decline during the remainder of the decade and in April 1939, there were just 729 allotments in Dudley (Dudley Committee, 24.4.39).

The outbreak of war had an immediate impact on demand for allotments; by November 1939, there were 201 applications. One hundred and fifty of these could be allocated to vacant plots and thirty-eight were given allotments on new sites, but there were no allotments sufficiently near to the homes of the remaining applicants (Dudley Committee, 21.11.39). After this initial flurry, the demand slowed, but publicity and the start of the growing season stimulated further interest and, in spring 1940, action was taken to create new plots in areas where demand was greatest. The number of applications tailed off during the remainder of the year, but in 1941, demand increased more sharply. The number of allotment holders was more than double the immediate pre-war figure by the beginning of 1942, when there were 1,489, plus another twenty-five applicants who had not yet been granted plots (Dudley Committee, 13.3.42). Some new plots were marked out, but the remainder of applicants could not be accommodated because they had applied for allotments at sites which were fully tenanted. Eight new sites were created and all these plots were taken immediately. However, demand slowed in 1943 and the number of applications was lower than it had been earlier in the war. At the end of 1945, there were 1,576 allotments in total in Dudley. Four hundred and fifty-two new plots were provided by the corporation during the course of the war and 92% of these were tenanted. The number of private allotments also rose roughly three-fold (Dudley Committee, 7.12.45).

Demand for allotments in certain districts declined rapidly after peace was declared and in 1947, several sites were relinquished. As had been the case after the First World War, peacetime reconstruction led to pressure on allotment land to be used for alternative purposes. At the end of 1947, there were fifty-seven sites in Dudley, but many of these were poorly tenanted and within a year, the number had fallen to fifty-four (Dudley Committee, 19.11.48).

The 1950s and 1960s saw a dramatic reduction in the number of allotments available. However, the number of plots actually cultivated fell even more quickly. By 1951, the number of plots had fallen below the previous nadir of 1938 and decline continued in the following decades. Some sites were simply given up because of a lack of interest rather than a positive demand for alternative use. For example, Castle Mill was reported to be "completely

overgrown with grass and weeds and did not appear to have been cultivated for some time" (Dudley Committee, 7.1.58). Very few new applications for allotments were received in the late 1950s.

In the early 1960s, sites continued to be given up if there was an obvious lack of interest. The least popular sites frequently experienced problems with vandalism and theft and there was generally little opposition to their being given up, either from allotment holders or the local community. However, in other instances, allotment holders fought against attempts to close their sites. When Barnett Lane was wanted for a residential development in 1965, the NSALG intervened and, as a result, the site was retained for allotment use. In 1966, there were seven permanent and nine temporary allotment sites in central Dudley, and a further twenty-five permanent and nine temporary sites in the surrounding areas of Brierley Hill, Coseley and Sedgley. In total, only 420 of the 754 allotments in the borough were occupied in 1966 (Dudley Committee, 12.7.66).

During the early 1970s, there were only very minor fluctuations in the numbers of allotments let. However, this appears to have been, at least in part, due to the fact that there were insufficient plots to meet demand. In 1975, there was a waiting list of more than 500 in Dudley, and Wordsley and District Gardeners' Guild reported a waiting list of five years (*Express and Star*, 15 September 1975). The situation had not been resolved by 1983, when it was reported that there were 268 people on the waiting list for allotments (*Express and Star*, 19 January 1983).

In 2002, there were forty-four sites under the control of Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council; a total of 1,103 plots covering more than sixty-six acres of land. This represented one plot for every 277 inhabitants. Of these, just 127 (11.5%) were recorded as being vacant or temporarily out of use, with nine sites having no vacancies at all. However, eight sites were not in use at all and a number had a high proportion of vacant plots. Nineteen of the sites were statutory sites and these tended to be larger. The size of the average site was 1.66 acres, with the largest being 9.43 and the smallest 0.09 acres (NSALG, 1997).

## **Appearance**

Allotments are stereotyped in the literature as ramshackle and dilapidated; there would appear to be little co-ordination or organisation and no visible management of sites. Allotments have been accused of having a negative impact on the local environment. The general appearance of some sites can be off-putting, with sheds being a particular problem. For example, in the 1930s, Wolverhampton Smallholding and Allotments Committee reported that, "persistent untidiness alienates public support and makes the future of allotments more insecure". It believed a small minority of allotment holders, "through carelessness and neglect spoil the otherwise pleasing effect of the whole group and get allotments a bad name" (Wolverhampton Committee, 14.2.36). Untidy sites alienated the local community and meant that allotment holders would be unlikely to be able to count on the support of local residents if their sites came under threat from developers. There were frequent references in the council minutes in all three boroughs throughout the twentieth century to objections from local residents regarding the appearance of allotment sites.

However, contrary to such external appearances, the regulation of allotment sites was, in fact, highly structured and stringent. Whoever assumed responsibility for site management, the council, allotment association or other management group, they would attempt to enforce rules and standards regarding the cultivation of plots. It has been argued that allotments awarded urban dwellers with a freedom they lacked at work by providing them with an area of land which they could choose to cultivate and use as they wished. However, in practice, allotment holders were subject to numerous regulations regarding the use of their plots.

On a day-to-day basis, the majority of sites were managed by an allotment association; these usually had a formal committee with a chair, treasurer and secretary. Just over half the sites in Dudley (23) had their own society in 2002 and a further four were affiliated to a larger society, while in Walsall, just one site had no society (NSALG, 1997). However, according to the stereotype, allotment association rules have relatively little impact on the appearance of sites. This may be because most allotment holders are primarily interested in

cultivating their own plots, with relatively few wishing to become involved in the management or improvement of their sites. FP-WS told how Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association had folded because there were only four or five people who turned up to the meetings. Likewise, HM-D reported that a number of local horticultural societies had been forced to close in recent years due to declining interest. However, as FP-WS recalled, like allotments themselves, the fortunes of associations have gone up and down in the past:

*...it sort of went defunct, our association, for a time and then there was a Mr B... took it over and he started to...you know, he organised it and he collected the rents and everything and... He made a, quite success of it, our allotment association.*

Interest in associations has, therefore, fluctuated over time, usually reflecting the popularity of allotment holding in general. A number of new associations were created immediately after the First World War to represent allotment holders on some of the new sites which had recently been established in the Black Country. Similarly, new associations were formed during the Second World War, another boom period for allotments. While some allotment holders did not object to local association rules, seeing them as being established for the benefit of all, others questioned regulations or openly ignored them, doubtless contributing to the stereotypical haphazard appearance of allotment sites. In some cases, this resulted in action by the local authority or site association to bring them into line, not to mention the censure of their fellow allotment holders. It was not always simply a case of over-zealous bureaucrats enforcing regulations; sometimes the council received complaints from other allotment holders. When plots were not cultivated, weeds created problems for other gardeners.

There have been attempts to establish national standards for allotment cultivation. The 1916 Cultivation of Lands Order established general standards for the cultivation of allotments and also stipulated the types of crops which could be grown and the uses to which the land could be put. At this time, it was clear that allotments were primarily intended for the production of basic foodstuffs:

*The allotment holders will be required to grow potatoes, peas, beans or other substantial foodstuffs, not being luxury foods and will also be required to cultivate their allotments well and properly and not use the same for grazing (cited in Dudley Committee, Dec 1916).*

Local councils expanded on this statement and established strict rules to control the standards of cultivation; types of produce grown; other uses of allotment land; and the appearance of sites. Under the conditions of letting for wartime allotments in Dudley, tenants were to keep the allotment free from weeds, well-manured and "in a proper state of cultivation"; to grow potatoes or peas, beans, parsnips, turnips, carrots, cabbages, cauliflowers, onions or similar basic crops; not to use the allotment for grazing; to ensure trees and shrubs were not "injurious or an annoyance to any adjacent allotments"; to keep hedges properly cut; not to use any building as a dwelling house; not to keep fowls, pigeons, pigs or other animals without the corporation's permission; not to sublet; to keep fences in good repair; and to ensure no rubbish was thrown on paths or roads (Dudley Committee, 5.3.18). The use of allotments was, therefore, quite rigidly regulated; they were seen as a facility for the growing of basic foodstuffs and were to be kept tidy and not used for other purposes.

There is evidence to suggest that regulations were equally strict in other areas of the Black Country and that councils attempted to enforce rules in the face of a good deal of non-compliance from allotment holders. There was concern over the neglect of allotments in Walsall in 1914, when the Town Clerk was asked to ascertain whether allotment holders on the Ryecroft site were "neglecting to cultivate their allotments" (Walsall Committee, 27.4.14). It was discovered that sixteen were not properly cultivating their plots and these were informed that, unless the conditions of letting, which included keeping the plot properly cultivated, were complied with, they would be given notice to quit. In 1926, the committee threatened to resume possession of allotments in Forest Lane, Walsall unless the weeds were cut back because the land was not being properly cultivated (Walsall Committee, 23.8.26). In other cases, there were complaints about a particular allotment holder rather than a whole site. For instance, in 1928, Mr Barner of Darlaston Road in Walsall was accused of keeping his land in an untidy condition, with "a lot of iron, old tins etc strewn about" (Walsall

Committee, 10.1.28). The situation was similar in Wolverhampton where, in 1925, several allotment holders on Dunstall Lane and Woden allotments were served with notice to quit for improper or non-cultivation.

In general, there is evidence that standards of cultivation, and therefore the appearance of sites, improved during the Second World War possibly because of increased pressure to cultivate all available land as efficiently as possible. However, even at this time, there were reports of allotments not being cultivated properly. After 1945, it would seem that a greater proportion of allotment holders began to neglect their plots. There were a number of problems reported in Dudley during the 1950s. For example, although almost all the plots on Bluebell Road were tenanted, some were not cultivated and weeds had become "a source of annoyance to other plot holders" (Dudley Committee, 8.9.53) and, in 1958, Castle Mill was reported to be "now completely overgrown with grass and weeds and did not appear to have been cultivated for some time" (Dudley Committee, 7.1.58). From 1968, allotment holders in Wolverhampton had to give six months' notice in writing if they wished to give up their tenancy. This system was intended to put to an end to the ordeal of new tenants having to clear up after the previous allotment holder. For similar reasons, Sandy Lane Allotments and Gardens Association required new tenants to pay a five pound deposit which would only be refunded on the termination of their tenancy once it had been established that the plot had been left in a satisfactory condition. However, this scheme had to be abandoned as it discouraged the recruitment of new tenants (Dudley Committee, 4.3.68). Problems in controlling the appearance of sites persisted; in 1972, out of the ninety-three plots in use on Dunstall Lane, Wolverhampton fifteen were in a poor condition because they were not properly cultivated (Wolverhampton Committee, 20.12.72) and in 1981, it was reported that there was evidence of very little, if any, cultivation on a number of plots on Penn Road, Redhouse Road and Sandy Lane (Wolverhampton Committee Annual Report, 1981/2).

The attitudes of local authorities to the keeping of livestock on allotments varied from area to area and over time. In the early twentieth century, providing they obtained permission, allotment holders in Dudley were allowed to keep pigs, poultry and rabbits, "where this can be done without creating a nuisance". In

1918, the Council said it had no objection to pig keeping "in suitable places satisfactory to the sanitary inspector" (Dudley Committee, 19.2.18). However, local property owners often objected to this practice. In 1916, complaints were received about pig keeping on allotments in Walsall, but the committee did not intervene providing sties were properly constructed (Walsall Committee, 24.7.16). This was supported by government policy; in the following year, the Board of Agriculture circulated a letter emphasising the desirability of pig keeping. The Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries also encouraged poultry keeping on allotments in the early twentieth century. In 1920, it published a circular suggesting ways to improve strains of poultry and increase egg supply. Allotment committees, therefore, began to view the keeping of poultry more favourably. There is evidence that some allotment holders in Walsall had constructed fowl runs on their plots before this date, but to help to promote greater interest, the Walsall Fur and Feather Society was established (Walsall Committee, 10.5.20). Allotment holding has links with another traditional working class hobby: pigeon fancying. There is evidence that some Black Country allotment holders kept pigeons, but this often led to complaints from local residents and other allotment holders.

Attitudes towards the keeping of livestock on allotments appeared to harden in the 1930s and 1940s. For instance, Dudley Allotments and Smallholdings Committee became visibly less supportive of livestock rearing. In 1947, it refused to grant approval to keep bees on allotments or for the erection of a pigsty (Dudley Committee, 14.11.47). Although, in 1926, Walsall Committee had allowed pigsties to be erected, by 1939, it too was not so amenable to this use of allotment land. However, the need to produce food during the Second World War led to a reversal in attitudes toward pig keeping and in 1941, the committee agreed to the erection of a number of pigsties. In Wolverhampton and Dudley, however, even during the Second World War, allotment holders were informed that they could not keep pigs and were discouraged, although not forbidden, from keeping poultry. Nevertheless, it would seem that a number of allotment holders ignored this instruction<sup>27</sup>. There is evidence that the need to produce more food at home and, perhaps, continued resistance from allotment holders

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<sup>27</sup> For instance, in 1941, a complaint was received about a piggery on Leslie Road allotments in Heath Town (Wolverhampton Committee, 17.9.41).

forced a change in attitudes, in Wolverhampton at least, later in the war. In 1944, a Pig Club Committee was formed by Fordhouses Allotments and Gardens Association and the committee finally agreed to pigs being kept on some sites. This practice continued into the 1950s; by 1953, a number of tenants had erected pigsties on Jones Road; they claimed that keeping pigs was more profitable than vegetable growing because they were likely to suffer less damage and loss from trespassing (Wolverhampton Committee, 9.11.54).

Livestock keeping, which had been quite prevalent in the early part of the twentieth century, despite often been officially discouraged at times, gradually became less common. This occurred partly because there was less necessity to keep animals to support the household and also because of stricter controls. Interviewees rarely mentioned the keeping of livestock. LT-D remembered how, years ago people kept chickens, and even rabbits, on allotments. There were only two contemporary references; BD-WV said they were currently thinking about keeping chickens on his allotment and on GG-WV's site, one allotment holder kept bees.

Although council Small Holdings and Allotments Committees established rules controlling allotment cultivation, they only became involved when a major problem was brought to their attention. The poor cultivation of plots was an issue addressed more regularly by local associations. Allotment secretaries played a vital role in helping them to control sites; Walsall Committee admitted, "It would appear that their condition depends to a considerable extent on the enthusiasm of the collector and secretary" (Walsall Committee, Dec 1957). Rent collectors were another means of ensuring high standards of cultivation. In the 1920s, the duties of rent collectors had been extended beyond simply collecting money on behalf of the council. In addition to filling vacant plots, they were instructed to ensure paths and roadways were kept clean and free from weeds (Walsall Committee, 24.2.22). Another means of encouraging higher standards of cultivation in the post-war years was to organise allotment inspections. BP-D explained that allotment associations were just as keen to improve the appearance of sites at the end of the twentieth century, for example, tidying up sheds and keeping uncultivated plots covered to prevent weeds spreading. A

number of associations bought tools such as rotavators and strimmers for allotment holders to borrow to encourage them to keep the site tidy.

Competitions were another method of encouraging high standards of cultivation among allotment holders and overcoming the uncared for traditional stereotype. Those who were keen competitors thought there were advantages for the whole allotment community. The high standard required not only meant that the plots of competitors were well looked after, but also encouraged others on the site:

*It helps to keep the standard up you know 'cause people try to win these competitions (BS-D)*

*If you're on that plot there and I'm here...if mine's immaculate and all the stuff is looking great, it gives you an incentive to do the same or vice versa, that's my view. So, probably, if you've got one on a site who can do that, it may make the others think a little bit more, not to grow up to standard for competition, but to improve their standard (AR-WV).*

Some competitions were organised on a national basis with the aim of raising standards throughout the allotment community. For instance, from 1934, the National Allotments Society offered a fifty guinea Challenge Shield for the area showing the greatest improvement during that year. This did not aim to discover the best plot, site or area, but "to encourage collective improvement in the amenity standard of all groups in specified areas" (Wolverhampton Committee, 14.2.36). It intended to contribute to making allotments more acceptable to the public, thereby gaining wider support. There were also local competitions with similar aims. In the 1930s, plots in Dudley were judged according to the method of cultivation of vegetables and fruit; system of crop rotation; general layout; and cleanliness (Dudley Committee, 13.12.38). In 1949, allotment holders entering the Walsall Growing Crops competition had their plots judged on the cropping scheme, superior work and cleanliness as well as the crops grown (Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association Growing Crops Record Book and Prize winners, 1945-96).

During the Second World War, there were initiatives to encourage new allotment holders and to establish national standards which all allotment holders should

aim for. Certificates of Merit were awarded by the Ministry of Agriculture and Food to allotment holders who, in the opinion of the judges, merited an award. The scheme was introduced in Walsall and Dudley in 1941. In the first year, sixty-three people from Walsall entered and eleven certificates were awarded. Popularity peaked in 1944, when there were 125 entries, sixty-nine of whom were felt to deserve certificates (Walsall Committee Annual Report, 1943-4). This scheme was continued into peacetime and appears to have remained popular. However, such initiatives would only ever attract a minority of allotment holders.

It is clear that, whatever the official view of allotment cultivation and formal attempts to enforce or encourage high standards of cultivation, the way in which individual ploholders worked their land was highly idiosyncratic, contributing to the stereotype of allotment sites as 'awkward' and ramshackle. However, it is also apparent that many allotment holders took a great deal of pride in the appearance of their plots and ensured that they were well managed. The management and cultivation of individual plots has been awarded little attention in the existing literature. The examples related below illustrate some of the ways in which allotment holders gave a great deal of care and consideration to the way in which they cultivated their land; their approach was a long way from the haphazard stereotype.

A number of interviewees commented on the variation, in terms of both what was grown and the way in which it was grown by different allotment holders. BP-D was one who reflected at length on the diversity to be found on just one site where the mix of fruit, flowers, vegetables and trees varied from plot to plot. Some allotment holders preferred organic methods, while others concentrated on growing unusual varieties which they were unable to buy in the shops. Although information about the way in which allotments were cultivated can be found in the documentary sources, it was clear from interviewees' comments that this was only part of the picture and a great deal of knowledge and skills were not written down, but gained through contact with other allotment holders and personal experience. Allotment holders were well aware that people chose to cultivate their plots in different ways; while there was no single "right way", most developed their own habits and methods which suited their style of gardening.

The popularity of crops grown on allotments fluctuated over time. In the early years of the twentieth century, the emphasis was on more basic produce. During the First World War, even potatoes and parsnips rose in price, making it essential for many people to grow their own; there were even fears of a potato shortage in 1917 (*Weekly Dispatch*, 1917). Other crops commonly grown on allotments at this time were carrots, onions, peas and radishes (*Weekly Dispatch*, 1918). In the 1920s, EE-WS remembered most allotment holders grew mainly potatoes as these "were the staple diet then" and most also grew peas, parsnips and carrots. Even among those entering competitions, the range of produce was fairly limited. In 1922 prizes were awarded in the Walsall Town Hall Show for white potatoes, carrots, leeks, parsnips, onions, celery and tomatoes. From its foundation in 1922, Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association held a number of shows each year. Based on the number of entries for each class, it would appear that the most popular allotment crops at this time were basic produce such as potatoes, onions, long beet, leeks and parsnips, but also flowers (Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association Show Programmes).

By the 1930s, however, allotment holders were urged not to grow potatoes because these were so cheap to buy; one of the many gardening guides published at this time recommended a wider variety of vegetables including: spinach, artichokes, broad beans, runner beans, beetroot, broccoli, herbs, cauliflowers, horseradish, lettuces, marrows, peas, radishes, rhubarb, salsify, scorzonera, shallots and tomatoes (Thomas, 1936). The Second World War heralded a return to more basic produce. MS-WV said that the crops grown on his wartime site, parsnips, carrots, beetroot and purple sprouting broccoli, were deliberately chosen because they were hardy enough to withstand frosts. Again, "potatoes were prolific". Very few grew flowers because the land was needed for food production and people were encouraged to concentrate on crops with the greatest food value and protein content, particularly green and root vegetables. Contemporary experts also suggested that varieties which saved space should be favoured, for example, dwarf beans and bush marrows (Bush, 1943).

After the war, there was, once again, diversification in the types of crops to be found on allotments. Although the crops judged in the Palfrey and Delves growing crops competition had remained almost the same for forty years, they

began to change somewhat in the 1960s to include marrows, shallots, lettuce, radishes, maize, artichokes, kohlrabi and spring onions. During the 1960s and 1970s, produce became increasingly specialised. For example, prizes were introduced for different types of beans and shallots. In particular, the number of flower categories expanded greatly; by 1979, there were forty-one classes of flowers compared with just eleven in 1961 (Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association Growing Crops Record Book and Prize winners, 1945-96). However, even in the 1990s, the classes of vegetables in Walsall Horticultural Show remained largely traditional: potatoes, runner and dwarf beans, peas, shallots, marrows, beetroot, carrots, parsnips, cabbage, cauliflower, onions, celery, leeks, salad, tomatoes and cucumber (Walsall and District Gardeners' Mutual Improvement Association records).

From interviews, it was possible to identify a number of crops which were being grown by the vast majority of allotment holders in the 1990s; these were mainly traditional, indigenous crops: potatoes, cabbage, cauliflower, onions, leeks, beans, peas, carrots, sprouts, parsnips, broccoli, lettuce and spring onions. However, a number of allotment holders also grew more unusual vegetables. For example, BH-WV grew red onions, pumpkins, chillies and peppers and DH-D grew kohlrabi, Scotch kale and asparagus. Some chose to concentrate on particular crops; HM-D grew a selection of salad crops, while BM-D preferred fruit. Certain allotment holders had established a reputation for growing certain vegetables. For instance, BA-D claimed to be known locally for his Welsh onions. Specialisation meant that even crops which had generally declined in popularity since the early twentieth century, such as potatoes, were still grown, but now allotment holders were likely to be more selective about the varieties they grew; for example, RD-WV and BD-WV said they grew varieties to suit different cooking methods.

The crops they chose to grow were crucial to most allotment holders. HM-D preferred older varieties of vegetables. JR-D said she chose some varieties which would be at their peak at Christmas so she could give them as presents, but for her own use, she preferred "more old fashioned varieties" which matured over a longer period and had a better flavour. Storage potential influenced some allotment holders in their choice of crops; some chose those which froze well or

could be preserved. RD-WV and BD-WV grew a number of unusual varieties such as pea-beans and liked to experiment with new crops like lemongrass and imported seeds such as Italian yellow beans. This experimental approach was important to them and they kept a computer database to record what they grew each year and how successful it had been. Even long-established allotment holders were not averse to experimenting; LT-D had grown sweetcorn for the first time in 2002 after another allotment holder had given him some to try:

*...one of the West Indian blokes came over to me, in September last year and he gave us several [sweetcorn]. He grows 'em similar as I've grown 'em this year. We've been absolutely amazed by the results; we've done very well with them.*

Mange tout was another new vegetable for LT-D; he had grown it for the previous six or seven years and he was constantly trying new varieties of more established crops, such as climbing French beans and charlotte potatoes. Many interviewees described how they discovered their preferences through trial and error. AM-WS said he had tried different types of vegetables over the years; some were successes, but others he did not like:

*Over the years, I've just about grown everything [laughs]. I've tried somethings that are not usually grown like celeriac and things like that, but we didn't particularly like those.*

A number of interviewees commented on the crops grown by different nationalities. For instance, allotment holders from the Asian community grew large quantities of onions as well as garlic and coriander, while Afro-Caribbean gardeners favoured red beans and pumpkins. Some allotment holders grew some varieties just for showing:

*We used to grow special vegetables as well, you had to grown two or three different sorts, like Chinese cabbage and Chinese lettuce and all that...we always growed summat different and they judge you on those you see... (RM-WS).*

RM-WS acknowledged that he was prepared to spend quite a lot of money on seeds and other supplies because he wanted to put in the extra effort to win shows. Most of those who were more serious competitors tended to specialise. A number concentrated on flowers for showing, while they grew vegetables

primarily for consumption. Although they have sometimes been prohibited by local authorities throughout the twentieth century, most allotment holders grew flowers as well as fruit and vegetables. AR-WV said that, in his experience:

*...the general trend was about ten percent of the site, the plot, was flowers and the rest was produce, you know, vegetables and what have you.*

One reason for growing flowers was that they made sites look more attractive as well as serving a practical purpose. BM-D grew some around the edge of her plot to attract insects and encourage pollination or for companion planting, for example, marigolds to keep off carrot rootfly. Other allotment holders grew flowers simply to pick and take home. When MS-WV had a plot shortly after the Second World War, there were a number of what he termed "traditional gardeners" who kept a patch just for flowers. Being reluctant to admit to liking flowers, most used the excuse that they "kept the wife happy".

Although a number of allotment holders grew fruit and flowers on their allotments, these were more usually grown in their home garden or greenhouse and some started plants in their greenhouse at home before taking them to the allotment. Conversely, although vegetables were more usually grown on the allotment, a few allotment holders also grew them in their garden at home. This was usually done for convenience.

Health concerns occasionally restricted the crops allotment holders were able to grow. In the past, LM-WS had grown potatoes, but had been forced to stop when the digging required became too much for him. A further consideration was that different crops were suited to different areas of the Black Country depending on the soil, aspect and weather conditions. Sometimes, it was not possible to grow certain crops on individual sites; a number of allotment holders said that there was clubroot in the soil, making it impossible to grow cabbage.

Conforming to the traditional vision of an allotment plot complete with a rickety shed, number of interviewees had sheds or greenhouses on their plots. Most were improvised structures; LM-WS had a makeshift greenhouse constructed from old window frames where he grew tomatoes and cucumbers. Some were

purely practical, providing somewhere to store tools and gardening supplies so allotment holders did not have to bring these every time they visited their plot. However, for others, sheds had greater significant, especially if they regularly spent long periods of time on their plot; some had installed cooking facilities and decorated their sheds with certificates.

Sheds were one of the features of allotments which most commonly led to complaints throughout the twentieth century. In 1927, the *Smallholders' Gazette* reported that "writers to the press recently have again raised the subject of untidy and unsightly houses usually found on allotments". To overcome the problem of sheds which "spoil the general perspective of allotment land", it was thought that there should be stricter planning restrictions on allotments:

*...by a small measure of uniformity, the general view of allotment land either in winter or summer would be pleasing (Smallholders' Gazette, 1927: 4).*

There has been strict regulation regarding constructions on allotment sites throughout the twentieth century. EE-WS remembered greenhouses on allotments from the 1920s even though there were strict regulations surrounding the construction of sheds and other structures. In Wolverhampton, sheds were allowed on allotment sites at this time, but only if they were relatively small and used for specific purposes. Although the committee was happy to allow sheds for garden implements, they would not agree to the construction of a large shed or one which would be used to store a motorcycle (Wolverhampton Committee, 3.7.29).

The Second World War meant that committees became stricter about the unacceptable use of allotment land. In many instances the rules surrounding temporary wartime allotment sites were more rigorous than those for permanent sites. One of the conditions of tenancy at West Park temporary allotments was that no huts of any description were permitted, except small garden frames. Immediately after the war, it was stipulated that no pigsties or other structures were to be erected on allotments without the prior consent of the council (Wolverhampton Committee, 22.4.42).

In an attempt to improve the appearance of allotment sites in Wolverhampton, a new site called the Jubilee allotments was opened in 1935. On this site, "all huts and sheds were to be in line and adjacent to each of the cartways" (Wolverhampton Committee, 27.3.35). The uniformity was intended to make allotment sites more visually pleasing and more acceptable to the public. Walsall Smallholding and Allotments Committee also tried to improve the appearance of allotments in the 1930s. In 1934, rent collectors were instructed to ask allotment holders not to erect "huts of unsightly appearance on the land and to inform them that if, on inspection, the committee are not satisfied with the huts, the tenants would be asked to remove them" (Walsall Committee, May 1934). However, allotment holders themselves were not always willing to co-operate with attempts to improve the appearance of sites. Those interviewees who were secretaries of their sites said they had problems persuading all allotment holders to improve the appearance of their sheds.

After 1945, greenhouses became a more common feature. Wolverhampton Committee agreed to the erection of greenhouses on Sandy Lane providing they were of a standard design, size and colour (Wolverhampton Committee, 14.3.45). In 1957, the tenancy agreement for allotment holders in Dudley, which had previously only allowed tool sheds, was amended to include greenhouses (Dudley Committee, 3.9.57). By the late 1990s, tenants on all sites in Walsall provided their own sheds, which were to be built to a prescribed size. In Dudley, sheds were only provided by the Council on three statutory sites; on the remainder, tenants were responsible for providing their own. In four cases, no constructions were allowed on the site (NSALG, 1997).

Although methods of allotment cultivation have not been the subject of a great deal of study, it is, perhaps, assumed that, as stereotypical traditional gardeners, allotment holders would adopt more traditional methods of cultivation. LT-D felt that methods of cultivation had altered significantly over time and this impacted on the layout and appearance of sites. For instance, there was more emphasis on growing in a small space, making baby varieties more popular than they had been in the past. Some allotment holders who wanted to enter shows grew crops in barrels and some sites had raised beds. GW-WS thought the latter was

an idea which had been made popular through television gardening programmes which placed more emphasis on appearances than growing techniques.

Just as allotment holders were particular about the types of crops they grew, many also held strong opinions on which growing techniques were best. Rotation systems were mentioned by a number of interviewees who felt it was vital to adopt a proper crop rotation:

*I use a three course rotation, that is: potatoes and roots one year on one third; peas and beans on one-third; and green crops on one-third and they rotate round. Some people use a four year rotation or a four course rotation, but I've only used a three course rotation (AM-WS)*

*I mean you used to change the site of what you grew every year for the purpose of, you know, managing the allotment better, 'cause you put something in the same year after year after year, it eventually stops producing very well, but you keep moving it about, keep moving it about... (BA-D).*

Allotment holders frequently disagreed about the best methods of cultivation. For instance, RM-WS dismissed a long-standing allotment tradition, double digging:

*I don't believe in double digging, haven't done for thirty or forty years...they found out that people as was doing double digging was putting virgin soil on the top and there was nothing in it for growing you see, so you always put the top soil back on top...all vegetables only feed off the first four, five inches...*

Allotment holders obtained plants in different ways. Some bought them from garden centres. One who did this admitted it was essentially done for convenience:

*You could do it cheaper if you buy 'em by seed, but we don't have the room, nor the time nor the hassle (BH-WV).*

However, a number were more frugal and explained that they saved seeds from one year to the next. Another option was to send for seeds by mail order. This

was particularly popular when allotment holders wanted special varieties, perhaps to show.

Allotment holders reflected on the problems they faced in making decisions about how best to cultivate their plots. BM-D pointed out that planting a certain quantity of seed did not guarantee a yield; there were many factors beyond the control of the allotment holder:

*I mean, this year, we've got about five parsnips and that's two lots of seed that went in. The first lot never germinated at all and the second lot, there was about five. And I mean you get pests on things that sometimes decimate them and lousy weather so they don't grow or they get washed away and all this sort of thing, so you sort of plant, I think, to allow for things going wrong, but somethings keep going despite the weather...*

Even though they could not be considered to be active members of the green movement, or examples of the newer type of politically active gardener, a number of those interviewed said they did use organic methods of cultivation. Knowing that produce had been grown without the use of chemicals was one of the main attractions of having an allotment for some gardeners:

*The beauty about fresh vegetables is they've got no chemicals on them, see, they're organically grown. I dig manure into the allotment every year; I don't use chemicals... (GGo-WV).*

Some referred to specific methods they termed 'organic'. RD-WV grew comfrey to use as fertilizer and relied on compost bins and manure and rotavated straw into the soil. BA-D mentioned how toads and hedgehogs helped to rid the allotment of slugs naturally. JR-D used manure and green manure to keep up the fertility of the soil and, in order to prevent whiterot, did not to water crops unless it was absolutely necessary. Using organic methods was obviously very importance to her, but even she acknowledged that she was not a totally organic grower:

*There was no point to me putting energy into the plot if it was the same I could go to Safeway and buy. So, I'm not a purist; I'll spray the path for weeds, but I don't spray the crops if I can avoid it.*

However other allotment holders were considerably less fastidious:

*I ain't a big lover of spraying, but there are times when you've got no choice (AR-WV).*

The term 'organic' was interpreted in very different ways by interviewees. Both the following comments were made by gardeners who claimed to be organic growers:

*Okay, we used to use a bit of fertilizer, you know, a little bit of a boost here, there, whatever, but the majority of it was on manure (EH-WS)*

*...only went up today to spray them, to stop the fly like and the maggots getting in sort of thing, which is just good husbandry really. You don't do these things, you don't get the good produce like. (GW-WS).*

BM-D described herself as "95% organic" as she did not use insecticides, but did use Growmore.

Several interviewees were anxious to stress that organic growing was not a modern phenomenon and did, in fact, have a long tradition in the allotment community. Some were particularly scathing; HM-D described the modern organic movement as "the biggest con". He argued that it was "nothing new" and during the early twentieth century, everyone used organic methods simply because chemicals were not available. MS-WV claims that he did not use fertilizers on his plot in the 1940s, just bonemeal and dried blood from the abattoir. However, LW-D had a different interpretation; he did not feel that he used organic methods because he saw this as a modern term; he preferred to simply talk about "home-grown vegetables"; he thought that people often confused the two terms.

Not all allotment holders welcomed the use of organic methods. In some cases, individuals who wished to practise organic gardening faced opposition from more

traditional gardeners. JR-D faced resistance because she used slightly unusual cultivation techniques which the other plot holders were not aware of:

*...they'd never heard of nettles being left on a plot for butterflies and that annoyed them...Total lack of understanding...I was the first to use carpet to block out...and they thought, you know, that I was stupid...to block out weeds...just beyond belief!*

As several interviewees explained, allotment holders' knowledge about growing usually came from a combination of sources:

*I think it's a combination of a lot of things really, three things really: somethings you read, somethings you pick up off your colleagues or things that you learn yourself by trial and error (GGo-WV)*

*You get a lot of experience from other people, but of course if you're interested in gardening, you pick up tips here, tips there, tips and you'll get books and you'll read them and you'll study... (BA-D).*

Even allotment holders who had been gardening for many years acknowledged they still had much to learn. The fact that, no matter how long they had been gardening, there was always something new to learn was a belief reiterated by many interviewees:

*I mean you can always learn summat, although I'm getting on in years, I can still learn something you know (LM-WS).*

Despite the fact that allotment cultivation is a practical activity, many allotment holders gained knowledge about growing from printed sources. Several had large collections of gardening books and many could identify a favourite they relied on:

*This was written in 1901, it was, given to me by an old gardener; there's every conceivable thing in there about gardening: the name of plants, what way they grow, where they're made, where come from, why...If anybody asks me anything... (LM-WS).*

Perhaps the most important source of information for allotment holders, however, was each other. In some instances, it was evident that allotment holders were more likely to trust the opinion of a fellow allotment holder rather

than rely on an 'expert' or other formal source of information. This was seen as one of the main ways in which new gardeners could improve their skills:

*You get people who are fairly new on the site or not had an allotment before, they will come and ask for advice...I don't know that much about gardening; I'm still learning myself, but if they do then you gotta try and help them, either by me telling them something or finding somebody else on site who can, you know...asking people on other sites (PD-WS).*

Many allotment holders stressed the importance of keeping records so they would be able to determine what worked and repeat successes in future years or avoid further failures:

*...thing is, if you don't keep records, you've had it, 'cause you start to think, "I forgot to put so and so in...Everything's in the diary and I keep a record of everything from about 1966 of every variety I grew and where in the allotment it was grown. So if I grow sprouts, you can tell where they are 'cause I know the spacing...top of the allotment, bottom of the allotment and then I can just go back (JH-D).*

HM-D thought that gardeners should not simply plant according to the calendar or gardening books, but depending on the soil and conditions. This limited the value of more general sources of information such as books, newspapers and television programmes. Again, the care and attention awarded to cultivation methods refutes the disorganised, haphazard stereotype of allotment cultivation.

Despite the traditional stereotype of allotment sites as ramshackle and disorganised, it is clear that allotment holders gave considerable thought to the use of their land, especially their choice of crops and methods of cultivation. Attempts to officially regulate allotments were rarely successful, but this does not automatically mean that they are uncared for and a blight on the landscape. The degree of importance gardeners attached to the management of their allotments and the amount of planning involved is not always appreciated by those outside the allotment community. Even if they were not keen to conform to official regulations, the vast majority of allotment holders took a great deal of care over their plots and often made attempts to improve the appearance of their site, by growing flowers or creating raised beds for instance. This indicates that there is

a need to study the management of individual plots more closely than has been done through previous studies.

### **Atmosphere and culture**

The second aspect of the stereotype of allotment sites relates to their general atmosphere and culture; they are perceived as essentially rural, peaceful, harmonious places which offer a chance to escape from the pressure of urban life. The harmonious, non-confrontational nature of allotments led to them being supported by nineteenth century employers because they attached workers to the land, making them less likely to become involved in trade union activity, riots or other forms of disturbance. Although this was a less obvious feature of twentieth century allotment holding, sites continued to be provided by employers and these may have helped to increase employees' loyalty and also to make them more dependent on their employer. Allotments were favoured by some individuals and organisations for the way in which they were seen to control working class activity outside work. In the 1920s, it was argued:

*...the allotment is one of the biggest factors making for social contentment (Smallholders' Gazette, 1927: 4).*

However, having an allotment did give working people a degree of security and control over their food supply which they would otherwise have been denied. Towards the end of the twentieth century, there is little evidence to suggest that allotments were used as a means of social control. Perhaps this was because the majority of allotment holders at this time were elderly, a less powerful political group and seen as posing little threat. Another factor may be the fact that, as allotment holding changed from an economic to a social activity, it came to be viewed as more anodyne and much less effective as a lever to control behaviour. Instead, the benefits to allotment holders of having somewhere to relax have been prominent.

Even in the mid 1920s, the therapeutic value of allotments in providing an escape from city life was already widely accepted:

*...the allotment movement was a sort of adult education. The nearer they got to nature, the saner they became (Allotment and Smallholders Gazette, 1926:554).*

Essentially, little appeared to have changed in this respect at the end of the twentieth century; allotments were clearly a haven for a number of gardeners, a place where they could escape from their day-to-day worries:

*...it's very therapeutic; you can just lose yourself (BD-WV)*

*I've never, ever found out what stress is, nobody's ever told me, but you hear so much about it, but you're in another world...when you go up there, you're in a totally different world, relaxed, easy-going ...You haven't got the cares of your job or your study or whatever it is you're doing... (AR-WV).*

DH-D thought that an important benefit of having an allotment was that it provided "relaxation from the...theory of the day, the stress".

The location of the site itself was important to some interviewees; an allotment was somewhere they could escape from everyday life, even when it was, in reality, close to the bustle of urban life:

*It's like a little oasis, you can hear the motorway in the distance, but you've got all the fresh air and the warmth and the chaps come along have a chat and...you know, it's great. (LM-WS)*

*...it was fresh air, you were out, you were in another world, you were in another environment, you know? (EH-WS)*

*You can walk a hundred yards down the road and in a way, you might be a hundred miles away, it's the most marvellous recreation (LC-WV).*

This supports the stereotype of allotments as being, essentially, rural and a place where people can escape the pressure of modern life. In keeping with the stereotype of allotments as relaxing places, BP-D described how some people saw their allotment as somewhere for a day out; they might bring deckchairs and picnics.

However, allotments were not always solitary places. Although the usual stereotype is of a single allotment holder working on an individual plot, in many cases, plots were cultivated jointly. A significant number of allotment holders received help, to a greater or lesser extent, from a relative or friend and a number worked their plots with their spouse or another relative. Most divided the work, for example, the wife might look after the flowers while her husband concentrated on vegetables. Sometimes, other relatives helped with certain tasks such as repairs. Other gardeners shared plots with people they were not related to. A common arrangement, especially among female gardeners, was for two friends to share a plot. During the Second World War, MS-WV worked an allotment with his father's friend. As MS-WV was only a teenager at this time and the other gardener was elderly, one plot between them was enough to manage. BA-D shared his plot with another gardener for a time, but this was not a great success because the two were not equally dedicated.

Nevertheless, as AR-WV pointed out, although allotment holders occasionally helped each other, the usual way of working was for a gardener to do the vast majority of work on his plots himself. PD-WS estimated that three-quarters of plots on his site were cultivated by individual allotment holders and there is no reason to suppose that this was unusual. Many gardeners were proud of the fact that they cultivated their plot largely unassisted. EC-WS remembered one who was in his 80s and clearly pleased that he was still able to dig four plots. Many appreciated the time alone their allotment afforded them, but even if they had an individual plot, allotment holders interacted with other gardeners on their site. The ploholders on EC-WS's site had helped to keep her plot tidy:

*...the chaps have been good to me down there if I haven't been able to do anything, they've cleared it off for me and done, you know...*

GW-WS received help from the other allotment holders when he had first moved to the site:

*I must admit this last year, when I moved up Grenville Road, I had a lot of assistance off the other allotment holders round about, the fella on the next one to me...he's the chairman and the fella opposite, he's been very good. They helped to put the shed up didn't they and things like that when I moved.*

BS-D commented that he regularly helped people when they first took on a plot and needed extra assistance to make an initial impact:

*I'd helped people before; I've seen people take them on...the allotments that were rough, you know that hadn't been done for a few years and I've helped people to get 'em straight.*

Some allotment holders did not ask for help through choice; they were compelled to in order to continue with their allotments. JR-D was not able to maintain her plot without assistance due to illness:

*...and one man had done quite a bit of digging for me...And that's the only way I was able to keep going because I had twelve months where I just couldn't go at all and now I'm back to...coping.*

LM-WS mentioned that one of the younger allotment holders from his site helped him out with the heavier work:

*One of the lads...he's about forty-five, he helps, he rotavates it for me; he gives me a lift you know, get the digging started, but if I've any problems, I mean me roof fell off me shed in the winter time and two of the lads come along and put a new roof on.*

This type of practical help might be repaid by older gardeners passing on knowledge. A number of interviewees acknowledged that younger gardeners could learn much from more experienced allotment holders. Some older allotment holders were seen as valuable sources of information on their sites:

*...they want to know anything about gardening or plants, they'll come to me and...but they say to me, 'cause I'm practically the oldest bloke on there, "Go see Les, he'll tell you what to do"(LM-WS).*

However, some allotment holders pointed out that 'traditional' gardeners could often learn new techniques from newcomers, especially those from ethnic minority communities. There were, inevitably, differing opinions regarding the value of personal advice. As PD-WS, explained that, for various reasons, it was not always possible to give a straightforward answer to a question:

*It's horses for courses and what I like I wouldn't necessarily impose on anybody else. Somebody asks me what I'm growing, I'll tell them, you know, but you do get some gardeners who will try and force you to do*

*what they do: I grow this, so you will grow this. I'm easy, I grow what I grow; if people wanna grow the same, I'll tell 'em what it is; I'll tell 'em where they can get it from; I'll help them to get it if they want to, but I won't force them...if they wanna grow the same as me fair enough; if they wanna grow something different, fine! (PD-WS)*

In addition, JH-D found that the intense competition on his site made it difficult to give people advice:

*They said "Have you got your parsnips in?" and I said, "No" and then they don't believe you 'cause they think, especially when there's competitions, they think you have got the parsnips in, but you aren't telling them because you want to be in front...that's the trouble with advice, they think you're kidding 'em.*

According to the stereotype, allotments are an anachronism and do not play a significant role in modern urban life. However, AR-WV believed that allotment societies should be involved with other community groups to foster greater community spirit. He was involved in a probation service scheme, whereby probationers laid paths and carried out other work on allotment sites. He also organised a scheme with the local hospital for mentally and physically handicapped people to cultivate plots as part of their therapy. RM-WS had been involved in a similar scheme to encourage more disabled people to cultivate plots; he had established 'deep beds' suitable for wheelchair users. There are few references to schools' involvement in allotment holding during the second half of the twentieth century<sup>28</sup>, but during the late 1990s, there appears to have been a resurgence of interest in this activity. Many allotments had established links with local schools and children were provided with their own plots to tend, supervised by a teacher. For example, RM-WS spoke about a scheme he had been involved in:

*...they used to love it. Some of 'em had never seen a potato growing before in the ground and peas! They didn't believe peas could grow. They put theirs own seed in...I made two potting benches and their mothers used to come down...so that was fabulous (RM-WS).*

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<sup>28</sup> For examples of schools' involvement in allotments in the earlier part of the century see p. 87.

This was seen as a way to encourage younger people to develop an interest in allotments and to combat some of the problems of vandalism. One interviewee reported:

*I'm currently pursuing a project that we've got with the local school, get the schoolkids to come down and look after a plot, you know, we'll do them, initially, we'll do the grafting, you know, clear the plot, rotavate it and whatever, but the after that, it's up to them to plant and...I'm of the opinion, if you can get kids young enough then you may get 'em interested in gardening and you will...hopefully will keep them away from vandalising allotments and allotment plots (PD-WS).*

There were clear benefits for both the local community and the allotment holders in developing this type of arrangement; it might help to improve intergenerational understanding and community relations. It was pointed out that, as well as alleviating the current problem of vacant plots, this activity had the benefits for the future. It might help to engender an interest in allotments among the younger generation, thus enabling allotments to be sustained.

However, while allotments might offer a peaceful retreat and a number of potential benefits for the local community, there was also frequent evidence of friction. Bonfires and the untidy state of sites frequently drew complaints from local residents. However, tension was most obvious from reports of crime, especially vandalism and pilfering, which were detailed in council and local association minutes throughout the twentieth century. For example, trespassing appears to have been a significant problem in 1919 when the Chair of Walsall Committee wrote to the local press calling attention to trespassing and damage and asking for public support by reporting the names of trespassers. Trespass notices were renewed and school teachers asked to remind scholars that they should not be on allotments without permission (Walsall Committee, 13.5.19). A particular problem reported on some allotments in Wolverhampton was people trespassing on allotments to gain illegal entrance to the racecourse. In 1942, at the Grazebrook Estate site in Dudley, there were instances of sheds being broken into and pilfering and it was suggested that police patrolled near the allotments to try to reduce problems (Dudley Committee, 15.12.42). There continued to be

reports of vandalism in the last quarter of the twentieth century. In the 1970s, Walsall Committee urged allotment holders to report acts of vandalism to the police (Walsall Committee Annual Report, 1977-8) and there appeared to be increasing concern about vandalism in Wolverhampton in the early 1980s when it was claimed that the allotment movement was "in danger of collapse because of vandalism" (*Express & Star*, 1981).

Many interviewees spoke about the problematic relationship between allotment holders and the local community, clearly disputing the traditional stereotype of allotments as detached from contemporary concerns. AR-WV's view was that the level of vandalism fluctuated:

*They don't do owt for a while, then suddenly have a mad purge...vandalise your sheds or your crops.*

Like several interviewees, FPr-WS believed that there had been a time when allotments had been a more integral part of the local community and vandalism was not such a problem:

*I mean, my shed down on the allotment, it was never locked up for fifteen or twenty years. Just closed the shed and that was it, just closed it and put a little latch on it. And in there, there was spade, fork, all me tools, all me equipment, all me sprays, everything. It was never touched, never touched at all. But now, good god, oh dear me, you gotta...even if you leave your car on the car park while you go on the plot, you gotta lock it up and god knows what because...it's a terrible state we live in.*

LT-D felt that vandalism had "crept in" during the time he had been on his allotment; the main problems were children breaking through the fence, damaging or stealing vegetables and breaking into sheds. These problems had "gradually got worse". Others admitted that crops were stolen in the past, but often argued this was because people needed food, whereas at the end of the twentieth century, vandals were needlessly destructive:

*Today, I'd say it's more damage than stealing...I mean they go round and they rip...I mean, my fence, everybody's fence... (DH-D).*

EE-WS did not recall any vandalism in the 1920s despite high levels of unemployment, but RC-WV had found evidence in his society's records that

pilfering had taken place in the 1920s. Reflecting on allotment holding in the 1940s, MS-WV could not recall any vandalism although he admitted:

*...there must have been some...if only because people were so desperate that they would take things from allotments to eat.*

According to RB-WS, vandalism was most prevalent in the mid 1960s. At this time, his grandfather had crops torn out of the ground and thrown around the plot. He suggested the problem was, in fact, not as bad forty years later.

There was also variation from site to site. Some were the targets of regular attacks by vandals. PD-WS thought that his allotments were "sitting targets". Certain sites were renowned for being the target of vandalism:

*There is one site in our association where literally every week, they break in and they use cabbages as footballs, get 'em and smash 'em against the wall...and that happens literally, on a constant basis, literally every week...(PD-WS).*

All the sheds on his site had been broken into five times in the last year; gardeners had stopped leaving anything of value on the site overnight and some did not even bother to lock their sheds. However, certain sites did not suffer from any vandalism problems. Several allotment holders, mostly from Dudley where a number of sites were in semi-rural locations, acknowledged that their sites were fortunate in having few problems:

*...we don't seem to get any of this so I think we're perhaps lucky. 'Cause you see some horrendous tales in the 'papers, where all the plants have been pulled up and the sheds have been smashed up and all things, so I suppose, we're lucky that we don't... (BM-D)*

*In this area we've been pretty lucky; we don't get much trouble with vandals. You do get the odd...kids will jump over and things like that, but no, not so much (BS-D)*

*Haven't had much in the way of pilfering have we? Nor vandalism. Occasionally, you get a couple of kids chasing each other or youths, you know, having a bit of a fight...but very few, very few. And stealing, very little stealing (JH-D).*

The reason for this variation was thought to lie, in part, in the location of sites. For instance, while AM-WS suffered very little from vandalism when he had a plot on the Malt Shovel site in Walsall which was well hidden, on his current site in Sutton Road, there were considerably more problems because of its more prominent position:

*...it is too exposed and everyone can see the allotments when they just walk into the Arboretum unfortunately.*

FPr-WS was another who attributed the vandalism his site suffered to its position:

*We get a bit of vandalism round this area, because obviously, now, we're the centre of two playing fields; we've got Leckie Playing Fields and Bluecoat Playing Fields... I've found goalposts over the fence, they'll say "Me goalpost's over the fence.*

BM-D thought the lack of vandalism on her site was due to its location on a housing estate and some distance from the town centre and the fact that there were locked gates:

*...it's in a nice area housing-wise and it's overlooked isn't it on all sides by people's gardens?...it's a fairly quiet area, I don't know, compared to somewhere perhaps in a more perhaps industrialised sort of area. It's on the edge of the country isn't it really where it is?*

RD-WV too thought that problems had been fairly limited because his site was surrounded by houses. This was an example of an occasion when a shared concern about crime had acted to unite allotment holders and local residents; because the allotment holders had developed good relations with the local community, they were quick to report any trouble. People who lived in nearby houses also helped to prevent trouble on LM-WS's site:

*We put a notice on the gate explaining to people and fortunately we've got sensible people who live around and they try to stop the kids from coming in you know.*

Some sites had taken more radical steps to try to deter vandals. On AR-WV's site, chainlink fencing had been constructed and hedges planted. The number of break-ins on BA-D's site had prompted the allotment holders to improve security.

To try to stop people entering the site, they had planted a hedge of dog roses round the perimeter. They had previously tried a wire fence, but this was often cut through and climbed over. BH-WV's site had tall fences and a steel gate and claimed, "Nobody goes through our allotment; it's like Fort Knox; it's secure". However, such measures had the disadvantage of dividing allotment holders from the local community rather than helping to improve relations.

On occasions, the police were involved in incidents on allotments and several sites were members of the Allotment Watch scheme. FPr-WS described how he had tried several techniques, as well as involving the police on more serious occasions:

*I give it up. I dunno, you shout and bawl at them, you don't do no good; you don't get through to 'em. And you try to make friends with 'em. You win; they're all right for a bit and then they start again..I don't know what the answer is: give it up!*

RM-WS's attitude too was one of resignation to the inevitability of vandalism on allotments. He thought it was impossible to prevent people breaking into allotment sites:

*...they break in all the time and you can't stop 'em. You can stand guard all night, but they know when you're coming and when you're not going...*

However, incidents of pilfering did not necessarily indicate a breakdown in relations between allotment holders and the local community. Like a number of interviewees, BP-D believed that most pilfering was done by people from the site itself because things were taken "at odd times" when no one else was around. Several interviewees told about allotment holders stealing from each other's plots. JH-D believed that any stealing which did occur on his site was committed by the other allotment holders:

*The stealing that has been done has been done by mostly the people that have got allotments, you know, they haven't got a cabbage, so they...I mean, I've seen it done...I saw a chap come down the allotment and that chap...walked past his plot, cut a cabbage and walked off. I couldn't do anything about it...but, he just cut it and walked off.*

This naturally led to suspicion and division among allotment holders on a site. However, a strong committee might help to unite allotment holders by dealing with such problems effectively. RM-WS believed that the sense of community on his site was strong enough to ensure that internal thieving was very rare and any which did take place was swiftly dealt with by the site association:

*If anybody else had got on anybody else's allotment and taken something, they were automatically expelled from the site...*

RM-WS suggested that it was more likely that allotment holders from other sites sometimes sabotaged each other's crops:

*I think you get a certain amount of jealousy from one site to another and all as well, you know, you could have somebody say, do his site up or summat like that, but it only happens once or twice a year, but that's all you want it to happen...*

Although, according to the stereotype, allotments are perceived as fairly laid-back, apolitical places, disputes between allotment holders were relatively common occurrences throughout the twentieth century. Shows and competitions were a common source of dispute. For example at Palfrey Allotment Holders' Association Show in 1923, there was an objection to an exhibition of onions which, it was claimed, were not grown by the exhibitor (Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association Minutes, 12.7.23). In 1926, there were objections to an exhibitor's sweet peas, which he admitted were not grown on his allotment and resulted in him being asked to refund his prize money (Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association Minutes, 4.8.26). In another case in 1931, no potatoes were found when an exhibitor's plot was inspected so he was deemed ineligible to take part in the competition (Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association Minutes, 14.9.31). A number of interviewees referred to the rivalry competitions fuelled:

*I'm not saying it's all corrupt, it's not, but some of it is; it's like everything isn't it?...If I can beat him at all costs, there no such thing as it's the taking part that counts; it's not, it's the winning or the losing isn't it? (EH-WS).*

Several recalled controversies surrounding decisions made at allotment competitions. These often seemed extremely petty, for instance, in one case, an allotment holder won first prize, but was disqualified because his beans had not been displayed on a doily (DH-D). Such rules were taken very seriously by some allotment holders because competitions could be very close-fought. A number of allotment holders recalled competitions in the past which were not open and shut cases:

*I remember the once, how those eight plots, there was the first was one point ahead of the next three, which were second equal and, there was only one point between, in the first four plots (FP-WS).*

This rivalry could lead to secrecy, with allotment holders reluctant to share techniques for fear that a competitor would gain an advantage over them:

*You can imagine the rivalry that used to go on...and secret things and secret this and where they get the seed from...we used to go in Woolworths and places like that, but there were also the specialist seed merchants who supplied the real stuff, you know, the real selective stuff and you'd never disclose where you bought this stuff from it was all secret (LT-D).*

Evidence of this 'friendly rivalry' was provided by a number of interviewees. However, in some cases, it was clear that allotment holders actually helped one another while simultaneously competing against each other:

*...sprouts had gone just the week before the show, cabbage root fly. Well the other people, like say my dad, people like that as had got some sprouts spare, 'cause they'd put a couple of spares at the end of their rows, they'd dig it up for him and they'd take it...although they were competing against each other and that's how it used to be, great (JH-D)*

*...the other allotment holder down there was called Fred S... and he was a great showman and I used to show. We'd never show against each other, 'cause he was Borneo Street. He'd say, "I'm showing runner beans," he said, "What are you going in?" I said, "I'll do the nine vegetable"...He'd go, "Well, I'll do the six". And what we used to do, we used to average about a hundred and some odd pound a year in prize money, what we did, we always shared our prize money over the years.*

*Nobody knew only him and I, but it was a great idea, there was no rivalry then you know 'cause...and it worked out just the right thing (RM-WS).*

However, other interviewees related stories about how rivalry had become nasty and specific incidents had deterred them from being involved in shows:

*Not interested in showing...I find that showing or competition brings out the worst in people... Someone I know had a plot and he use to show vegetables and one year, somebody went and put poison down, so they stopped showing and they will not...they will never enter a competition again (PD-WS).*

EH-WS remembered one of the top growers in the district had his plot vandalised the night before a show:

*You've never seen a plot like it. It's my firm belief even to this day that it must have took four or five men a good night's work to do the damage that they did. There wasn't a vegetable on the plot...every vegetable, irrespective of what it was had been cut in two: onions, beet, carrots and parsnips had been pulled up. You name it, and it was all destroyed...they wrecked all his greenhouse and they wrecked all his trellises for his runner beans, they'd smashed them all down. And I said that it took four or five men all night long and I mean all night, six or seven hours to do the damage that they did...it wasn't children, it wasn't kids like, it was...it was enemies basically...*

Nevertheless, JH-D remembered competitions from the 1960s as being "great fun". Interestingly, RM-WS felt that the judging in the Walsall town competition was, "very, very fair, no, no shenanigans, nothing like that". He attributed this to the fact that each town wanted to win and to beat the others in the inter-town competition; in order to do this, those plots which were of the highest standard needed to be selected to represent the town.

Further confuting the tranquil stereotype, there were other sources of dispute between allotment holders. There were many examples of disagreements which became sufficiently serious for, not only the site association, but also the council to become involved. For instance, when one allotment holder had taken mortar rubble and manure from another's plot, there was a special meeting to settle the

matter (Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association Minutes, 10.10.33). Another allotment holder had complained that someone had taken manure from his plot. In this instance, the thief was asked to give up his plot and prosecuted (Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association Minutes, 29.1.35). Many interviewees commented on the disputes which arose amongst allotment holders which allotment associations were expected to deal with:

*There was so many conflicts going on between various people: you were doing something for him and you should be doing something for me sort of thing (GG-WV).*

*...somebody's objected because somebody's trodden on somebody else's plot this sort of thing. They can be very nit-picky at times, some of these elderly gentlemen. I find it beyond belief; I just laugh; I know I shouldn't, but I do (BM-D).*

Although these might appear to be very minor concerns, it is clear that, for many allotment holders, radios being played too loudly and too many fires being lit were important issues.

GN-WS felt that the introduction of self-management at some sites had caused particular problems at the end of the 1990s and had led to arguments about how money was spent. In his view, money was often allocated without all allotment holders being consulted. LM-WS expressed similar views; he believed that there had been considerable problems on his site because the allotment managers had a different agenda to that of most ordinary allotment holders, resulting in disagreements, often centring on the potential profit to be made from the site trading shed. He suggested that this led some allotment holders to consider leaving the association and giving up their plots.

According to the stereotype, allotments are perceived as peaceful, harmonious places and there is evidence that allotment holders valued the peaceful, relaxing atmosphere, which offered them an opportunity to escape the pressures of daily life. But this stereotypical view overlooks the fact that allotments were frequently the sites of dispute both among allotment holders and between allotment holders and the local community. In addition, they had to deal with

problems such as vandalism and crime throughout the twentieth century. Allotments were, therefore, not totally divorced from urban life.

## **Conclusions**

This chapter has considered the activities which take place on allotments and examined how these were managed at communal and individual levels. The lack of comparable research into this topic makes it extremely difficult to judge how accurately these findings might reflect the situation in areas outside the Black Country, but they suggest that both the appearance and atmosphere and culture of allotment sites were more complex than would be suggested by the stereotype throughout the twentieth century.

Further research is required to examine these features in greater depth, but this thesis has established that there was considerable thought and care involved in the management of allotment plots and to dismiss them as ramshackle and haphazard, as in the traditional stereotype, is not a fair assessment. In the second half of the century as leisure became a more important motivator for allotment cultivation, the range of crops grown and other uses to which plots were put expanded as there was less pressure to produce basic foodstuffs to support the family. This gave allotment holders more freedom to experiment on their plots; this diversity may have made plots appear even less uniform than they did previously and contributed to the perception of sites as 'untidy'.

It is clear that there was great variation in terms of how allotment holders cultivated their plots, despite the fact that they were subject to, at times, fairly strict rules regarding their use of the land as well as less transparent ways of ensuring high standards of cultivation, for example, through competitions. There was often little evidence of the strict organisation and regulation of sites in their actual appearance and in the way in which individuals chose to work their plots. This has helped to reinforce the stereotype of allotments as disorganised, ramshackle places. However, despite outward appearances allotments were not uncared for, unplanned or poorly managed. Although there was little structured, formal control of allotment sites, individual plots were carefully organised and maintained. It is clear that, throughout the twentieth century, most allotment

holders gave a great deal of thought to how they cultivated their plots. From the beginning of the century, there was a gradual diversification of cultivation techniques on allotments. As the characteristics of allotment holders became more disparate, so did the methods of cultivating plots. For example, the types of crops to be found changed from a small number of basic produce grown for subsistence purposes, to a wide variety of fruit, vegetables and flowers, including many new varieties and imported crops. Keeping livestock on allotments became less usual as allotments ceased to be used to support the household. Likewise, methods of cultivation also changed, for example, organic methods became more popular from the 1970s. Knowledge of different cultivation methods and crops was spread throughout the allotment community by a variety of means, but the traditional means of communicating knowledge, personal experience and contact with fellow allotment holders, were most important than more formal methods.

The aspect of the stereotype which depicts allotment sites as peaceful havens can be argued to hold true to some extent, but they were more active and contentious places than they would first appear. For example, on inner city sites in particular, there could be serious problems with vandalism and other petty crime. In addition, there were frequent disputes between allotment holders themselves. Although these were often petty, they indicate that the perception of harmony is not a true one. Despite the shift from allotment cultivation as a financial necessity to a leisure pursuit, accompanied by the fact that having a place to escape the pressures of daily life was clearly important to many allotment holders, conflict on allotments did not appear to decrease significantly during the course of the century. This undermines the stereotype of allotments as harmonious, tranquil places and points to the need for a reassessment of this aspect of the traditional stereotype.

## **5. Importance of allotment activities**

Of the four aspects of the stereotype considered, the importance of allotment activities is the least well researched and, consequently, has the least strongly established stereotype. Despite the fact that this topic has been largely neglected, there is some evidence that, according to the traditional stereotype, in the past, allotments were important for their economic benefits, supporting the household and local community, both directly and through the sale of produce. The role of allotments in wider society, for example, as a form of community self-help is mentioned in the literature, but generally assumed to be of declining importance in the twentieth century. By the end of the century, allotments had come to be perceived as of limited importance, linked to the stereotype of sites as peaceful and uncontroversial places to retreat to. The aim of this chapter is to consider the extent to which this stereotype holds true for allotments in the Black Country.

### **Economic**

The traditional stereotype places emphasis on the financial importance of allotment holding. In the early part of the twentieth century, for many allotment holders, the chief use of produce was to feed their family. For instance, in 1922, when a plot was transferred from an allotment holder to his son on his death, it was assumed that the plot would be "heavily worked for the Benefit of the Family" (Palfrey and Delves Allotment Association Committee, 20.2.22).

Despite the fact that, according to the 1922 Allotments Act, allotments were not intended for commercial exploitation, there were a few allotment holders who wished to use their land for commercial purposes. In 1932, one from Wolverhampton erected a stable on his plot to keep a horse and cart to sell green grocery (Wolverhampton Committee, 18.5.32) and in 1945, an allotment holder in Wolverhampton asked to take over five vacant plots for pig and poultry food (Wolverhampton Committee, 24.1.45).

Throughout the twentieth century, allotments were advocated as a partial cure for unemployment. They could provide benefits by supplementing the diet of

unemployed workers and their families, and by giving the unemployed a new interest and a healthy way to occupy their spare time. Overall, the Provision of Allotments for Unemployed Persons Scheme<sup>29</sup> was regarded as a success both locally and nationally in the 1930s. In 1935, the General Committee argued for more plots for the unemployed throughout the country saying:

*The growth of the allotments movement amongst unemployed men during the last three or four years has been very welcome; we estimate that at least 50,000 new allotments have been opened up of recent years and we receive testimony on all hands that the provision of allotments and cheap seeds for an unemployed man is of incalculable benefit (in Wolverhampton Society of Friends Preparative Meetings Minutes, 6.2.35).*

Recalling allotment holders from the 1920s, one interviewee described how unemployed railway workers had plots to provide them with basic foodstuffs:

*They were manned by railway men and other people, amongst whom there were quite a lot of unemployed you know, because they could make ends meet by tilling the land and...it was very interesting that was in so far as what most of them did was potatoes which were the staple diet then, potatoes and then they'd vary their thing with peas and vegetables such as parsnips, carrots and everything like that (EE-WS).*

Those interviewed in 2002 were divided over whether cultivating a plot saved them money. Some had carefully worked out the financial benefits and believed allotment holding to be worthwhile:

*Well I pay nineteen pounds then for my allotment...and my runner beans, I grow two rows and I had 150 pound in weight off the beans...and at almost ninety p a pound, if you work that out, it's a lot more than nineteen pound isn't it? And that's only one vegetable. So, in fact, it's very, very profitable. Just that one alone, that pays for your plot, but there's so many other vegetables as well that you can have...(GGo-WV).*

BD-WV thought that some people claimed it was an expensive hobby because they counted the cost of their labour, but she felt that this should not be part of the equation as, for her and her husband, gardening was a hobby first and

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<sup>29</sup> See p. 80.

foremost. Therefore, she argued, "we save a fortune" because they did not have to buy fruit and vegetables. Other interviewees reflected on less obvious financial benefits:

*I mean, for what you pay for the allotment, I've got two sheds and a greenhouse and it's worth it for me just to keep my garden tools over there (BH-WV).*

However, others did not think there were any financial benefits to be gained from growing their own vegetables on an allotment. JR-D did not believe she saved money, partly because she had to buy petrol to travel to her plot and DM-D did not feel that an allotment actually saved money because it required significant time, effort and financial input. LM-WS agreed, arguing that, while there were few, if any, financial gains to be made from allotment cultivation, the value was felt in other ways:

*By the time you've bought your seeds and planed 'em and such like, and the time you know, you don't gain a lot money-wise, but you get the satisfaction of growing it.*

However, despite the fact that they clearly did not cultivate an allotment for financial reasons, a number of allotment holders claimed that produce from their allotments provided the household with vegetables all year round just as it had for allotment holders earlier in the century:

*Oh yes...we always had a freezer-full...but runner beans by the barrowful, yes. We had everything; we grew everything; it'd keep you going forever...We was never short of anything, new potatoes'd last us a year... (BM-D)*

*We're totally self-sufficient in vegetables; we don't buy any vegetables at all (PD-WS)*

*Well, it's kept us in food basically...we have a cooked meal every day and you can guarantee that there's at least, two of the veg are what we grow off the allotment, almost every day of the year, don't we? (GW-WS).*

Only a few allotment holders claimed to be fully self-sufficient. For example, only potatoes and onions lasted throughout the year according to BM-D; although she

did freeze other produce, such as sweetcorn and beans, she still had to buy some vegetables, particularly during the winter months.

There were economic benefits to be had from allotment holding for communities as well as individuals and families. At the end of the twentieth century, it was unusual for allotment holders to benefit financially by selling produce they had grown; most simply gave away any surplus to friends and family. However, this activity had brought significant benefits to some households earlier in the century. RB-WS recalled that his grandfather had sold some of the produce from his allotment. This did not provide him with a substantial income, but nevertheless:

*...he used to sell one or two of 'em...I used to get rid of 'em to some of his relatives, some of my wife's relatives had them and I remember I used to say to him, "How much shall I charge them for a cauliflower?"; and he'd usually say "threppence", three pence [laughs]...So he didn't do it for a living.*

AM-WS, who had an allotment during the Second World War when he was a child, also sold his surplus produce:

*Towards the end of the war, I was growing too much for the family to actually use, so I used to sell it to a local greengrocer and get some pocket money from it that way. He was quite good, he took quite a lot...*

The fact that it was possible to produce a large quantity of food on a single plot meant that some allotment holders, especially those with smaller families, were bound to generate a surplus which could be shared among the local community.

*I'd come up home some days with a car full of stuff, you can't eat all that...you put about six or seven rows of potatoes in, you might get about twenty or thirty sacks of potatoes you know, so you was virtually growing more than you required just to fill the piece of ground (GG-WV).*

This study has found evidence of the 'gift relationship' which is referred to in the literature. Rather than see food, and their efforts, wasted, the majority of allotment holders disposed of their surplus by giving it away, usually to friends and neighbours:

*...because you've got a huge surplus...there's plenty for everybody...you can give it away (LC-WV)*

*Allotment holders are renown for giving stuff away; it's par for the course, you don't sell it, you give it away to your neighbours and friends, anybody as wants it 'cause you can't eat it all yourself...there's just too much, so you have to give some away, but it's better that than waste it (GGo-WV)*

*We couldn't even eat the lettuce, we had to give it to all the neighbours  
We just didn't want any more; I told a neighbour to go help herself  
because we couldn't, couldn't...we got no room! (BH-WV)*

BM-D and DM-D took a lot of the vegetables grown on their plot to their workplaces as well as giving away produce to neighbours because even if they froze vegetables there was a limit to how much they could consume themselves. Sharing of surplus had been even more common in the past; MS-WV recalled that, throughout the privations of the Second World War, allotment holders made sure their neighbours did not go hungry by sharing produce: "You would hand over the fence a bit of this and a bit of that". It was clear that it was not only the recipients of this free food who benefited. One allotment holder acknowledged there were psychological benefits for allotment holders themselves:

*We know people that live...like Gordon and Helen, they're single people living in a flat; I'll throw an onion, a cucumber, some tomatoes in a bag and I'll take it up to 'em, knock on the door, give it to 'em. It gives me a warm feeling giving somebody something because they really appreciate it. (BH-WV).*

Less obviously, there were also financial benefits to be gained by allotment holders from entering competitions with the possibility of prizes in the form of money, trophies or other goods, in addition to the kudos of winning. A variety of cups, medals and trophies were awarded in the three Black Country boroughs. In the main, these were intended to appeal to allotment holders' competitive instincts and pride in their work rather than an interest in financial reward.

Although organisers in Coseley found that “the award of cash had a greater appeal than other forms of prizes” such as cups, medals and vouchers in the 1960s (Dudley Committee, 12.7.66), for most allotment holders who were interviewed, any prizes were largely irrelevant. At just a few pounds, they were not sufficient motivation for most to enter competitions, rather, as FPr-WS said, “it was just, the honour of winning, you know?”. However, for RM-WS, even at the end of the twentieth century, the prize money was important; he explained that growing crops to show standard could be expensive and the prize money helped to pay for the necessary seeds and fertilizers to sustain his hobby. In addition to trophies and money, practical goods were also given as prizes. The types of prizes awarded changed over time. In the 1920s, they typically included brass tongs, cigarettes, money, a steel poker, coal scissors, a cart of coal and garden tools. Tools remained a popular type of prize at the end of the twentieth century. The number of prizes on offer rose steadily during the 1960s and 1970s. Although the prize money was nominal, some of the trophies, especially the older ones, were worth substantial amounts.

Allotments were, therefore, of considerable economic importance, especially for poorer families, in the earlier part of the twentieth century. This is also reflected in the motivation for allotment holding discussed in chapter 3. During this period, the stereotype would appear to be true. However, after the Second World War, there is considerably less evidence that the stereotype is an accurate representation. Although self-sufficiency remained important to some people and the sharing of produce brought indirect economic benefits to allotment holders’ friends and family, allotments were no longer of such economic importance. This shift is linked to issues such as rising living standards and lifestyle changes discussed in chapter 3<sup>30</sup>. However, it may be the case that allotments were still important for other, non-financial, reasons which do not normally feature strongly as part of the stereotype.

## **Social**

In addition to the financial benefits of allotment holding, traditionally, the moral value of allotments has been extolled by organisations and individuals.

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<sup>30</sup> See pp. 132-36.

Allotments were seen as a healthier and more worthwhile activity than many of the alternatives available to working class people. Although this has been relatively well researched by nineteenth century historians, it is usually ignored in relation to twentieth century allotments and so does not form a significant aspect of the stereotype for this period. Nevertheless, there is evidence that such attitudes persisted into the twentieth century. In 1920, the NUAH claimed:

*The town dweller has also found that there is more health for him in cultivating potatoes than in going to the pictures. More joy than can be found at the pub and greater profit by supplying by his own efforts the needs of his family (NUAH Journal, 1920: 9).*

During both world wars, this was a particularly prominent theme; allotment holders received praise for their work in supporting the war effort:

*...unselfish and patriotic efforts have my unstinted admiration and those potatoes, beans, peas, onions and parsnips will be of untold value in saving the nation from starvation and humiliation (Allotments and Gardens, 1918:1)*

*Weekly broadcasts over the wireless extolled our [allotment holders'] virtues. We were the cream of the nation (Gibson, 1951:10).*

Even later, in the 1940s and 1950s, allotment cultivation was still seen by the government to have important benefits for society as a whole:

*Witnesses have stressed the intrinsic social value to be derived from the pursuit of cultivating a garden or allotment...not only are supplies of good fresh food brought to the household table, but the practice strengthens home life and promotes healthful living, thereby giving to society as a whole great and lasting benefits. It also links together town and country life and promotes that mutual understanding (Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries, 1950: 14)*

There is, however, little evidence at a local level to support these national pronouncements, so it is difficult to draw conclusions about their importance for allotment holders in Walsall, Wolverhampton and Dudley in the twentieth century. The moral dimension of allotment holding certainly assumed less significance by the end of the twentieth century, but its virtues were still being extolled, this time by the 'green lobby'. Allotments could also have a positive

impact on the local environment, by providing a refuge for a variety of plant and animal species, encouraging biodiversity as well as simply by increasing the amount of green space available in towns and cities. They also had secondary effects on the environment; urban agriculture meant less need for transport and packaging. They were advocated as one of the ways for local authorities to meet local Agenda 21 targets (Wale, 2001). Environmental concerns were not only a concern at the end of the twentieth century. The NUAH urged local authorities to include allotments in their post-war development plans after the First World War:

*We do not want more herding of people in already overcrowded, dull, monotonous districts...we desire to see a deeper appreciation by national and local authorities of the need for open spaces, 'lungs' for people and allotment areas in our towns (NUAH Journal, 1920: 9)*

However, from the interviews conducted, it might be suggested that although these wider societal benefits might be important issues in some regions and to particular groups, such arguments now had limited relevance for the majority of Black Country allotment holders. However, many clearly saw that allotments could play an important role in the local community, for example, by the sharing of surplus produce, social activities and interaction with other community groups. Sometimes, this might be on an ad hoc basis, but on other occasions, arrangements were more formalised. The social benefits for individuals of belonging to an allotment community were mentioned by most interviewees:

*...and the other thing is the social part as you say, you meet people, you've got friends there and that's great, that's good (RM-WS)*

*...and he'd meet his mates down there and they'd all stand and have a chat and a cup of tea of whatever you know and we used to really enjoy it (EC-WS)*

*I mean it's a social club, you come down of a morning, it's all banter you know, talking to each other...it's like a club, you know (LM-WS).*

Participation in social activities was an important benefit of allotment holding for most interviewees. It was thought that this made it a valuable pastime especially for people who took part in few other leisure activities:

*Great enjoyment actually, you know. If anybody's young, retire early, at sixty like...could do that because it's an outlet for them, it keeps them very busy... You miss the comradeship of going down there, now I don't even go out the house... (RM-WS)*

*But, I still enjoy the company and going down there...to be quite frank, I mean, what else would I do? Sit here and stare through the window all day? (FPr-WS).*

Allotments were, therefore, seen as fulfilling an important social function, especially for retired people who lived on their own:

*It kept people active, you know and that's the main thing you know...the kind of person who wouldn't venture to go out, if he was stagnating on his own, he could go down to the allotments (GG-WV).*

EC-WS said that she had met a lot of people through the allotments movement; this had helped her to settle in when she first moved to the district:

*You do meet some nice people. I mean that's how I met a lot of people; I mean, I didn't know many people up here when I moved up here and yet going on the allotments...I know that many people...*

In addition to the impromptu social interaction, on some sites, organised activities had taken place over a number of years:

*...we also used to have an annual supper in October, November time...we used to have a turkey; my wife used to cook the turkey as a matter of fact, a great big turkey and take it down there...just allottees and we'd invite about a dozen, used to be the people who'd done the judging and a couple perhaps from the town hall who were part of the allotments control people...and it used to be a self-entertainment evening...we used to have an evening at Palfrey Club in the upstairs room, we'd have the room to ourselves and everybody'd do a turn you know, they'd either do a song or something like that and it used to be quite a pleasant evening... (FPr-WS).*

In at least one case, such events continued even after the site itself ceased to exist. Although the Malt Shovel site closed in 2000, the ex-plottolders continued to meet:

*We do still have an annual dinner of the ones who were on the Malt Shovel site, to keep together. They've moved to various sites, some are on Borneo Street and other sites in the borough which they moved to (AM-WS).*

Another type of social interaction was the exchange of produce between allotment holders; many felt this helped to foster a community spirit on the site:

*We shared a lot of things, I mean, I've got some lettuce was ready and I said to Ken, "Do you want a lettuce on Saturday, I'll bring you one up there" and he had one. Bernard come round, I said, "Help yourself to a lettuce", so he go and pick one as he want...last year, I'd got no beans hardly, 'cause they was in late and he gave me a couple of feeds of beans didn't he? Oh, we done quite a few swapping like that; there's some good allotment holders who share produce...if we had a newcomer come on... when I'd got something ready and he was just starting, I always made a practice of saying, "Here you are; here's cabbage" or whatever. And I think it builds into the spirit up like, you know? I found that you get a return, you know like (GW-WS).*

Some deliberately arranged to grow crops which they could share:

*The gentleman on the next plot to me...he grows runner beans and I grow runner beans, but the variety that I've got come before his. So what we do, mine are about a fortnight or three weeks before his are ready to eat, harvest, so I tell him to help himself off mine. Now, when mine are finished, I help myself off his. Well, that's extending the season for your runner beans isn't it? By about six weeks. Because mine are three weeks before his and his are three weeks after mine...you've got a six week period when you can have fresh runner beans. (GGo-WV).*

Some interviewees related instances to illustrate the way in which allotment holders would take care of others on their site:

*There was a man as used to be on Sutton Road...and he had bad heart and the last couple of years before he died, he had to dig it on his knees and they made him special tools...And his wife said to me she used to*

*worry about him and she used to say to the other fellas on the allotment: "Look after him won't you?". And they always did, they never left him on his own, you know, they always saw there was somebody there... (DP-WS).*

BP-D described his site as "a good community" in which people were willing to help each other or to give advice. One example was a couple who regularly brought meals for an allotment holder who did not have much money. Another allotment holder grew vegetables for old people who lived nearby.

However, some interviewees felt that allotment holders no longer formed such a close-knit community as had been the case in the past:

*When we first came here, I used to love going down there on a Saturday and a Sunday. And they were all there looking busy and happy and together and you know and...laughing and joking and...it was a lovely atmosphere. But that's all gone....I mean you go down now don't you and you don't see a soul...I can be down there all day sometimes, don't see a soul. One time, you'd go, you'd have a laugh and a joke with somebody, always be somebody down there, pulling their legs... (FP-WS).*

Those interviewees who described themselves as "weekend gardeners" tended to be less involved in the social side of allotments. As they were there less, it took them longer to get to know people:

*I think probably the people that go during the week, because they're retired or semi-retired, are probably more on the chatty side; they all know each other by name. I mean, we're getting to know people, aren't we now, over the years? (BM-D).*

There were those, such as PD-WS, who disagreed, suggesting that allotment sites were one of the few places where traditional community spirit was still in evidence:

*People are not community-minded any more, the days when you could leave your back door open and your neighbour would go in and whatever*

*have gone, but very much, you've got this type of community spirit on allotments, particularly the smaller allotments...you find that little groups help one another you know. You've got plants over so you say to somebody, "I've got a few cabbage plants here if you want 'em"...on the allotments, particularly if you're new, people will come up to you and, "Do you want a few plants?", "If you want any help, just give us a shout you know", "If you want some advice, ask", whereas out in the street, they'll ignore you.*

LW-D, too, thought that people on his site still tended to help each other out and share information:

*...they swap plants and things like that...That seems to feed its way through you know. Somebody says, "I know where there's some manure going" and you just take your bag; somebody tells you and you go up and get it that sort of thing you know.*

However, he did not think that the community spirit on the site in 2002 was quite as strong as it had been in the past.

Although competitions could engender rivalry between allotment holders and allotment sites, which might become nasty on occasions<sup>31</sup>, entering site competitions could also help to foster greater community spirit among allotment holders on a site. To enter competitions as a site required the commitment of a large proportion of the allotment holders; growing, preparing and displaying required a lot of effort and could not just rely on a few keen individuals. EC-WS recalled how allotment holders from her site used to stay up all night before a show to get the display ready because, if sites won prizes, the money could be used to improve facilities. In some areas, particular sites became well known for winning competitions. The social side of competitions was clearly important to many allotment holders:

*I've got friends as far away as Malvern, all allotment gardeners. I've been as far as Newcastle-under-Lyme, involved with the allotments associations in Stafford, all...around you know, Newport in South Wales...(LT-D).*

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<sup>31</sup> See pp. 186-88.

However, another allotment holder felt that, as he had got older, this aspect seemed to be missing as the people he used to know had died or stopped showing for other reasons:

*And, also you used to meet people there...people you hadn't met since the previous show the previous year and course it was, of a consequence, you used to have...good chatter, you know, you used to have a good long chat about different things....but I find they've all died off, completely now, I don't know anybody now, I don't go there...It's a complete new generation that's...and I find I'm just, I don't know a soul. So, as a consequence, I...“Oh to hell with it!” I'm not, it isn't what it used to be. Well it probably is, it's just...no longer appeals to me like it used to do (FP-WS).*

Extending the social importance of allotments beyond the site was also mentioned. DH-D claimed that the allotment association he belonged to was “trying to form a community spirit” by involving the local community in the allotments. BH-WV talked about a bonfire party for locals which had been organised on the site:

*I said, “We'll get a couple of cans of beer, we'll sit around, maybe have a...” As a joke, I says, “Maybe we'll roast a couple of sausages”. Bloody hell! One thing led to another and his wife, my wife and pasting tables were out and the whole thing was rolled out and the people were phoned up and there was a good thirty or forty or fifty people over there, fireworks, barbeque and a full buffet, like a wedding was out and everything and it was on 'til two in the bloody morning!... So we're gonna have another one here and it's gonna be bigger and better than it was last year....*

Some allotment holders identified benefits of allotments for the wider community. A number donated produce to local hospitals, schools and community groups. For example, RM-WS took produce to the harvest festival at the local school and EC-WS gave some of her vegetables to the local school and also to the soup kitchen:

*We helped look after the soup kitchen; we used to do every Friday, when we used to do a soup, like a big stew. Course, the vegetables used to*

*come in handy and...we'd have our own stuff and they used to enjoy it; they used to come back for more!*

She mentioned that, when they decided to close the trading shed, the profits were donated to charities: local schools, hospitals and community centres. Allotment holders were involved in fundraising and similar charitable activities throughout the twentieth century. During the Second World War, Palfrey and District Association became involved in fundraising to support the war effort. There was a gift stall to raise money for the Red Cross, a Harvest Home for the Duke of Gloucester's fund, and a ballot for the Spitfire fund. The Association also decided to invest in war bonds and, in 1944, six wounded soldiers were invited to the Association's annual social evening. The Red Cross Horticultural Society ran a scheme to organise "Victory Garden Shows" to raise funds and one of these was held in Dudley in 1941. During the Second World War, special arrangements were made to ensure that surplus allotment produce was disposed of in a way which brought the greatest benefits to the nation, by donating it to a hospital or similar institution. For example, Palfrey and District Allotment Association sent bags of potatoes to a nursing home and wounded soldiers at the local hospital. Another recipient of allotment produce was the Australian Unit stationed near to Walsall. Some of the surplus from the demonstration garden in Dudley was donated to Dudley Hospital. Produce was also sent to St John's Community Feeding Centre and sold to British Restaurants and ARP canteens.

The majority of those allotment holders who responded to requests for help with this study were involved in local allotment associations or committees. In this respect, they may not be representative of typical Black Country allotment holders. Although only a minority were contacted directly through allotment associations, allotment holders who were more active in the committee and social side of the allotment community appeared to be more willing to participate in the research. Allotment associations operated at national, regional and local levels. In addition to site-based associations or local management groups, a number of interviewees belonged to the NSALG or to local horticultural societies such as Walsall Mutual Gardeners' Association and Walsall Fuchsia Society. Involvement in this aspect of allotment holding was clearly extremely important to some allotment holders, but considered irrelevant by others.

The two allotment societies which had existed in Dudley since the First World War died out with the general decline in interest in allotments during the 1930s to be replaced by Dudley and District Allotment Holders' Association. This organisation had close links with the Borough Council; it was supported by council funds and represented allotment holders on the Smallholdings and Allotments Committee. The President was the mayor; the Vice-President was an alderman and several members of the committee were councillors. Dudley and District Allotment Holders' Association was concerned with promoting allotment holding; ensuring the good management of sites; supplying seed and fertilizers; protecting allotment holders from loss of land or crops; collecting rents and letting plots. The Association insisted on certain standards of behaviour and membership could be terminated if "conduct is proved to their satisfaction to be detrimental to the interest of his fellow members" (Dudley and District Allotment Holders' Association, Rules and Objectives).

Walsall Allotment Holders' Association represented the interests of allotment holders in the borough from the First World War. Around 1920, it was carrying out a range of activities, including: writing to the council protesting against rent increases; arguing that permanent allotments should be entitled to improvements in roads and fencing; nominating representatives to serve on the Smallholdings and Allotments Committee; and organising local competitions. There were also local area societies such as the North Walsall Allotment Holders' Association and Palfrey and District Allotment Association and some sites had established their own associations by the early 1920s. As in Dudley, there were close links between the Council and the local allotment associations. The Smallholding and Allotments Committee often consulted with local associations before making decisions and took measures to explain or justify actions such as rent increases to allotment holders. Less is known about the early history of allotment associations in Wolverhampton, but in 1939, there were at least eight allotment societies (Wolverhampton Committee, 20.3.40).

Allotment associations have rarely been especially politically active locally or nationally and, for this reason, their importance has often been overlooked in the literature on working class co-operation and self-help. However, this does not mean that allotment associations have not been active in other ways. For example, they have frequently exerted influence on the appearance of sites. Since the early twentieth century, allotment associations have helped to improve the condition of sites by bringing relatively minor incidents to the notice of the council, for example, dangerous trees or poor fencing. Other duties undertaken by allotment associations included advertising vacant plots, maintaining waiting lists and lobbying on behalf of allotment holders, when a site was under threat for example. As early as 1915, Walsall Smallholding and Allotments Committee clearly saw the potential benefits of individual allotment holders joining an association and "strongly urged each allotment holder to become a member of his branch allotment society" (Walsall Committee, 10.11.15). It was thought that, if the majority of allotment holders were members of the association, this would ease the smooth running of the site. Allotment associations also offered opportunities to participate in social activities such as annual dinners, harvest festivals, talks, the sale of supplies, social evenings, trips to garden centres or nurseries and, of course, shows and competitions. In addition, the structure of societies provided a means to reward long-standing members. For example, when GW-WS resigned after more than thirty years, he was made honorary vice-president of the association. Others were presented with trophies, gardening tools or life membership. Being able to buy seed, fertilizer and other gardening supplies from the trading shed or "hut" at reduced prices was frequently seen as one of the main benefits of belonging to an allotment association:

*Hut's useful as well; they've got a hut where they can go up and buy compost and stuff like that you know...cheaper than you buy from the garden centres (GG-WV).*

Trading sheds provided social as well as financial benefits as they acted as a meeting place on many sites.

At times when their sites were targeted by developers, allotment holders were likely to join together to oppose the threat. The risk of losing their site often motivated even those who, under normal circumstances, had little involvement in

allotment association activity to take combined action. On occasions, resolutions were passed by allotment associations protesting against the taking of allotment land for development. In 1929, the annual meeting of the Walsall Allotment Holders' Association passed the following resolution:

*This conference is of the opinion that the allotment movement should be maintained and encouraged as far as possible consistent with the development of housing sites (Walsall Committee, 8.7.28).*

Petitions, again usually organised by allotment associations, were yet another common form of protest used to convey allotment holders' strength of feeling on an issue.

Interviewees had become involved in allotment committee activities in a variety of ways. One said he simply took over when the previous longstanding secretary wanted to retire while another became involved through his father:

*Me dad was a member, on the committee and he used to say, "You can come on the committee" and I used to say, "No, not as long as you're there". I used to know all about what was going on in the committee because he used to tell me...but eventually, they said, "Come on", so I went on the committee and I think for a bit we were both on together, but eventually, dad didn't go and I carried on, still on (JH-D).*

Yet another had been selected by an older allotment holder as someone who might be suited to committee work:

*The Secretary before me, he picked me out to be secretary after him, years he'd been down there (RM-WS).*

EC-WS was one of the first women to be involved in her site committee. Before actually joining the committee, she had helped to prepare for the meetings, but the actual meetings were seen as "a man's thing". Even when she had been accepted on the committee, as a woman, EC-WS was still not welcome at the social evening. However, by the late 1990s, being female could actually be an advantage for an allotment holder who wanted to join a committee. BM-D explained that she was initially invited to join because it was seen to be "a good thing" to have a female representative.

Some allotment holders described how, initially, committee work had little appeal for them and certainly was not part of their motivation for taking on an allotment, but they had gradually become more and more heavily involved and had come to appreciate the importance of allotment associations:

*After I'd been there about four or five years, I was asked to go on the committee. And from there, in 1981 I think it was, I first took over from the site collector was well. It progressed from there to go down the Town Hall to meetings. And I even got involved in going to Inter-Town meetings; that was Wolverhampton, Walsall, Dudley and Sandwell (GN-WS)*

*The chappie who was the chairman on Sutton Road just gave up...Me and quite a few others attended a meeting and it was basically, yeah, where do we go? What do we do? Chairman's resigned, he's not only chairman of this site, he was also chairman of the association, so the association was a little bit rudderless; what do we do? And the meeting decided, you know, we need to form a committee and asked for you know, people to volunteer. I volunteered to be on the committee...the first thing we gotta do was elect some officers...I got put forward as chairman, got elected and I've been chairman ever since...Because I was chairman...what tends to happen is that people on the committee, or certain ones on the committee, are the ones that go forward to the EWLMA [East Walsall Local Management Association]...the treasurer was a chappie who was on our site, but not a member of our committee. He was getting on and he said he wished to resign, and I picked up the baton, that's how I became treasurer of the association, you know somebody'd gotta do it... (PD-WS).*

However, a number of allotment holders experienced difficulties finding sufficient time for committee duties. GW-WS described how he was forced to give up because of work commitments. However, according to LM-WS, although the meetings were run fairly formally, they were not excessively time-consuming or onerous:

*We have a committee where you know...you have propose and second and take minutes and all this I mean...well, it ain't time-consuming, we only meet once a month, but it's at half past seven, 'til about ten o'clock*

*at the pub, at this club, 'cause the blokes have a drink if they want one or whatever...and that's what we do.*

Some interviewees had little involvement in this side of allotment holding. One saw meetings as an opportunity for "the old guys" to get together and discuss problems, adding, "it don't mean nothing to me" (BH-WV). Others did not feel that the association represented their interests and believed that only a select group were invited to participate. Anyone who did not conform to the traditional profile of an allotment holder was excluded. One believed that the fact she had unconventional views meant she was considered unsuitable by some of the more staid committee members.

Allotment associations played an important role in the management of sites, but their influence fluctuated over time. In general, they were not seen as significant by the majority of ordinary ploholders. Nevertheless, it is evident that allotment holders were able to exercise a fairly high degree of self-organisation when it was clearly in their interests to do so, to oppose a threat to their land for example. On several occasions during the twentieth century, there have been attempts to make this self-help more formal through self-management schemes. However, these have experienced varying degrees of success.

As early as 1919, some individual societies in Walsall were allowed a degree of self-management which would enable them to decide who should be allocated vacant plots on their sites. Associations had an advantage over the central committee in determining the suitability of applicants because they knew more about local people and circumstances as well having an interest in raising the standard of cultivation on their site. However, several management groups were soon experiencing financial difficulties, partly due to problems in collecting rents from allotment holders (Walsall Committee, 14.9.21). Self-management did continue on some sites, but it was not without problems and tensions between the council and self-managed sites were apparent in the early 1930s<sup>32</sup>. Even sites which did not take up full self-management were encouraged to assume greater administrative responsibilities in the inter-war years. From 1921, all

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<sup>32</sup> For example, Walsall Allotment Holders' Association questioned the council's right to enter allotment sites which were self managed (Walsall Committee 31.3.31) and the committee refused to help to provide fencing on a self managed site (30.6.31).

allotment associations were allowed to apply to collect rents with collectors being entitled to 7.5% commission, but this system did not prove entirely successful. The council did not appear to be entirely happy with single collectors having control over a large number of sites and on several occasions, took measures to distribute sites more widely. This caution was, perhaps, related to a fear that not all the collectors were trustworthy. Making individual collectors responsible for rent collection was quite unusual and did not occur in any other boroughs in the West Midlands until after the Second World War.

Around 1920, a number of allotment associations in Wolverhampton took over control of their sites. From 1923, any allotment association was allowed to take over site management and rent collection if a suitable agreement could be made with the council. However, there were twenty areas which did not have an allotment association or, if they had an association, the members did not wish to take over the collection of rents. Some of those associations which did agree experienced financial problems similar to those reported in Walsall.

The problems of the 1920s and 1930s meant that self-management was largely abandoned during the mid twentieth century. The issue only became central in the Black Country again towards the end of the century. There were limited attempts to introduce self-management in Dudley from 1980 when the Wall Heath Horticultural Guild rented Richmond Park allotments and agreed to do minor repairs in return for a rent reduction before later agreeing to take over the running of the site for a peppercorn rent (*Express and Star*, 23 June 1981). Barnett Lane Allotment Association was established with its own committee in 1984, and in 1985, Wordsley Gardeners' Guild negotiated with the council to hand over control of the site to a committee of allotment holders. The number of self-managed sites increased in the following two decades. By 2002, just three temporary sites in Dudley were run by the council; the remainder were self-managed (Dudley Metropolitan Borough Council, 2002). Allotment holders in Wolverhampton became more autonomous in 1993 when a number took over the day-to-day control of plots. By 2000, one-quarter of the thirty-two sites in the borough were self-managed (Wolverhampton Metropolitan Borough Council, 2000). Self-management was reintroduced in Walsall in 1995 and two years

later, eleven sites in the borough (30%) had delegated management; the remainder were managed by the council (NSALG,1997).

The change from council run allotments to self-management was a topic of interest to most interviewees. DH-D had a plot on one of the first sites to adopt the self-management scheme in Dudley. He explained that being one of the first meant the site committee was very keen to see the scheme succeed:

*We were a pioneering one to take up the scheme. Being the first one, there was always a tendency to sort of, "we've gotta make a go of it".*

A number speculated as to the reasons for the introduction of self-management. The most common view was that it was a way for the council to save money and effort:

*I think their idea of self administration...they didn't want to employ the staff down the town to sort of look after and manage allotments, so if they get them self managed it'd cut out staff you see; that was the idea of it you know... they said, "Oh no, well, we've finished now with the allotments, you look after yourselves and that's it and if you want to have a show you have your own show"...you know, "Forget us now, we just give you the grant; how you spend it's your business"...(FP-WS).*

However, at least one thought there were some good intentions behind the change:

*...then the authority...in view of the fact that if they could make them what they called self-managed, things might be better, right; they can do what they wish, how they wish (AR-WV).*

GW-WS recalled the system in Walsall before self-management was introduced:

*The Allotments Council was...just a committee of allotment holders...if they wanted summat done by the council, they just went and said "Can we have summat done on so-and-so site?". There was two delegates from each site in the borough.*

FP-WS had also been involved in the local allotment community at the time when this system was in operation. He recalled that allotment sites had to make an application to the local authority for work which needed to be done and the

council would do this work “whenever they’d got the chance or time or inclination”. As GW-WS, who had worked for the council Leisure Department explained, this system did not always work effectively:

*... I can well remember doing a job when I was at work and I got a list of every site, in the borough and we gotta go down to spray it, but we never got round to it, but I had got a full list of the route to go round to do it like you know, one of these jobs we’d get round to one day.*

A number of interviewees spoke about the benefits of self-management for allotment holders, referring to things they had been able to do to improve their sites, making decisions about how to use the money themselves rather than having to apply to the council:

*...we run it ourselves and we appointed a treasurer and he collected the rents and we used the money for...that’s been tarmaced there and we’ve put gates on at the end you know and there’s also an entrance down the bottom end...we had new fencing put along there, you know, and that sort of thing...and we put water tanks in as well (BS-D).*

*If the money’s well spent and they look after it and they get things done amongst theirselves more than probably what they used to do, you know, I think there’s a lot more helping in that way like you know and one’ll get the sprayer and spray...things like that which they hadn’t used to ‘cause they gotta wait for the council (GW-WS).*

However, it was acknowledged that self-management meant that allotment holders needed to be more proactive and this sometimes caused difficulties:

*...the problem is, people pay their rent, they come up there, they dig their plot and they’re not interested in anybody else, you know, they’ve got blinkers on and they just wanna go down plot number thirty and dig plot number thirty, they don’t care what’s happening on number thirty-one and twenty-nine, you know. So unfortunately, that is the problem (AR-WV).*

A number of allotment holders recalled difficulties in persuading allotment holders to do work to improve site facilities:

*...there was always things to do like keeping the weeds down...and you couldn't get people to come and you know, do a bit of work, put a new gate... (GG-WV)*

*You know for instance we've got a healthy bank balance for a start; we're not short of cash; we run it very well; there's money there and we can spend it on you know, improving the site within a certain reason and things like that. It's just when you come to...want something done; they don't seem to come forward (LW-D).*

Many interviewees were aware that self-management had meant that some sites which had previously been run by the council now faced difficulties with increasingly complex financial and legal rules:

*We have to make a return of course to the finance committee at the Town Hall at the end of the year to show how the money's been spent and with it, all the necessary receipts and invoices and things like that. So, we got quite a capable committee who have to run this and, I mean, we're talking about thousands of pounds, not tens, so it has to be well looked after and documented (FP-WS).*

This could be problematic because, as EC-WS pointed out, good gardeners were not necessarily good committee members or good accountants. FP-WS was also aware of the difficulties of finding suitable people to take on committee duties from among allotment holders. He detailed the problems faced on his site:

*Secretary, he was a bit of a dictator, anyway, we fell out with him ...and it wasn't very successful. So they formed a new committee; sacked the old one, started a new one and the chap who... took over secretary job, he died shortly after. So, they was scrapping round for someone else to do the job and they got another wide boy...fiddling the funds...So they haven't had a very successful time at all. However, they have regrouped again you know and they've stated up again and we are starting to make a bit of progress now. They've put forward proposals to get a team of people to come and clean them up and we're going start spending some more money to get them cleaned up a bit...they've made a start..*

As several interviewees pointed out, self-management was only possible for larger sites where the majority of the plots were taken. However, allotment holders on those sites which were not large enough for self-management to be viable were still involved in decision making via regular meetings.

Even on self-managed sites, the local authority remained responsible for some aspects of the allotments such as security. Some allotment holders saw the council as a type of regulator:

*We sort of muddle along sort of thing you know, but they was under the evil eye of the council; you can't do anything you shouldn't be doing, you know what I mean? (LM-WS).*

In addition to council control and self-management, a number of alternative management arrangements were adopted by allotment sites throughout the twentieth century. In Walsall, allotment sites in Springfield Road, North Street and New Sun Street were owned by the Ecclesiastical Commissioners and Lord Barnard owned private allotments in All Saints' Road and Stafford Street. Some sites were solely for a company's workforce; for instance, Walsall Locks & Gears provided allotments for their work people in Wolverhampton Street. One private allotment site in the Paddock area of Walsall was owned by the bowling club and the twenty-five plots were reserved for club members. In 1920, Wolverhampton Committee handed over some land to allotment associations to run as co-operatives and other sites were passed to firms to run as private allotments<sup>33</sup>. An example of a co-operative arrangement was Dunstall Co-operative Allotments in Wolverhampton, which were owned by Dunstall Co-operative Allotments Society Limited. There were one hundred plots and all the tenants were shareholders in the society. Under the articles of association, three-quarters of the shareholders had to be in agreement before major decisions such as the sale of land could go ahead. RC-WV, an allotment holder from Jeffcock Road,

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<sup>33</sup> These included Steelhouse Lane which was adopted by the wrought iron manufacturers Bayliss, Jones and Bayliss; Dunstall which was let privately by Courtaulds yarn manufacturers; Foxes Lane and Walsall Street which were let directly by the Great Western Railway; Penn Road and Goldthorn Terrace which was owned by the motor company, Slater and Co; and Goldthorn Hill which was owned by Wolverhampton and Dudley Breweries.

another private site, where allotment holders were shareholders, was very much in favour of this type of organisation:

*This is an ideal; I've always thought this is just about the ideal organisational structure, entirely self-managing as opposed to the council putting its oar in. Absolutely, it's ours, that means, if we don't make it happen, it doesn't happen, which is why we place such a lot of emphasis on people like our secretary and chairman...a brilliant system.*

Owning the land meant that this association was able to do a number of things to raise additional money to improve the site:

*We own the entrance...so we've got garages there, which we rent out. We've got the trading shed, which provides us with usually some profit over the year. And our annual subs from the members are ten pounds...We've managed to keep our sub down to ten pounds with rent off the garages... (RC-WV).*

However, an interviewee from another private site explained that the legal arrangements could be even more complex and difficult than on self-managed sites, making it difficult for ordinary allotment holders to deal with.

Yet another form of management existed in north Walsall in the late 1990s. Here, some allotments were run as Food Producing Co-operatives, in conjunction with Groundwork Black Country as part of the Health Action Zone Programme (*Walsall Observer*, 23 Aug 2002: 18). Another interesting development in the same decade was a tenant-led initiative to create allotments on a small area of wasteland on Lunt Estate in Wolverhampton (*Wolverhampton Chronicle*, 5 September 1993).

The social importance of allotments has been largely overlooked in previous studies and does not form a major part of the established stereotype because, at first sight, it would appear that allotment associations are ineffective and of limited importance to the majority of allotment holders. It was clear from interviewees' comments that only a minority of allotment holders were interested in taking an active part in association activities, possibly because the bureaucratic procedures and hierarchical structures did not appeal to the full range of allotment holders. Arrangements such as self-management required a high

degree of commitment on the part of allotment holders and relatively few showed any inclination to become involved in this aspect of the allotment movement. For the vast majority of allotment holders, the social interaction which took place on allotments was much more significant than any involvement in wider social and political concerns; the latter was very much a secondary activity, if it registered with them at all.

However, in addition to the formal allotment associations, there were a number of examples of more informal types of organisation among allotment holders. Often, this was intended to achieve a specific objective; there are numerous examples of allotment holders banding together to petition the council throughout the twentieth century in relation to a range of issues including applications to make war plots into permanent allotments; requesting a water supply; appealing against notices to quit; and protesting against rent increases. Another example of informal organisation was the way in which allotment holders sometimes organised their labour on an informal basis to make improvements to their sites. From the 1920s, a common arrangement when improvements were required was for the council to provide the materials, and the allotment holders to carry out the work themselves. It was usual for allotment holders to be responsible for routine maintenance work such as trimming hedges. Towards the end of the twentieth century, this type of activity was still taking place as the introduction of self-management meant that allotment holders had to take greater responsibility for the upkeep of their site. However, both allotment associations and self-management groups tended to rely on the goodwill of a small proportion of allotment holders.

Although involvement in associations was important for some of those allotment holders interviewed, for many, it was of no concern. It may be the case that what many allotment holders valued more was the independence that owning an allotment brought them. The degree of autonomy enjoyed varied from site to site, but whether the council or local association was in control, allotment holders were required to follow certain rules<sup>34</sup>. Those who wanted an allotment as an escape from their working lives would have little interest in joining a formal organisation to control their leisure time. If, as Roberts (1970) has claimed, the

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<sup>34</sup> See pp. 157-62.

middle classes are more likely to join clubs than their working class counterparts, this may help to explain why only a small minority of allotment holders were interested in being involved in the formal management of their sites. However, even if allotment holders were not interested in formal committee work, they were often willing to become involved on a less formal basis when particular issues arose which would affect them directly, a threat to their site for instance.

The social importance of allotments is, therefore, of much greater significance than is apparent from the traditional stereotype derived from the literature. Although allotments were of less moral significance in the twentieth century than in the nineteenth, this aspect did not disappear completely. More importantly, allotments assumed a role as places of interaction, fulfilling an important function for older people in particular who would otherwise be isolated. The importance of allotment associations is usually overlooked because they were not especially politically active. However, at a local level, these organisations were crucial and were well-developed forums for the allotment community throughout the twentieth century. They were involved in charitable work; developed links with the local community; made practical improvements to sites; and fought threats posed by developers.

## **Personal**

Cultivating an allotment can be important for an individual in a variety of ways; it can bring improved health, opportunities for relaxation and a sense of pride for instance. In addition, allotment holding may have particular benefits for those in certain disadvantaged circumstances, for example, the unemployed and those suffering long-term illness. The personal importance of allotments has rarely been the subject of research and is, therefore, a neglected aspect of the stereotype.

Beyond the value owning an allotment can have for an individual, it can bring a number of benefits for their immediate and extended family. Allotment cultivation can have implications for relationships within families: between parents and children and between husbands and wives. There are obviously links between allotment holding and household food production, whether this is

for financial benefit or in order to obtain fresh food produced according to certain personal standards. Interviewees suggested that, rather than places to escape from family life, allotments might be better described as places where families work together to produce food for the household and also offered opportunities for older family members to pass on their knowledge and enthusiasm and, in addition, to develop closer relationship between family members.

The importance of families in allotment holding was widely recognised in the early twentieth century. In the 1920s, the NUAH linked many of the benefits of allotment holding to gains for the allotment holder's family:

*He benefits somewhat in pocket for he grows cheaper than he could buy...He devotes part of his space to flowers for the beautification of the garden and the home and to give pleasure to his wife and children and he does not take matters too strenuously (NUAH Journal, 1920: 86).*

It might, therefore, be suggested that allotments were significant in the formation and development of family relationships. Many interviewees reflected on their experiences of allotments and gardening generally when they were children. For instance, LT-D's father and uncle had a number of allotments in Dudley during the 1940s and GW-WS said he first started helping on his father's allotment in the 1930s when he was about five years old. But this pattern was not limited to the war years and before. Some interviewees said their own children had helped on their plots. In EC-WS's case, her children often went to the allotment with her husband:

*It used to be lovely 'cause we as we say we used to down, my husband used to go down and he used to take my two girls down on a Saturday and I'd never see 'em 'til Saturday evening.*

In some families, it was usual for several generations to spend time together on allotments. FPr-WS's son had helped him on the allotment before taking on his own plot and his grandson also spent time on the allotment from when he was a toddler.

Even if there were no direct links with allotment holding, many allotment holders' families had a more general interest in gardening. Several remembered their parents growing vegetables in their garden at home and many helped with this

activity as children. In many cases, a mutual interest in gardening was an important part of the relationship between children and their parents. For instance, JH-D remembered working with his father on the allotment from a very early age. When he was a teenager, his father bought him his own spade which he clearly still treasured. A few other interviewees also recalled their fathers buying them their first spade or other gardening tools. This was evidently seen as an important event in their lives, almost a rite of passage:

*...my father took me to a little shop up there, an ironmonger's shop, a hardware shop, I was about seven, eight years of age, bought me a border fork and paid seven shillings and sixpence for it...and that border fork, I don't say it's usable today...the prongs on it, they've had that much wear...they're very, very, very, very slim... (EH-WS).*

Some interviewees thought that the experience of helping on a family allotment as a child was more common in the past than it was today. EE-WS claimed that his generation was "sort of brought up to it"; he vividly recalled collecting manure for his father:

*...go and get the horse manure, I mean, I went with my barrow many a Saturday morning...Lunt Street, where the railway horses used to come... I used to get hops from the brewery; that was a good standby you know...We used to go round collecting the leaves...you know, collect bags of leaves, always have a pile ready...*

In some families, it was essential for children to help out in this way for various reasons. For example, PR-WV remembered having to dig the family allotment because his father was partially blind. EE-WS recalled working with his brothers on their father's allotment when he was in hospital for several months:

*...during this time the potatoes you know ripened and so my elder brother who was ten was designated to dig the potatoes up and I had to go along and scrape the mud off them and throw them into the bag and all the rest of it and I'll never forget that; my god it was cold! 'Cause it was early winter...I remember having to get up at six o'clock and get these potatoes with slugs on them...*

He helped because he had to, rather than through interest or enjoyment. However, the experience did not put him off gardening permanently. Although he never had his own allotment, he did have a big garden where he grew fruit and vegetables.

The involvement of a whole family, husband, wife and children, in allotment cultivation was not common, but it did occur in a few families. EC-WS claimed she, her husband and their children were all interested in gardening:

*Me and Bill's had many a happy hour down there. As I say, Irene [daughter] had an allotment and her enjoyed it and her won some prizes with it.*

Refuting the traditional stereotype of allotments as a place for husbands to escape from their wives, a number of husbands and wives worked plots jointly. They spent significant amounts of time together on their allotments. Talking about someone with a plot near to his, GG-WV said:

*...so whenever he was there with his wife was always there, they was always together on the allotment.*

BH-WV claimed that he and his wife worked together on their allotment, but they had defined roles in terms of the jobs they did: "I'm the donkey, I do all the digging, she puts it in". There were also a few cases of husbands and wives both being interested in allotments, but cultivating separate plots. Even when just one person was responsible for cultivating the allotment, their spouse might be involved indirectly. For instance, JH-D said his wife used flowers grown on the plot for her flower arranging. Another interviewee who had judged a number of shows reported that it was common for allotment holders' wives to enter the flower arranging or pot plant categories. In addition, several interviewees claimed their wives enjoyed spending time on the allotment simply relaxing. However, in other cases, spouses were less interested. A number of wives were present at interviews which took place in the allotment holder's home and many said they rarely visited the allotment. Some said that health problems prevented them, but others simply did not have any inclination to do so. In a few cases, allotments were a source of dispute between husbands and wives. A number of allotment holders said that their wives sometimes objected to the amount of time they spent on their plots. RM-WS commented:

*...sometimes their wives don't like it, they spend too much time there. My wife didn't mind because the stuff she got.*

When two or more family members worked a plot together, the balance of work and decision-making was not always equally split and sometimes this reflected family relationships. For instance, JH-D recalled how, gradually, as his father became older, he did more and more of the work on the allotment:

*He'd start the one side and I'd start the other. And when I used to start first, he'd do two-thirds of the garden; I'd do a third. And as he got older and I got stronger, in the end, he'd only do a third and I'd do two-thirds.*

However, he emphasised that he always considered it to be his father's allotment and allowed him to make the decisions. Joint family plots were not always a success. JR-D had taken on her plot with her son, but there were problems because, as she said, "we get on, but we've got different opinions". Her son lacked sufficient time because of work and family commitments and he eventually gave up and she took over the plot on her own. As well as sharing an interest, allotment holders had also gained knowledge from helping on plots owned by other family members:

*See I had to learn from me dad and I remembered all the things he used to tell me 'cause I was interested...they had beans, but not very good and me dad says, "Look at these", 'cause I was interested then, he got 'em up, the beans had just gone the same as the pot, they'd gone round and round and round, he says, "Never grow 'em in pots, grow 'em in boxes"... (JH-D).*

Several allotment holders thought that the allotment movement needed to do more to encourage families, though some suspected that not all allotment holders would be keen to see more children:

*It's something I think we ought, we as a movement, an allotment movement, we need to move forward and try to make a more family friendly you know give up some plots and make them into playgrounds for the kids...difficult to get that one over 'cause, because the age of the people who've got allotments, they tend to not want kids. They've had*

*their kids and they've helped to look after the grandkids; the last thing they want is kids (PD-WS).*

A number of interviewees referred to the differences between allotments in the UK and those in other parts of Europe where families might spend a weekend living on their allotment. One said that he had suggested introducing a similar system in Walsall, but there was little interest. However, he felt there was still room to make allotments more family-friendly:

*I think it's the way to go, get families interested; make it safe for the kids, so they can bring the kids down; the kids can play in the play area and swings and whatever while mum and dad do the plot. I think it will come, but it could take some time (PD-WS).*

Being able to provide for their family often led to a sense of pride for many allotment holders. For some, being able to supply their family and friends with fresh vegetables obviously gave them tremendous satisfaction:

*He does enjoy it. When he brings home everything, you know, he's so pleased (GGo-WV's wife).*

*I'll say, "What d'you want?"*

*She'll say, "Well, bring me a cauliflower and some potatoes", marrow, courgettes, peas, beans".*

*Whatever the wife asks you for, you can just take home. And your friends as well, 'cause you've got plenty: onions, leeks... (RM-WS).*

It has been suggested that this sense of satisfaction was also important to allotment holders in the earlier years of the twentieth century. For instance, even in the 1930s, allotments did not simply provide economic benefits for the unemployed. Advocates of the Society of Friends' allotment scheme for the unemployed in the 1930s referred to "the immense relief of spirit and new interest in life as well as of the economic benefit of fresh vegetables for the family that one allotment can give" (Anon, 1935: 129). Referring to the benefits of allotment holding among the unemployed in the 1930s, it was argued:

*...it is morally significant that men learned to work quite voluntarily and without payment at tasks not of their own choosing and without any prospects of seeing either the fruits or benefits of their labourers” (Anon, 1935: 131).*

This was a theme which recurred in the 1980s and 1990s:

*Although working an allotment will not take anyone off the Unemployment Register, bringing vegetables home to one’s family will give great satisfaction and rid the Unemployed of ‘the useless feeling’ (NSALG, 1992).*

This was not the only way in which allotments provided personal satisfaction. Those who were keen competitors were clearly proud of their achievements. For example, some had certificates on the wall of their sheds and others kept newspaper cuttings and certificates. Winning clearly brought with it a sense of achievement. JH-D recalled his father’s reaction on winning the site competition for the first time:

*... he’d be about eighty-two when he won the competition and he was...tears were running down his face...And I was crying, you know but that was it, he started in 1916 and it took ‘til 1967 to win the cup. But before he died, he won it three times...*

However, having a regular supply of fresh vegetables was the advantage of allotment holding mentioned most frequently by interviewees. This was seen as an enduring benefit of allotments, something which was important throughout the twentieth century; as LC-WV said:

*If you want a plate of fresh green peas, the only way to get them is to grow them, you can’t get them any other way. It’s the same now as it was then, if you want flavour, you’ve got...unless somebody’s going to give you them...so there was always that, a permanent aspect of it.*

Many interviewees emphasised the freshness of the produce from their allotment:

*Oh, the vegetables, the fresh vegetables...it's the freshness you see (RM-WS)*

*...what you grow yourself, you grow, you can harvest it, it's fresh, you can pick it, you can have it in the pot within an hour and then within two hours, you can have it on the table, a nice meal (LT-D).*

A number related stories to illustrate the benefits of having a supply of fresh food. For instance BD-WV described how her husband always visited the allotment on Christmas morning to pick vegetables for their Christmas dinner. Most believed that the taste of fresh vegetables picked from the allotment was very different from the taste of vegetables which could be bought from shops:

*The best thing of an allotment is you've got your own fresh produce, end of story you know. I mean people say, "Well, I can't tell the difference", well whether they can or they can't I don't know, but I certainly can! (AR-WV)*

*They taste different, you know, there's a taste to them; there's the stuff in the supermarket, we find, is bland (PD-WS)*

*...when you taste the food that we grow in the allotment, it doesn't taste the same as it does in the supermarkets; it's absolutely beautiful! (LM-WS).*

JR-D believed that fresh vegetables had a unique quality:

*I prefer to go and get it fresh, 'cause I think there is something...when you've just picked something, you can tell...I can tell the energy difference. I know this sounds nutty, but they crackle, the produce crackle. Any peas I buy from the supermarket, there's a different sort of feeling to it.*

Another benefit of growing their own food rather than relying on shops was that allotment holders could choose which types of vegetables and which varieties to grow. BD-WV described how she had tried growing different varieties until she

found one she liked the best. She also pointed out that many allotment holders were keenly aware of the need to grow different varieties for different uses; for instance, some potatoes were best for chipping, while others were more suitable for roasting or boiling. Many interviewees commented on being able to choose from a wide selection of vegetables:

*I say having that and being able to go down and pick what you want, you know, when you want particularly this time of the year [summer], it's superb, you know, you can have a cabbage on Monday, a cauliflower on Tuesday, calabrese on Wednesday...(PD-WS).*

Having vegetables which they knew had been grown using organic methods was another bonus of allotment holding for many people. Some allotment holders expressed concern about current farming practices:

*Well, I don't know how the whole thing's going to finish up you know, with this food lark. It's all mass produced...masses and hundredweights and hundredweights of chemical fertilizers and sprays... they keep saying "Oh, it's all perfectly alright". Well, okay, perhaps it is, perhaps in about twenty-five years' time, we shall find out whether it was perfectly alright to or not...(FPr-WS)*

*If you buy vegetables from the market or the supermarket, they've all got chemicals on them; they've all been sprayed with stuff (Ggo-WV).*

Knowing that the food they were eating was grown in a particular way was important:

*Nothing tastes as good as what it does when it comes off allotment. You know it's clean because you done the digging, you know there's nothing in it that'll knock yer about... (RM-WS).*

LT-D thought that a significant advantage of having an allotment was the control he was able to exercise over what he grew and how it was grown, for example which chemicals were used. He pointed out that there was no way of knowing what chemicals had been used on vegetables and fruit sold in supermarkets:

*...in supermarket vegetables and fruit just for the appearance of them you know, as long as they look attractive, nice and clean, you never know what chemical's been used to grow it...well, when you've got an allotment*

*and you grow your own, you can control what's used to grow it, you know, whether you use chemicals or not, whether you're organic or not...*

BA-D also emphasised the importance of knowing how food had been produced and that vegetables from the allotment had been grown using certain methods and were of a high quality:

*... the quality of the food, you know very well that what's gone into there, you've been responsible for and you can enjoy your food, you know there's no...there's nothing harmful in it...*

Although having a supply of fresh vegetables and fruit obviously gave many allotment holders immense pleasure, in some ways, it was even more important in the earlier years of the century when many poorer families, and those living in towns especially, had limited alternative means of obtaining them. Being able to pick fresh vegetables from their allotment was a healthier option than buying the cheapest over-ripe fruit and vegetables. It was MS-WV's belief that the generation that benefited from fresh food from allotments during the Second World War would be "the longest living generation" because the proliferation of home-grown fruit and vegetables meant their "diet was ideal"; they were not reliant on convenience foods. Even at the end of the twentieth century, allotment holders attributed their good health to the fact that they had a constant supply of fresh vegetables which had been grown naturally:

*We do firmly believe that the good food we've had off allotments through the years has kept us in good health. I know it might sound a fallacy, but we've had one of two things wrong haven't we, but nothing particular... (GW-WS).*

Although health was rarely mentioned as a factor which motivated interviewees to take on a plot, it was frequently seen as an important benefit of allotment holding. A number of allotment holders pointed out that gardening was a form of exercise and helped to keep them fit:

*A friend of mine, he had an accident with his back, he can't stand more than a couple of minutes... And he's got an allotment, he loves it...It keeps him moving see, it keeps his body moving...nothing better, keeping him active (GG-WV).*

Being out in the fresh air was something which frequently appealed:

*...it's great the fresh air, you know, you're not stuck in... (GG-WV).*

FPr-WS expanded on the health benefits of allotments:

*I find it damn good exercise and I find that my winter weight is at my peak when I take up the spade in March and I'm down to...I've lost about a stone by about the end of June. So, it does me the world of good and then that stone gradually goes back on again, September, October, November, Christmas and January and February, inactivity and I'm about...the stone's gone back on again and so it has to come back off again [laughs]. It's just an annual thing. But I think it's good, healthy exercise and there is an end product of course.*

Even those allotment holders without obvious health problems thought that gardening had health benefits. Some interviewees, either through what they had read or through personal experience, felt that gardening was a good hobby for people who no longer worked as it acted as a mental stimulus:

*...gardening being good for older people, 'cause it stimulates the brain, 'cause you have to think about, in terms of what you're going to plant? When you're gonna plant it? How are you gonna plant it? What varieties? And it's all keeping this, you know the old grey matter going. I never thought about it personally, I just did it, but you think about it and you think, "yeah, yeah". 'Cause, now, you're thinking about your varieties for next year "...ain't having that one again, didn't do very well with that...what sort were that one? That one did very well, so I'll have some of that..."(PD-WS).*

It was clear that, for some interviewees, the sheer pleasure of growing was one of the most important benefits of owning an allotment:

*You pick a cauli you know, nothing big, you know, a normal size cauli and you think, "That was only a seed that big when it started"...it gives me a kick, it does, it really gives me a kick because this cabbage, cauliflower, beans, broad beans, whatever, you know, the fact that you've started off with a tiny seed...okay, I'm easily pleased, but it does... (PD-WS).*

For some, cultivation was linked, directly or indirectly, to creativity. This might be a compensation for a monotonous job or simply a chance to use their skills. Allotment cultivation was, therefore, something many people appeared to love for its own sake:

*...there were guys down there, eighty-two, eighty-four years of age and still digging their garden plot, because...they relished the idea of being on the plot (EH-WS).*

The coming of spring, with the prospect of spending time on their plot was something many allotment holders looked forward to; alternative indoor hobbies did not seem to hold the same fascination:

*In the winter time when it gets dark at half past four, it's terrible...cause I have to sit there all day and at night, I read me books and I do the crossword puzzle and listen to me music and, but it's terrible...and once you get March here, that's when you start putting your seeds in...and you know, it's marvellous, you know (LM-WS).*

However, this was not true of all allotment holders. BM-D acknowledged that other allotment holders on her site got greater enjoyment out of cultivating their plots than she did. She and her husband had a number of other hobbies which they often wanted to do at times when they felt obliged to visit their allotment, but she believed that retired people enjoyed spending a significant proportion of their time there:

*I should say fifty percent of the people down there who spend all their time, I say, they are retired anyway...I think they enjoy it.*

It can be seen that allotments provide numerous personal benefits which were extremely important to allotment holders, but largely ignored by previous research and, therefore do not form part of the stereotype derived from the literature. Personal benefits included opportunities to develop family relationships; a sense of pride; better health; self-sufficiency; opportunities for creativity; and simple enjoyment. To a large extent, it is only possible to obtain information about the personal benefits of allotments by direct contact with allotment holders themselves through oral history interviews and, perhaps, this is why this has been neglected in the past.

## Conclusions

According to the traditional stereotype, allotment activities were important for economic reasons at a family and community level. However, in the post-war years, the personal benefits of allotment holding, such as improved health, relaxation and having a supply of high-quality fresh food, have become more central. However, this does not mean that self-provisioning had become insignificant to the allotment community, rather, most allotment holders were more concerned about the type of produce grown and the methods of cultivation rather than its economic value.

The social and personal importance of allotment activities does not feature in the traditional stereotype because they have rarely been the subject of in depth investigation. However, this study suggests that both factors are extremely important. Although the moral value of allotments was central in the nineteenth century, this rarely features in discussions relating to the importance of twentieth-century allotments. Nevertheless, the true importance of allotments in the late twentieth century has been underestimated because most work has focused on the financial aspects. Allotments were not just important as a means of coping with poverty and hardship; they also had an important social role in the lives of many communities. Although self-help was an important feature of the allotment community, it tended to take place on an ad hoc, unstructured basis rather than being organised through allotment associations; it has therefore been neglected by many historians of working class movements. The personal importance of allotments assumed increasing significance over time as allotments ceased to be a financial necessity. Considerations such as the impact of allotments on family relationships, their role in providing households with fresh produce and the potential health benefits of allotment cultivation became extremely important to many gardeners by the end of the century.

When the findings of this study are compared to those in the existing literature, it is clear that the use of oral and documentary sources has uncovered evidence relating to a number of issues which are, to a large extent, absent from existing studies in this area. The oral evidence has proved to be especially important for this section of the study because the personal perspective of allotment holders is

often missing from written evidence, making it difficult to identify the significance of allotment holding to individuals, for example, as a source of pride, enjoyment and relaxation. The enthusiasm many people felt for allotment cultivation is clear from the oral testimony. Another topic which emerges strongly from the oral evidence is the importance of allotment holding for family relationships, especially those between parents and children.

In conclusion, this indicates that there is a fundamental flaw in this aspect of the stereotype due to a lack of research in this area generally, but more specifically, little consideration of the views of allotment holders in determining the importance of allotments in the later years of the twentieth century. Allotments were clearly of great importance to allotment holders and their families and, to some extent, their local communities, but this has not been the subject of in-depth research. Although researchers have acknowledged that the characteristics of a typical allotment holder changed as allotment holding ceased to be a survival strategy and became a recreational activity, the ways in which this change affected the importance of allotments has not been investigated. The emphasis has remained on economic, rather than social and personal, concerns. Consequently, although the stereotype seems to hold true to a large extent for the earlier years of the twentieth century when allotments were important for the household economy, in the post-war years, the financially-focused stereotype breaks down and by the end of the century had become irrelevant.

## 6. Conclusions

This thesis helps to compensate for the overall dearth of literature relating directly to twentieth century urban allotments. While historians have concerned themselves with rural, nineteenth century allotments and gardening in general, urban allotments usually feature only as part of wider works on twentieth century social or economic history, such as self-provisioning or working class leisure activities. This research is significant because, unlike the majority of previous studies of allotment holding, which have focused on rural areas in the nineteenth century, it has examined a fairly typical urban conurbation during the twentieth century. Further studies of other regions are needed before more substantial conclusions might be drawn. However, in the main, the Black Country appears to be fairly representative of the national picture in terms of allotment provision in urban conurbations. As was described in chapter 1, local patterns of allotment activity broadly have conformed to national trends throughout the course of the century. Although allotment holding was not a noticeably strong feature of local working class communities, a significant number of allotments was provided from the early twentieth century onwards.

In the existing literature, allotment holders and their motivations for allotment gardening, have been the subject of greater study than allotment activity itself; the question of what allotment holding actually involves has not been investigated in any depth. The importance of allotment holding is even more difficult to deduce from the literature, in particular, the social importance of allotments for individuals and their families and communities, and also their wider social and political importance. Less attention has been paid to these aspects than to the economic value of allotments. This study has, therefore, made an important contribution to the study of this area by investigating previously overlooked aspects of allotment holding as well as examining the more well-researched topics in greater depth.

From the review of the literature, it was possible to discern stereotypes of allotment holding and allotment holders in relation to the following four issues: the characteristics of allotment holders; their motives for having an allotment; the appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotments; and the importance of

allotment activity. In many cases, the stereotypes presented in the literature were supported by images of allotments and allotment holders present in popular culture. At first sight, it may appear that allotments have changed little during the course of the twentieth century; their image remains trapped in the past in a number of ways. On closer examination, however, it is clear that the nature of allotments and allotment holders shifted during the course of the century, largely as a result of allotments becoming a leisure activity rather than a financial necessity. Once the stereotypes had been set out, each aspect was investigated using primary sources to determine the extent to which it held true for Black Country allotments and allotment holders. Such a focused and systematic examination of the common assumptions relating to allotments has not previously been undertaken.

Easily the most detailed stereotype relates to the characteristics of a typical allotment holder. In fact, three distinct figures are apparent from the literature. The first was that of a working class man with a family to support; the family was usually poor and unable to afford an adequate diet. From the 1960s onwards, the now prevalent image of an elderly, flat-capped gardener emerged. This stereotype has been challenged in recent years with the emergence of a new type of allotment holder, a middle class, often female, grower with an interest in 'green' issues. This represents a more dramatic change from the previous two stereotypes. Although the images of allotment holders are explicitly present in the literature and well-established in popular culture, they have not been rigorously tested and examined. The lack of in-depth research has meant that the allotment stereotypes outlined in chapter 1 have largely been accepted without question not only in the mass media, but among academics and even within the allotment community. This thesis attempts to test the extent to which the stereotypes outlined hold true in practice among allotment holders in the Black Country.

If allotment holders in the Black Country actually conformed to the conventional pattern outlined, it would be expected that a typical allotment holder of the early twentieth century would have been a working class man with a family; there would then have been a shift in the age profile, but not the gender or social class, of allotment holders prior to the emergence of a new type of allotment

holder at the end of the century who was likely to be younger, female and middle class. The findings of this research indicate that the first two stereotypes were, in broad terms, fairly accurate, although there were some slight discrepancies such as a wider range of occupations than might be expected among allotment holders who otherwise fitted the second stereotype. However, there is relatively little evidence that the third stereotype was present in significant numbers within the Black Country allotment community even at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

In terms of social class, there is little evidence that significant numbers of middle class gardeners have taken on allotments as would be expected according to the established view. The composition of allotment holders in the Black Country has reflected local employment patterns to a large extent and the majority remained manual workers even at the end of the twentieth century. However, the links between allotment holding and poverty did gradually diminish and this was no longer a defining characteristic of a typical allotment holder in the region by 2000. Although allotments played an important role in supporting local poor and unemployed families in the earlier years of the century, the majority of interviewees were now retired and appeared to live quite comfortably.

In the first half of the twentieth century, it was common for younger people to work allotments to provide for the household. However, the movement towards allotment gardening as a leisure pursuit meant that the age profile of allotment holders rose after the Second World War. It is not surprising that, like other forms of gardening, this activity came to be most popular among older generations. Evidence of younger allotment holders returning to allotments towards the end of the century, which has been documented elsewhere (Crouch and Ward, 1997; Jones, 2000; West, 2000), is extremely limited in the Black Country.

Likewise, when gender was examined, although the number of female allotment holders rose, they remained firmly in the minority in the Black Country throughout the period studied. The proportion of women varied between sites and, according to interviewees, women were made more welcome on some sites than others. However, the actual number of women who were involved in

allotment holding is unknown; although only a few had their own plots, many more worked on a plot owned by her husband.

A characteristic which did change somewhat is ethnicity. The size of ethnic minority communities in the Black Country grew dramatically from the 1950s and significant numbers of Asians and Afro-Caribbeans in particular became interested in allotment holding during this period, although none volunteered to take part in this research. This characteristic has been overlooked in most existing research. This has meant that this important shift has not been awarded the attention it may well deserve and ethnicity does not feature significantly in any of the existing stereotypes.

This study has, therefore, provided a greater depth of information about allotment holders than is present in much of the existing literature. It confirms the hypothesis set out in chapter 1 for the earlier part of the twentieth century, but questions whether the emergence of the third stereotype of younger, middle class, female allotment holders is actually as noticeable as is suggested in the literature. As well as further exploration of those characteristics already identified, a number of additional characteristics, for instance the type of housing occupied by allotment holders and aspects of their personality such as perseverance or insularity, have been uncovered which were not prominent in the literature. Although these represent much less obvious aspects of the character of allotment holders, they do indicate the ways in which the composition of the allotment community has changed and diversified. However, given the small scale of this study, it is not possible to say whether these characteristics would be shared by allotment holders nationally and there are few comparable studies.

The stereotype relating to allotment holders' motivations was developed from the characteristics of allotment holders, but has been subject to less discussion in the literature. According to the traditional view, for the allotment holder in the first half of the twentieth century, poverty was a key motivator as allotments were required to supplement both the income and diet of poorer families. However, as allotment holding came to be seen, primarily, as a hobby, the range of factors which might prompt someone to take on a plot expanded and became more

individual to include, for example, competitive instinct, pride and a desire to escape from the home and family. However, the most recent stereotypical allotment holder had a very different set of motivators, including political beliefs and a desire for fresh, organic food.

Holding true to the stereotype, in the early years of the twentieth century, the most important motivational factors for Black Country allotment holders were financial ones, digging an allotment as a means of providing for the family. It is interesting to note that, although the traditional view of an allotment holder as someone who cultivates a plot to support his family has largely disappeared, the link between allotment holding and financial hardship remained, especially in the minds of older people. Although self-provisioning was still important at the end of the century, by this time it was usually a lifestyle choice rather than an economic necessity; the demand for organic food and a personal wish to be self-sufficient, or at least to provide vegetables for the household, were both significant. Even in the earlier part of the twentieth century, competitions and personal interest played an important motivational role. Later on, personal motives assumed much greater importance, but in many ways, these are more difficult to identify than financial motives as they depend on an individual's circumstances and personality. As there was little sign of the third stereotypical allotment holder to be found in the Black Country, it is not surprising that political beliefs were not generally significant as a motivating factor.

From this research, it is apparent that the factors which motivate people to take on allotments are too complex to be explained in terms of a stereotype. For most allotment holders interviewed, there was no single reason for taking on a plot. Motivating factors are often difficult to pin down, especially for those who have held a plot for a number of years. Moreover, allotment holders might be motivated by several factors which were not easily compatible, for example, wanting to grow crops to competition standard and also to provide nutritious food for the family. In addition, there are a number of factors relating to family background and changing living and working conditions, for example, greater affluence and a trend for early retirement which do not form part of the stereotype, but are clearly important in motivating some people to take on allotments. Another consideration is that many allotment holders were motivated

by unique elements of their personality or background, such as a strong competitive instinct; the need for relaxation; or a childhood interest. Yet others were encouraged to take on an allotment by prompts from the wider community, such as the media. In general, however, while external pressure, including financial obligation, might make it more likely that an individual would decide to take on an allotment, a genuine personal interest was necessary if someone was to continue to cultivate their land, especially on a long-term basis.

Even those who might be considered to be stereotypical allotment holders in terms of their characteristics often did not conform to the corresponding stereotype in terms of motivation. This indicates that the stereotype is superficial and that allotment holding is, in fact, more complex than it appears from its popular image. This thesis challenges the idea that motivation for allotment holding can be adequately described by a crude stereotype. Although broad patterns can be identified, for example, less emphasis on financial motives and greater importance awarded to personal factors towards the end of the twentieth century, in general, the use of stereotypes is not particularly helpful in understanding motivation for allotment holding.

The stereotype relating to the appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotments is less explicit in the literature than those relating to allotment holders themselves. This research therefore makes a valuable contribution to the development of knowledge in this area. In general terms, allotments are depicted as backward and dilapidated, but, ironically, their ramshackle appearance often contrasted with a plethora of rules regulating the management and cultivation of plots. In theory, allotments present an ideal opportunity for collective action, but as is pointed out in the literature, this has rarely been seized (Thorpe et al, 1969: 166-167). Despite a growing interest in allotments from those involved in the green movement, allotment holders are seen as having little political power. In the minds of many people, allotments are of relatively little importance to modern lifestyles. They are stereotyped as rural idylls in the midst of the chaos of contemporary urban life.

The lack of comparable research into activities which take place on allotments and their management makes it extremely difficult to judge how accurately the findings of this research might reflect the situation in areas outside the Black Country. The consensus is that, although there is usually fairly strict organisation and regulation of allotments, there is often little evidence of this in the actual appearance of sites and in the way in which individuals choose to work their plots. From interviews with allotment holders, it was clear that, despite outward appearances, allotments are not uncared for, unplanned or poorly managed. While there may be little formal control, individual plots are carefully organised and maintained. It was clear that most allotment holders gave a great deal of thought to how they cultivate their plots. It was found that there is great variation in cultivation practices, despite the fact that, at times, allotment holders were subject to fairly strict rules regarding their use of the land as well as less transparent ways of ensuring high standards of cultivation, for example, through competitions. This demonstrates the importance of investigating the reasons why allotments have been cultivated in certain ways at different times. As the characteristics of allotment holders became more disparate from the beginning of the twentieth century, so did the methods of cultivating plots. For example, the types of crops to be found changed from a narrow range of basic produce grown for subsistence purposes to include many new varieties and imported crops. Keeping livestock became less usual as allotments ceased to be used to support the household. Likewise, methods of cultivation also changed, for example, organic methods became more popular. As allotments became less important for subsistence purposes, allotment holders had more freedom to experiment on their plots and this diversification may have made plots appear even less uniform than they did previously and contributed to the perception of sites as 'untidy'.

The stereotype which portrays allotment sites as peaceful havens can be argued to hold true to some extent, for example, there was very little evidence of political activity among those interviewed. Nevertheless, this research has indicated that allotments were more active and contentious places than they might at first appear. For example, there could be serious problems with vandalism and other petty crime as well as frequent disputes among allotment holders themselves. It is clear that both the appearance, and atmosphere and

culture of allotment sites were more complex throughout the twentieth century than is suggested by the stereotype.

The importance of allotment activities is the least well-defined aspect of the stereotype. In general terms, like allotment holders themselves, allotment activities are seen as harmless and uncontroversial. Allotments had considerable economic significance in the first half of the twentieth century, but as the activity became an increasingly leisure-orientated one, this became less important. However, this does not mean that self-provisioning was no longer significant, rather, most allotment holders were more concerned about the type of produce grown and the methods of cultivation than its economic value. The 'gift relationship' is another aspect of this stereotype; this extends the impact of allotments beyond a gardener's immediate family, to the wider community. According to the traditional view, allotment activities were important for economic reasons at both a family and a community level. However, in the post-war years, the personal benefits of allotment holding, such as improved health, relaxation and having a supply of high-quality fresh food, became more central. Although self-help was an important feature of the allotment community, it tended to take place on an ad hoc, unstructured basis rather than being organised through allotment associations. Perhaps it is for this reason that allotments have been neglected by many historians of working class movements.

Although allotments were not just important as a means for coping with poverty and hardship, the social and personal importance of allotment activities do not feature prominently in the stereotype and have rarely been the subject of in depth investigation. This means that the true importance of allotments, in the late twentieth century in particular, has been underestimated because most work has focused on the financial aspects. From this research, it would appear that the social role of allotments assumed increasing significance over time as allotments ceased to be a financial necessity and considerations such as the impact of allotments on family relationships; their role in providing households with fresh produce; and the potential health benefits of allotment cultivation became extremely important. For example, although allotments were less important for families in financial terms, they were important as places where children of all ages and their parents could come together and share knowledge

and experience. The broader social significance of allotments is also more complex than the traditional view might suggest. The importance of allotments to local communities was, perhaps more significant in the earlier years of the twentieth century, but allotments still clearly had an important social role at the end of the century. The relationship between allotments and the local community is a complex one. In general terms, it would appear that relations deteriorated over time as allotments ceased to be an integral part of the local community and problems such as vandalism promoted allotment holders to cut themselves off, but further work is necessary before firm conclusions can be drawn. Consequently, this research also challenges this aspect of the conventional stereotype; although it was found to hold true to a large extent for the earlier years of the twentieth century, in the post-war years, it began to break down and by the end of the twentieth century it had become irrelevant.

This research therefore indicates that there are fundamental flaws in the stereotypes of allotments and allotment holders present in the existing literature. This is due to a lack of research in this area generally, but more specifically, little consideration being given to the views of allotment holders. When the findings of this study are compared to those in the existing literature, it is clear that the use of oral and documentary sources has uncovered evidence relating to a number of issues which are, to a large extent, absent from existing studies. The oral evidence has proved to be especially important because the personal perspective of allotment holders is often missing from primary documentary evidence, for example, the enthusiasm and pride many people feel for allotment cultivation is clear from the oral testimony. Even those aspects of the stereotype which have been the subject of more thorough investigation have been developed further by the addition of oral evidence. For example, the characteristics of a typical allotment holder have been found to include not only those socio-economic characteristics which can be identified via documentary sources, but also more personal characteristics such as perseverance. Another topic which emerges strongly from the oral evidence is the importance of allotment holding for family relationships, especially those between parents and children.

This research is just the first stage of an examination of allotment stereotypes and further work in other geographical regions is needed to consider whether the stereotypes of allotments and allotment holders which have been developed based on limited research into this topic are, in fact, accurate representations or whether, as this research suggests, allotments are a much more complex and significant phenomenon than has previously been acknowledged, particularly in terms of their social and economic importance.

One of the most interesting elements of the research was the identification of a number of personal and family characteristics which are held in common by a number of allotment holders. This suggests that more attention might usefully be paid to these types of qualities in addition to the more usual socio-economic variables. For example, the importance of family tradition may, in part, explain the slow rate of change in the composition of the allotment community, especially with regard to social class, but further research is required to confirm or refute this hypothesis.

Although the number of women, ethnic minority and non-manual allotment holders had risen, they were still firmly in the minority in 2000. The 'old guard' seemed reluctant to embrace newcomers and this limited, not only the appeal, but also the influence, of the allotment community. However, there is evidence that this stereotype is slowly breaking down, often linked to wider social and demographic changes and a third stereotype of a middle class, female grower with political interests is emerging, although this is happening more slowly in the Black Country than would appear to be the case in other areas of the country. The trend towards early retirement and longer lifespans has meant the age profile of allotment holders is rising and this has implications for the future of allotments. Such developments should be the subject of further research in the future. This also has implications for work to investigate the motivations for allotment holding. This is clearly a more complex subject than is depicted by the traditional stereotype. One important issue which should be awarded greater attention is the way in which multiple factors act together to motivate someone to take on, or continue to cultivate, an allotment.

With regard to the appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotments, more work is needed to examine how individual plots are managed. Previous studies have been focused at a site level, looking at the regulations imposed for example, and this has led to a false stereotype which fails to take account of the care taken by individual allotment holders in the cultivation of their plots. What allotment holders appear to value most is their independence in terms of what they grow, how they grow it, how much time they spend doing this, and so forth.

The importance of allotments is probably the area where least research has been carried out, so there are numerous options for further research in this area, especially in relation to the social and personal importance attached to allotments by individuals, families and communities. While the effects of hobbies such as allotment holding on relationships between husbands and wives are discussed in the literature (Bott, 1972; Gittins, 1982), there appears to have been much less work done on leisure activities involving parents and children. Allotment associations have rarely been as politically active as other working class self-help movements, so their importance may have been overlooked. It is clear from this research that they played a role in local communities, especially in charitable work and in building links with other community groups and further work is needed in this area. In addition, informal interaction between allotment holders was extremely important to most gardeners; when exchanging information about growing techniques, for example, personal contacts were considerably more significant than more formal sources. This less organised form of self-help is worthy of further study. Allotments were clearly of great importance to allotment holders and their families and, to some extent, their local communities, but previous research has tended to focus on the financial value of allotments. Although researchers have acknowledged that the characteristics of a typical allotment holder have changed as allotment holding ceased to be a survival strategy and became a recreational activity, the ways in which this change affected the importance attached to allotments has not been investigated. The emphasis has remained firmly on economic, rather than social and personal, concerns.

In summary, the most important shift in allotment holding during the course of the twentieth century was the change from allotments being sites of industry and

productivity to places for recreation where allotment holders could escape to relax. Changes in living standards, working patterns and family structure all contributed to this shift. This move can be argued to have affected each of the four aspects of the traditional allotment stereotype discussed. Allotment gardening became, predominantly, a hobby for retired people rather than a means for a working man to supplement his income and support his family. Allotment holders of working age were in the minority on most sites by the end of the twentieth century; most people who were interviewed had either held an allotment for a number of years or took one on to occupy their time after they finished working. Personal interest became the primary factor behind allotment cultivation, rather than duty or financial obligation. This meant that individual freedom and privacy on allotments became more important and this had implications for the community role of allotments, typified by the lack of interest in allotment associations or other semi-political activities. Allotments became less important in economic terms, but assumed increasing personal significance for allotment holders. At a wider level, by the end of the twentieth century, allotment holding had come to be seen as anodyne, a 'good thing' in the main as it supported the ideals of the green movement and campaigns for open space in urban areas, but no longer politically or economically significant. Coupled with the individualistic nature of many allotment holders, this meant that the allotment community was rarely able to exercise influence on wider society. Allotment holders themselves have a harmless, slightly eccentric image, seen as being as out of touch with modern life. As allotments lost their economic significance, they also became politically marginal and were no longer tied so closely to the local community. Allotments were not viewed as a valuable feature of contemporary society in the minds of most people; they were associated with the stereotypical image of elderly men, economic hardship and tumbledown sheds. As interviewees pointed out, it is possible the allotment community could capitalise on developments such as the 'green movement' and growing interest in organic food to encourage a wider range of people to take on plots, but in order to do so, a number of changes would be required to update the image of allotments; improve relations between allotment holders and local communities; and make them more welcoming to non-traditional allotment holders.

Changes which have taken place in the cultivation of allotments and the composition of the allotment community during the twentieth century have occurred only very slowly. Furthermore, the corresponding stereotypes usually persist for a time even after change has occurred. This is most notable in the association between allotments and poverty; although allotments were rarely cultivated primarily for financial reasons at the end of the twentieth century, many older people in particular still associated them with hardship, unemployment and poverty. This meant that allotments were not associated with modern life rather, they were seen as rural backwaters. They had an old-fashioned image and remained closely linked to traditional working class culture. More recent socio-economic developments and improvements in living standards and other aspects of modern lifestyles are not reflected in the stereotypes of allotments and allotment holders. For example, the ethnic mix of the Black Country and much of the UK is not incorporated into the stereotype, and allotments remain associated with poverty despite that fact that society has, overall, become more affluent. This research would seem to indicate that assumptions regarding the motivation for allotment holding and the importance of allotment activities in particular, have not kept pace with change; the stereotypes for these aspects continued to reflect the pre-Second World War situation even at the end of the twentieth century. In the case of the appearance, atmosphere and culture of allotment plots, the stereotype was never an accurate depiction of reality, at least for Black Country allotments. Plots have, in fact, always been more carefully looked after than they might appear and the atmosphere of sites has rarely been as peaceful as would be expected from the stereotype. The stereotype of the characteristics of a typical allotment holder is slightly different again, in that it would seem to be ahead of developments to date in the Black Country where there are few of the newer type of politically aware, middle class growers to be found.

The lack of previous studies of allotment holding means the stereotypes of allotments and allotment holders which have developed are, broadly, accurate for the more superficial aspects of allotment holding such as the characteristics of allotment holders, but are inadequate to deal with the more complex issues such as motivation for allotment holding and the importance of allotment activities. Here, the existing stereotypes are clearly too crude to act as a helpful guide in

explaining the changing patterns of allotment holding during the twentieth century. The characteristics of allotment holders is the aspect which has been most intensively studied by historians; consequently, this is where the stereotype is most accurate. Other aspects of allotments have usually only been studied at a superficial or cursory level so the stereotypes for these are correspondingly superficial and not fully formed.

Although this research has considered a limited geographical area and has encountered some difficulties such as the lack of involvement from the full spectrum of allotment holders, it does represent a significant empirical contribution to research in this long-neglected area. While it has confirmed some aspects of traditional stereotypes of allotments and allotment holders, it has challenged many others. It has evidently questioned existing views of the allotment community and has identified a number of areas for further study. The importance of this thesis is not limited to the admittedly narrow field of the history of allotment provision however. The issues investigated have significance for historians studying a variety of issues at both local and national level including leisure pursuits, family relationships, self-provisioning and household economies, urban land use, self-help and community political activity. It is, therefore, a valuable contribution to the study of twentieth century working class and middle class culture in the Black Country and beyond.

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<sup>35</sup> Short profiles of interviewees are provided in Appendix A.

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## **Appendix A: Interviewee profiles**

All interviews were carried out between April and December 2002. Unless otherwise stated, plottolders were born in the Black Country.

### **Dudley**

#### **BA-D**

Born in 1916, BA-D was a widower. He had held a plot for 30 years, but had been forced to give up gardening due to back problems.

#### **BM-D and DM-D**

A couple who worked their plot together, although BM-D, the wife, was the most interested in gardening. They were in their late 50s and still working. They had taken on an allotment three years previously as part of their plans for retirement.

#### **BP-D**

BP-D was in his 60s and had owned an allotment for more than 30 years. He was the secretary for the site association, a trustee and also ran the trading shed.

#### **BS-D**

BS-D's allotment was situated at the bottom of his garden. He had held the plot since 1974. He was in his 70s.

#### **DH-D**

Before he retired, DH-D had worked in the stock control department in a rolling mill. He still did gardening jobs on a part-time basis although he was 70 years old. He had held an allotment from 1965 to 1990. He had four children.

#### **HP-D**

Born in 1920, HP-D had previously worked as a landscape gardener. He had been a volunteer and allotment holder at the National Trust property, Holy Austin Rock at Kinver.

**JH-D**

JH-D was an allotment holder from a private site, where his father had previously had a plot. He was born in 1924 and had worked as an electrical engineer before becoming a school lab technician.

**JR-D**

JR-D had cultivated an allotment for the previous 14 years. She was enthusiastic about organic methods of cultivation. She had been born in 1925 and worked as a teacher. She had two sons.

**KM-D**

Born in 1919, KM-D had been on the School Lane site since 1985. He took on his current plot when he retired. However, he had previously cultivated a plot on another site when he was working on the railways in the 1950s.

**LT-D**

A retired horticultural wholesaler. Born in 1935. Coming from a family of allotment holders, LT-D took on his first allotment as a teenager just after the Second World War. He was forced to give up his plot in the late 1990s due to ill health.

**LW-D**

Born in 1918, LW-D worked as an engineer and later as a school photographer. His wife (**MW-D**) was also present at the interview, although she was not actively involved with allotment cultivation. LW-D had held an allotment for 45 years. He moved from his original plot to a new site 17 years previously.

**Walsall****AM-WS**

AM-WS was born in Leicestershire. He took on his plot as a child during the Second World War. He had cultivated an allotment in Walsall for approximately 40 years.

### **EC-WS**

EC-WS was in her late 60s and had still got an allotment, but no longer spent a great deal of time there. Her late husband and daughters had also been involved in the allotment movement.

### **EE-WS**

Although EE-WS had never had an allotment himself, he had helped out on his father's as a child in the 1920s.

### **EH-WS**

The first allotment EH-WS worked on was owned by his father around the time of the Second World War. He had had two plots personally, one in the 1960s and the second after he moved house in 1971. He had cultivated the latter until 1988. He was 65.

### **FP-WS**

FP-WS was a widower in his 70s who had held an allotment for 43 years.

### **FPr-WS**

FPr-WS had first helped on his father's allotment during the Second World War. He had been born in 1925. He now cultivated two plots. His wife, **DP-WS** was also present at the interview.

### **GN-WS**

Born in 1928, GN-WS had first worked on an allotment when he was 14 years old. He took on his current plot 28 years ago. He was heavily involved in competitions.

### **GW-WS**

GW-WS had held two plots in Walsall since 1956. He first took on an allotment when he was in his late 20s. He was forced to move from the Malt Shovel, a private site, when it was taken over by a hotel business in 2000.

**LM-WS**

Born in 1925, LM-WS had worked for Walsall Parks Department and had rented an allotment since 1965. He was involved in local committees, being Chair of the South Walsall LMA (Local Management Association) until 2001.

**PD-WS**

PD-WS took on an allotment when he took early retirement in 1994. He was actively involved in the site association and wider committee work as well as running the trading shed.

**RB-WS**

RB-WS's grandfather had been an allotment holder since the First World War. RB-WS himself had taken over the plot for a few years in the late 1960s after his grandfather died.

**RM-WS**

RM-WS had a strong interest in competitions and shows. He was 70 years old and had previously been a steel worker and a marine. He first took on an allotment when he retired in the early 1980s.

**Wolverhampton****AR-WV**

AR-WV first took on a plot in the mid 1960s when he was around 30. At first, he was forced to travel to a site some distance away, but he later succeeded in securing a plot nearer to his home. Before retiring, he had worked as an Allotments Officer with Wolverhampton Council.

**BH-WV**

BH-WV was in his early 50s. He had been an allotment holder on a small site where there were just three allotment holders for about six years. His wife had first got him interested and he had two plots.

**BHa-WV**

BHa-WV was an 87 year old widower who remembered playing on allotments in Wolverhampton as a boy.

**BL-WV**

BL-WV had never had an allotment despite the fact that it was a popular hobby in his family; his father and uncles had cultivated plots.

**GG-WV**

GG-WV had cultivated an allotment for 8 years in the 1980s, but had been forced to give it up when he had to move for work. He was born in 1930.

**GGo-WV**

GGo-WV decided to take on an allotment when he retired about six years previously. He was born in 1938

**MC-WV**

MC-WV was born in 1926. He had worked as an academic. His family had cultivated allotments since 1941 and he had taken one on himself in 1972.

**MS-WV**

MS-WV recalled sharing a plot on a temporary site during the Second World War. He later took on a plot on a permanent site for a few years before the land was built on. He was in his 70s, but had previously worked as an accountant.

**PR-WV**

PR-WV helped on his father's allotment during the Second World War. When his father gave up the plot in 1948, he took it on, but only for one season because he started courting in this year so did not have time for gardening.

**RC-WV**

Now in his early 60s, RC-WV's family had been on the same private site since 1943. He took over his father's plot when he died in the 1960s. He was Secretary of the site association.

**RD-WV and BD-WV**

This couple in their late 50s jointly worked a plot on a small site with just two other allotment holders. They took on the plot seven years previously after their children had left home. Both still worked so spent most time on their allotment at weekends.

**RG-WV**

RG-WV had a plot backing onto his garden on the Jeffcock Road site. He was 70 and his family had been on the site since he was 10 years old. He was Vice Chairman of the site association.

## **Appendix B: Interview questions**

### **Profile**

Name:

Address:

Tel:

DoB:

Place of birth:

Occupation (or previous occupation):

Marital status:

Children:

Allotment(s) held:

### **Background**

When did you first decide to take on an allotment?

Why did you decide to take on the allotment?

Did you have to wait for your plot?

Have you cultivated other allotments in the past?

When?

Where?

Why did you give up your allotment? When?

Have you worked on any allotments other than your own?

What do you enjoy most/least about working your allotment?

### **Allotment activity**

What do/did you grow on your allotment?

Was/is your allotment your only source of ...? Eg. shops (which), other allotment holders

Do/did you use your allotment for any other activities? Eg. pigeons, bees, storage

How long do/did you spend working on your allotment?

Times, days, seasons

What are your hours of work?

Do you cultivate your plot alone or does anyone else help? Eg. family, neighbours

### **Home and family**

How far from your plot do/did you live?

How do/did you travel there?

What do you do with the produce from your allotment? Eg. sell, give away, feed family...

Do you have a garden? How does this differ from your allotment?

Activity, what is grown, who looks after...

What other hobbies do you have?

How does the time you spend on these compare to the time you spend on your allotment?

Have other people in your family ever had allotments?

### **Allotment communities**

Where do you get advice about growing etc?

Do you give other people advice?

Are you involved with any allotment societies?

Why (not)?

In what way?

Do you take part in any social activities with the other plot holders?

Do/did you enter competitions?

Tell me about any problems/concerns you have about your plot/site. Eg. vandalism, facilities, vacant plots, threat to tenure

### **Wider issues**

Tell me about the main changes you have seen at your allotment site since\_\_\_\_\_.  
Eg. age/sex of ploholders, types of crops grown, facilities, vandalism...

Do you think the popularity of allotment holding has increased or declined since\_\_\_\_\_?

Why do you think this has occurred?

What would you say were the main benefits of owing an allotment? To:  
yourself,  
your family,  
society in general?