

MY ALLOTMENT

It is difficult to know where to start so let's start with the last Ice Age, which had its Glacial Maximum 22,000 years ago. My allotment is situated where the village of Naphill meets the village of Walter's Ash on top of the Chiltern Hills in Buckinghamshire at about 600 feet above sea level. The Chilterns consist of chalk about 2,000 feet deep. The glaciers had come as far south as the Chilterns about 500,000 years ago and dumped a layer of thick sticky clay on the chalk tops. In the area of my allotment the depth of the clay varies between 4 feet and 30 feet, from excavations I have seen. So, when the glaciers retreated they left an unpromising area of clay with flints embedded, on top of the chalk. Then, with the passage of time, a thin layer of soil was created on top of the clay from dust and seeds being blown in. The seeds germinated on top of the clay then the plants decayed and formed humus. Scrub and then trees came along, mainly beech and oak and their leaves dropped to decay and form more humus. (In the woods near my allotment the depth of soil is about 3 inches on top of the clay. In my garden it is 6 inches and on the allotments 12 inches generally, in both cases being deeper because of cultivation, the import of animal manures and possibly also leaf mould in the past. In the particular case of my allotment plot, I have 18 inches of soil generally because of the large quantities of manure I have applied since 1973.) However, after the last Ice Age there would have not been much soil for some time. The UK was joined to the continent and animals and birds and people would have been able to enter the UK easily. The first humans in the modern era came about 11,500 years ago from southern Spain. These were the people who built Stonehenge and other monuments about 5,000 years ago. Recent DNA tests have revealed that present-day people in England share 80% of their genes with the people who built Stonehenge (the remaining 20% being from more recent migrants from Scandinavia, Germany and France). The trees which covered the UK before 11,500 years ago were cleared gradually in order to provide farmland for the growing of crops, although much food was obtained by hunting wild animals in the forests.

It is believed that the earliest traces of human activities in Naphill are as old as 4,000 years, so it is possible that my allotment land was being worked on 4,000 years ago. I have found a few pieces of flint which could have been shaped as tools in bygone years, so there was probably some human activity taking place on my allotment. In those days the population was very sparse. Moving to more modern times the population of the UK was about 4 million in the time of Queen Elizabeth 1st some 400 years ago, as against 63 million now, but only 100,000 at the time Stonehenge was erected. There has been a gradual and increasing pressure on land resources, and disputes over the ownership of land. Rich landowners tried to enclose more of the land which was not already owned. The method used was to apply for a specific Act of Parliament for the piece of land to be enclosed. The peasants living on that land were usually unaware that that Act was being passed in London so were presented with a *fait accompli* and were then thrown off by the rich landowner. It was the old story of "to him that hath shall be given and to him that hath not, even that which he hath shall be taken away". By 1845, nearly all of the land in the UK had been enclosed by someone and Parliament wanted the last parcels of land allocated (there were taxes to collect from landowners after all). So Inclosure Commissioners were despatched to award "common land" to someone. The peasants had been using "common land" for growing some crops, grazing their animals, collecting firewood, etc. In our area of Naphill the Inclosure Commissioners visited on 4th August 1862 and awarded what was previously called "Naphill Common" to various people. (Incidentally, the population of England was about 18 million then as against 53 million now. In other words, the population has tripled since the creation of my allotment). As a sop to the peasants (called the "labouring poor") the Inclosure Commissioners awarded two parcels of land to the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor as allotments for the labouring poor. The purpose was to give the peasants some small compensation for losing their rights to grow their crops, graze their animals etc on the other land which was being awarded to rich individuals. The two parcels of land in question were both bordered by hedges at the time and were of about 2 acres each and were known as field 55 and field 129 (my allotment garden) and so designated on the Inclosure Map. Benjamin Disraeli, later Prime Minister, must have had some previous claim to the two fields since the Inclosure Award document held in the archives in Aylesbury states that, after the award of the two fields to the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor, Benjamin Disraeli was to receive rent charges of £2.50 and £2.00 respectively per annum in perpetuity. The Churchwardens then split up

the fields into plots of 20 poles, let them to the labouring poor and charged them annual rents to provide the money to pay Benjamin Disraeli his rent charges. Any surplus money was used to relieve poverty in the parish. For example one Christmas a lorry was loaded with loaves of bread and the loaves were distributed to the needy.

What was created on 4th August 1862 was a charitable trust for the purpose of relieving poverty in the community, either by allowing the labouring poor to grow their own crops on the allotments or by the distribution of surplus money to the needy. There was no local government in those days and the Church provided the local administration. There were monthly meetings of the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor and the minutes of those meetings can be viewed in the archives in Aylesbury. An example of an important minute affecting my allotment garden is dated Thursday 28th March 1891: *“It was resolved that the Allotment Wardens make arrangement with Mr Goodchild for the right of way to his house at Naphill and that he pay 4/- for the same per annum”*. The former Mr Goodchild’s house has no other access to the main road, either by car or on foot, so the right of way through the allotment garden is very important. The rent of 4/- (ie 20 pence) per annum was collected until recent times.

There was then something of a revolution. In 1894 a Local Government Act was passed by Parliament, creating parish councils, district councils, town councils, etc. The powers, duties and liabilities of the Churchwardens and Overseers of the Poor with respect to the allotments were transferred to a new local parish council which thus became the new trustee of the charity. For a while there were no significant changes to the administration of the allotments. The same allotment warden (“monkey” Allan) supervised my allotment garden, the same tenancy agreements were issued, rents were collected and some disbursements were made to the needy. The first parish council meeting was chaired by Coningsby Disraeli, who was Benjamin Disraeli’s nephew and inheritor and thus entitled to the rent charge of £2 per annum for my allotment garden. Some of his other lands in Naphill were let as private allotments, for example many immediately opposite my house, but gradually those private allotments were sold for housing. Virtually all the land in Naphill now has houses on it, apart from land which is protected by the Green Belt/Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty.

The years passed and the local parish council continued to administer the allotments, which consisted of two allotment gardens in Naphill and five others in other parts of the parish. In the 1960s the Government instructed trustees to register their charitable trusts with the Charity Commission and on 18th July 1966 the parish council registered the charity as “248607 Allotments for Labouring Poor”. The parish council continued as sole trustee, despite the repeated requests of the Charity Commission for four independent trustees to be appointed. Then things started to go wrong. Because the parish council had been administering the allotment gardens since 1894 there was a belief that the allotment gardens belonged to the parish council. One allotment garden was sold for development in 1971, another was absorbed into a recreation ground, 70% of another was sold to the owner of a neighbouring property, another was cleared of tenants and a decision made to sell it for housing, and an attempt was made to sell off another allotment garden for sheltered housing. So 5 out of 7 allotment gardens were subjected to attempts to sell, some attempts being successful and others not successful. Only 3.3 of the original 7 charitable trust allotment gardens are still being worked as allotments today. My allotment garden escaped unscathed, apart from one corner being leased to an electricity company for an electrical sub-station.

The Charity Commission then intervened, four truly independent trustees were appointed and a “Scheme” or contract drawn up whereby the remaining allotment gardens will be transferred to the Official Custodian of the Charity Commission then let to the parish council for 99 years for the parish council to continue to let to allotment tenants as at present. Since the title “Allotments for Labouring Poor” is inappropriate for modern conditions the trust is being renamed “Hughenden Community Support Trust”. The trustees will, in due course, be making grants to the needy of the parish in accordance with the Objects of the charitable trust, the money coming from annual rents for the allotment gardens paid by the parish council.

So, as regards my allotment, I can carry on growing my fruit and vegetables. Whew!

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