

The Rise and Fall and Rise again of the Allotment.

July 2012 saw the official opening of the new allotment site off Southampton Road designed to meet the increased demand for plots on which local people could grow their own fruit and veg. Whether this level of demand will continue only time will tell but over the last century and more allotments have risen and fallen in popularity.

There appear to have been allotments in Alderbury since at least the late 1840s: the Tithe Award of 1847 contains two 'Garden Allotments' with 'Various Occupiers' in Silver Street, one site where the house now known as 'Four Oaks' stands and the other behind the current 'Rookwood' and 38 Silver Street; another two sites in Folly Lane – one at its present location and the second in the triangular field below High Street bounded by Folly Lane and the footpath to Silver Street; and one on each corner of the present Firs Road and Southampton Road, the first seemingly covering the site of what is now Waleran Close and Firs Road, the other the site of the present 'Pine Cottage'. Unfortunately, it is not possible to tell the area of the sites or the number of plots.

The first document I have been able to find concerning allotments in the village is an agreement dated 24th February 1893 between the Earl of Radnor and William Belstone by which the latter rented an area of 9 perches – about 272 square yards or 227 square metres – “being Number 4 in the plan of the Close called Orchards”. Unfortunately, there does not seem to be a copy of the plan but as William Belstone was at this time living in one of the cottages – still existing – at the top of School Hill it is likely that his plot was at the Folly Lane site – also still there. The fact that there appear to have been at least three other plots on the site indicate that he was not alone in renting an allotment here.

On the 1901 Ordnance Survey map a number of sites are labelled 'Allotment Gardens'. They were in Silver Street (behind the houses presently known as 'Rookwood' and 38 Silver Street), Folly Lane, Clarendon Road, Ivychurch, Old Road, Whiteparish Hill and Junction Road amounting to over 15 acres in total. Notice that most of the sites were at the Alderbury end of the village, why Whaddon should be so poorly provided for is unclear. They seem to have been provided by the Longford Estate because it was not until 22nd May 1917 that the Alderbury Allotment and Small Holdings Association was established at a meeting in the (now demolished) Wesleyan Schoolroom in Alderbury. The fact that this body, which also took over the functions of The Alderbury & Whaddon Small Holdings Association (founded in 1906), was founded at a crucial time in the First World War may not be insignificant. The Estate let the sites to the Association who in turn let them to villagers who wished to grow their own food.

There exists a list from May 1917 detailing the names of the tenants and the size of the plots they rented. There had been some changes in the sites already in the short period since 1901. There were still allotments in Silver Street but they seem to have been only on the site of the current 'Four Oaks'. Those in Old Road – on the site of the present tennis courts and the War Memorial Green – had gone whilst those in High Street had been added. The Ivychurch site – between the present trackway off Old Road and Clarendon Road – was two acres smaller; presumably this was due to gravel extraction, which was a continuing feature of this site. The Clarendon Road site – known as Railway Bridge – does not seem to have changed, nor does Whiteparish Hill (near the still-existing cottages above the Three Crowns) nor Junction Road. By 1917 the site at Mount Pleasant in Folly Lane (next to 'Totterdown') was listed separately from the main site and there was a small site at Spiders Island and another at Ladies Cottage off Castle Lane. There seem to have been 110 or more plots, covering over 11 acres.

In the aftermath of the First World War there was often a waiting-list for plots but by 1936 it was being reported to the Association's Committee that a number of allotments were vacant. Presumably this was why the minutes of the 1937 AGM noted that attendance was very poor. Quite why interest should have declined is unclear – these were harsh economic times and it might be thought that demand would have risen not fallen, although it seems to have been a very similar picture in other parts of the country too.

By 1949, when the Estate concluded a new agreement with the Association (replacing that made in 1920), two sites had gone altogether, although one was not necessarily due to lack of demand. That in Silver Street had been taken back by Longford for use by the Woods department for use as a nursery in 1945. The reason why the Railway Bridge site had disappeared is not obvious from the records. According to the 1926 Ordnance Survey map (based on information gathered in 1924) the site has shifted from its original position behind the houses on the Clarendon side of the bridge to the field beyond the current farmhouse. It is possible that an anti-tank trap was built here during the invasion scare in the summer of 1940. The Ivychurch site was smaller – presumably more land had been lost to gravel extraction – whilst High Street had lost the portion where the bus stop, post box and (now disused) telephone kiosk stand to road safety works, apparently towards the end of the war.

Thereafter sites were lost at various times – that at Ladies Cottage was sold in 1953 and the one at Spiders Island two years later. The Whiteparish Hill site also went in 1955 as it was needed for the A36 diversion; Mount Pleasant followed in 1963 – probably because the cottages which stood on the bank opposite and which used the site as gardens were no longer occupied. In 1962 the Committee had resolved to “talk over the possibility of closing down the association” but it was eventually decided that it should continue. By 1968, however, the small holdings section had gone as the tenants preferred to deal with the Estate direct. In 1975 the High Street site was required for building purposes during the construction of Old Chapel Close, although the Estate offered an alternative site in Silver Street (that given up in 1945). A year later that at the bottom of Junction Road was needed to allow for the building of the by-pass. This was also the cause of the eventual demise of the Ivychurch site which was used to provide gravel needed in the road construction, although in truth this site was virtually derelict anyway with only one tenant (Jack Howe who lived in ‘Cherry Tree Cottage).

With the completion of Old Chapel Place the High Street site was offered to the Association by the Parish Council and in 1977 it came back into use, although it seems that some tenants continued at the Silver Street site until 1993. Thereafter the site was eventually sold as a building plot. For nearly twenty years there were only two sites – those at the High Street and Folly Lane – but demand grew and eventually the parish council combined with the Longford Estate to provide another site – that at Southampton Road

Who knows what the next hundred years or so will bring?

The Group is hoping to produce a book in the future with much more detail about the allotments and smallholdings in the village. Any information on this subject – especially old photographs and maps - would be gratefully received. Thank you.