

# Allotments and the British

Sumiyuki Sakasegawa

「国民総園芸家」と称されるイギリス人は、古代よりヤドリギ、サンザシ、ヒイラギ等に代表される緑を「命の象徴」とみなし、その後も野原や、畑地、庭の様々な草木を鑑賞し、生活のコンパニオン、心身の癒しの提供者としても愛しんできた。

筆者は既に本紀要に「庭とイギリス人」、「緑とイギリス人」の題目でイギリス人と庭や草木、園芸との深い関わりについて考察してきたが、本稿ではエンクロージャー等を機に誕生、産業革命、二度の世界大戦を経て更に発展し、利用者に果菜等の自家栽培農産物はもとより、草花、灌木等を、又、野生生物にも快適な生息地を提供し、近年安全な食品の提供、環境保全、野生生物保護、癒しの観点等からも見直されてきたアロットメント（市民農園）の現状を、現地訪問、インタビュー、アンケート調査、関連文献、インターネット等で入手した情報をもとに「イギリス人と緑の関係」という観点から考察する。

## Introduction

The British, who are often called ‘a nation of gardeners’, have long since the ancient times regarded greens represented by evergreen shrubs and trees such as mistletoe (preferably on a bough of an oak), hawthorn, and holly as symbols of life, and have treated various kinds of flora in the fields and gardens as their companions or healers. Given these backgrounds, it is quite natural that gardening has now become undoubtedly the largest national pastime in Britain, with greens regarded as inseparable from their lives. Gardens and allotments are now, we may safely say, two of the most common conservation activities carried out by common people, and the patchwork-like allotments are still a familiar and ubiquitous feature of the British landscape which serves as a feast for the eyes of walkers, drivers, and railway/coach travellers alike.

The author has already written two treatises on the close relationships between the British people and plants and gardening. In this paper which is based on my visits to and interviews with plot holders in Cambridge and London in summer 2001<sup>1</sup> and information obtained from books, documents, and Internet web-sites, I will see what roles the

allotments, which appeared concurrently with the enclosure movements, developed through the Industrial Revolution and the two world wars, and have provided homegrown vegetables, flowers and shrubs, have played not only for the holders and their neighbours (and even the wider community) but the wildlife and the environment in the vicinity.

### **Brief history**

The origin of allotments could be traced back as early as the Tudor Age, when manorial common lands, which increased during and after the English Reformation, were enclosed with commoners being compensated, as a philanthropic gesture, with allotments of land attached to tenant cottages.

The confirmation of the basic concept of the present allotment movement comes, however, much later in 1845 in the General Inclosure Act which authorised enclosures only on condition that land was set aside for allotment use.<sup>2</sup>

And the Allotments Act 1887 obliged local authorities to provide allotments if there was demand (by any six resident registered electors). During the first and second world wars, demand for allotments greatly increased due to food shortage, and a variety of lands such as public parks, playing fields, and undeveloped land, were dug up not only to grow food but to keep hens and pigs. After the second world war, personal food production lost its popularity because of the mass production of cheaper food helped by advanced industrial farming technologies, changes in tastes and values, availability of more pastimes, and so forth. The interest in producing safer food is, however, renewed recently due to fears of interference with food with chemicals and genetic engineering, and deterioration and contamination of food by the long-haul transport, and one has the impression that the allotments are now being reborn as wildlife-friendly and biodiversity-oriented allotments and regaining their power with their negative images of poverty, charity and wartime needs rapidly fading away.

### **How plot holders are involved in and what they get from the allotments**

There are a number of benefits you can get from allotments. As far as the growers or the plot holders are concerned, they can enjoy direct access to fresh and affordable fruits and vegetables, organically grown if preferred, maintenance at low cost of both physical and mental health or relief from stress by physical exercise or just sitting in the

allotment, opportunities for relaxed social activities in a community of interest, and so forth. The benefits for the broader public could be the reduction of 'food miles', provision of 'green space' or 'green lungs for towns and cities', a haven for wildlife and rare plants, a variety of recycling and reuse schemes, opportunities for youngsters to participate in the repairing of buildings, clearing of areas, etc., enhancement of awareness of the environmental benefits of organic cultivation, enhancement of local sustainable development, and putting people in touch with nature in a more holistic approach.

### **Changing image of allotments**

Though you may still hear occasionally of a lingering image of "allotments as a form of poor relief or a down-market hobby for elderly people" and smell a smack of stigma of charity in them, allotments these days seem to have shifted from being a mere form of social welfare provision to a form of leisure, or a recreational, therapeutic and very often self- or a-new-purpose-in-life-searching activity, which I could clearly see with my own eyes in the plot holders in Cambridge and London whom I had an opportunity of directly visiting at their allotments.

[Cambridgeshire has 4,770 plots on 208 sites covering an area of 950 acres and involving nearly 20,000 people, of which 1,600 plots on 27 sites covering over 100 acres are in Cambridge city, whereas London has 36,433 plots on 618 sites covering an area of 2,049 acres and involving nearly 146,000 people<sup>3</sup>.]

### **Roles of allotments**

The following are what I learned from the plot holders I visited and interviewed as well as the answers of the 10 plot holders (3 females and 6 males aged between 40 and 60, and one male in his 70s) to my questionnaire (See the whole questions attached in the appendix.) The sizes of their plots rented [at an annual cost of between 12 and 20 pounds per 10 poles/rods or about 300 square yards (250m<sup>2</sup>) – the average size of an allotment plot in England] from councils, churches, railway companies, water service companies, and private companies or owners, varied from about 100m<sup>2</sup> to over 500m<sup>2</sup>, with those living in the countryside having wider plots and females having smaller plots. They worked in their allotments for about 2 to 5 hours both during the week and at the weekend, mostly together with their spouses or partners and occasionally helped by

their children if they had any. The expenses for maintaining the allotment such as rent, seeds, plants, manure, and gardening tools were much less than £250 a year, the highest being £180.

*What do you use your allotment for and How do you feel when you are in the allotment?*

The dominating and prevailing purpose in keeping an allotment of those questioned and interviewed was to grow safe vegetables (by far the most important for all the plot holders interviewed), flowers, fruits, etc. of their own production. The diversified vegetables they grew included courgettes, marrows, squashes, pumpkins, aubergines, peppers, beans, kales, Brussels sprouts, rhubarbs, and among the fruits grown were such soft fruits as blackberries, raspberries, gooseberries, and currants, and hard fruits such as apples, pears, plums, and damsons.

What was regarded as nearly equally important, however, were what they mentally benefited from the allotments in which they could relax and feel as if in nature. The plot holders agreed that they could enjoy a relaxed life: peace, serenity, and a freedom from the tumult of the hectic world (urban life), a serene communion with nature, a self-oriented, getting-by-on-one's-own-feeling, and individuality, idiosyncrasy and creativity.

Their concern about the environment, wildlife and biodiversity, and their willingness to share ideas and activities among the plot holders were also clearly stated.

The former was endorsed by their answers to my question: *which do you use more, compost or chemical fertilisers?*, to which most of the interviewees answered 'mainly compost (manure)' [either bought from farmers or home-made with recycled garbage (kitchen refuse), wood chippings, etc. in handmade wooden boxes or compost bins available cheap thanks to subsidies from the council] with only one of them using more chemicals than compost. Incidentally most of the plot holders I met said they used neither weedkillers nor pesticides, the evidence of which I could see in the big slugs and snails moving slowly in a lordly manner. Their concern about wildlife was also confirmed by the introduction in the allotments of wildlife schemes such as beetle banks, small ponds for amphibians such as frogs and newts, nesting boxes for birds and hedgehogs, and the setting aside of plots as swards for wildlife or devoting a small corner of an allotment to plants that provide nectar and feeding ground throughout the season for

colonies of dragon flies, ladybirds, pollinating insects such as butterflies and bumblebees, small animals such as mice and moles, and so forth. It must be heartwarming to see birds and animals perching and feeding on some flowers and vegetables intentionally left out for them in the autumn when food supplies are sparse in the lean time of the year such as January and February.

The latter was clearly seen among the elderly plottolders in Landbeach, Cambridge, who proudly said they enjoyed visiting their plottolding neighbours and reciprocating favours and surplus products as well as their talks on the plots. An undeniable, firm sense of community was there. Cooperation among the plottolders was also endorsed by the well-organised and networked associations, some of which even run seed and fertiliser shops on the allotments and issue newsletters. The weekend stall successfully run by the Cambridge Allotment Network at Market Hill in Cambridge was another evidence of such cooperation among the plot holders, who now comprise people of all ages and both sexes in many different walks of life from various racial and ethnic backgrounds — private company employees, public servants, teachers, students, housewives, gardeners, retired OAPs, etc.

*Does your allotment 'cure' you when you are worried or out of sorts?*

In this age of increasing stress and frustration people are seeking after whatever could heal them mentally, e.g., aromatherapy, horticultural therapy, healing music, etc. My questionnaire and interview results also clearly showed this trend, for almost all the plot holders agreed that having and working in the allotment 'cured' them very much or at least to some extent. One of them stressed how he could get rid of stress by simply concentrating on digging up the ground, and the Cambridge Allotment News reports that people suffering from SAD (Seasonal Affective Disorder), a type of winter depression, are encouraged to visit allotments and gardens open to the public.<sup>4</sup>

*How important are the hedges/fences as a boundary?*

We may not have to refer to the well-known English proverb "A hedge between keeps friendship green" to point out the importance of hedges. Hedges serve both as a traditional boundary and a habitat for wild life as well as an important element of the picturesque English countryside. They have been home to a variety of mammals such as dormice, moles, voles, hedgehogs, weasles, and badgers, feeder for bats and birds

such as hedge sparrows, linnets, bullfinches, and song thrushes, and hatchery for a number of birds and beneficial insects such as beetles and wasps. There is usually, however, no hedge or fence between the allotment plots, though the complete sites of allotments are usually hedged or fenced (or as one plotter nicely put it, ‘curtained’).

The major role of the hedges and fences are naturally to form a boundary, but they also serve to reduce vandalism and trespassing from young, non-allotment holders, which plot holders in the urban areas lamented were on the increase, and to make the allotments sites more attractive not only for humans but also wildlife, which often inhabit and find food there. [Incidentally, hedges — wildlife habitat for thousands of years, and features of traditional landscape accepted as a part of the national heritage, are now shrank to less than half of their stretch in the mid-1940s of over 800,000 kilometres<sup>5</sup> and the alerted government started to pay subsidies for planting and maintaining hedges, despite which [and other measures taken by the government and the revival of interest in them by the general public], however, the mileage of hedges is dwindling just as the farmland bird population is<sup>6</sup>.

Allotments, thanks to their hedgerows, wildflowers on the boundaries and unused or set-aside plots, ditches and grassy banks, grassy paths, buffer zones, compost heaps, etc. which serve as habitats and havens for insects, invertebrates and mammals, have, according to NSALG, on average an up to 30% higher species diversity than urban parks. The wildlife associated with allotments include, among others, beneficial insects such as bumblebees and butterflies (often seen perched on buddrheia or butterfly bushes), predators such as bats, sparrows, thrushes, finches, tits, robins, blackbirds, starlings, frogs, toads, newts, mice, voles, hedgehogs, and foxes (which, once only found in rural areas, now, I’ve heard, frequently venture at dusk to forage for food in urban allotments as well.)

### *What does your allotment mean to you?*

As stated above, there are numberless benefits of allotments which could be enjoyed not only by the plot holders and people in general but by wildlife. The following are the actual comments I was given by those whom I questionaired or interviewed. They describe exactly what keeping an allotment is all about.

“It’s a chance to grow food myself.” (London, female, 40-49)

“I’m following what the Bible says: ‘In the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread.’ (Genesis 3.19)” (Cambridge, male, 50–59)

“It has been a tradition in our family (parents, grandparents) to have an allotment. It gives me an extra space to enjoy my hobby of gardening. The main problem is lack of time to grow what I want and keep the weeds under control.” (Cambridge, male, 40–49)

“It’s a way of life for me. I get satisfaction from helping organise the allotment association.” (Suffolk, male, 50–59)

“I can enjoy peace during the work.” (Cambridge, female, 50–59)

“It’s a hobby, gives me a joy of digging, and a sense of achievements.” (Cambridge, male, 50–59)

“I keep the allotments for the sheer pleasure of digging on my own. But equally important for me are friends, exchange/share of ideas, and reciprocations.” (Cambridge, male, 70–79)

“It’s an opportunity within a city to be in the country. You can get soil under your finger nails and experience the weather, growth cycle and all the sensory side to this.” (London, male, 50–59)

### **Concluding remarks**

As has been seen above, there was a clear sign of allotments being revived and revitalised among the allotment holders in Cambridge and London whom I questioned and interviewed. I was also confirmed in my belief that the traditional allotments with negative images of ‘a form of poor relief or a down-market-hobby for elderly people’ are now reborn and transformed into new, wildlife-friendly and biodiversity-oriented ones.

It could also be added that people’s interest in allotments is given a boost by the growing public concern about the genetically modified food and the enthusiasm for local food or food with a clear regional provenance, especially after the outbreaks in Britain of mad cow disease or BSE (Bovine Spongiform Encephalopathy) in the recent past and

the rapid spread of foot and mouth disease last year which claimed more than 6 million cattle and sheep.

Allotments are indeed excellent places where people can combine growing safe food of their own production for less 'food miles' and less packing, exercise, relaxation, cooperation across ethnic, age and other barriers, and conservation of the environment and wildlife, all of which could heal the frustrated, stress-ridden modern people.

### Notes:

- 1 This paper is a research report of the author's visit in summer 2001 to the plot holders in Cambridge and London sponsored by Shigakukan University.
- 2 <http://dspace.dial.pipex.com/town/close/xpz05/history.htm>
- 3 <http://www.nsalg.co.uk/acreages.htm>
- 4 CAN (Cambridge Allotments Newsletter) No.93
- 5 <http://www.nwf.org/internationalwildlife/hedgerow.html>
- 6 <http://www.english-nature.org.uk/news/story.asp?ID=237>

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<Major web-sites referred to>

<http://www.allotments.net>

<http://www.allotments.net/habitat/habitat.htm>

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/ukwild> (Big Garden Birdwatch 2000)

<http://www.cambridgeshire.gov.uk>

<http://www.camcnty.gov.uk>





- 4 What do you use your allotment for? [Tick all that are applicable.]
- 1)  for growing vegetables, flowers, shrubs, etc. for the house
  - 2)  for growing vegetables, flowers, shrubs, etc. for sale
  - 3)  for safe food of your own production
  - 4)  for a relaxed life: peace, serenity, and a freedom from the tumult of the hectic world (urban life)
  - 5)  for a serene communion with nature
  - 6)  for a privacy in the green oasis
  - 7)  for a retreat from the overcrowded family home
  - 8)  for a self-oriented, getting-by-on-one's-own feeling
  - 9)  for enjoying your individuality, idiosyncrasy and creativity
  - 10)  for a sense of classlessness and shared activities among the plotholders
  - 11)  for your children to commune with nature
  - 12)  for the greening of the city/village
  - 13)  for the creation/preservation of healthy and sustainable neighbourhoods rich in wildlife
  - 14)  for the promotion of biodiversity
  - 15)  other [Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 5 How do you feel when you are (working) in the allotment?
- 1)  I feel very relaxed.
  - 2)  I feel (as if) in nature.
  - 3)  Other. [ \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 6 Does your allotment 'cure' you when you are worried or out of sorts?
- 1)  Yes, very much.
  - 2)  Yes, to some extent.
  - 3)  No.
- 7 How many hours do you spend/work in your allotment during the week?
- 1)  less than 1 hour
  - 2)  1-2 hours
  - 3)  2-3 hours
  - 4)  3-4 hours
  - 5)  4-5 hours
  - 6)  5-6 hours



[Choose three and number them in order of importance.]

- 1)  vegetables
  - 2)  flowers
  - 3)  shrubs
  - 4)  fruit trees
  - 5)  the space
  - 6)  shed
  - 7)  soil/land
  - 8)  surroundings
  - 9)  serenity
  - 10)  other [Please specify: \_\_\_\_\_ ]
- 13 How important are the hedges/fences as a boundary?
- 1)  Very important; essential
  - 2)  Not so important; just a tradition.
  - 3)  Not important at all.
  - 4)  There is no hedge/fence.
- 14 Do you think you could do without an allotment?
- 1)  Yes, with no problem.
  - 2)  Yes, but I need a garden, a kitchen garden, etc.
  - 3)  No.
- 15 What does your allotment mean to you?

*Thank you very much for your cooperation.*