



Losing much more than just the plot

Garden writer and *The Garden* columnist Lia Leendertz on an ongoing battleground

Above: 1931 watercolour of *Tulipa 'Grey Dawn'* by Elsie Katherine Kohnlein, widow of WR Dykes, a former Secretary of the RHS. Taken from the RHS Herbarium painting collection.

I have recently been talking to a couple of allotment associations that find themselves under threat. Local authorities are pushing for houses, supermarkets and retail centres.

Allotment societies are clinging to asparagus beds, community spirit and fresh air. The solid and economic meets the tenuous and romantic, or at least this is how these councils would have it. It's fair to say that these are ugly fights, both sides utterly convinced they are right, and both desperate to win.

But one of the less excusable pieces of rhetoric I came across was the framing of allotment holders as a small, privileged group, selfishly sticking up for their own interests at the expense of the wider community. 'What the allotment holders have to realise is that this isn't just about them,' Mayor of Watford Dorothy Thornhill, who is behind the push to build on

Watford's Farm Terrace Allotments, told me. 'I really do have to think of what is best for the whole town here.'

It is a line I have heard elsewhere in the assault upon allotments by struggling councils keen to liquidise their assets. It is said as if allotments were some sort of luxury item, as if allotment holders were a favoured elite.

Allotments were not handed out by beneficent councils keen to indulge a few local residents. They were conceived as a result of the fury that followed the land grabs between 1600 and 1850 – the enclosures – when the rich and powerful fenced off and claimed as their own millions of acres of

common land, previously considered a common man's birthright. Before the fences went up, these were places that had been part of the everyday living of the general populace for hundreds of years, where anyone could graze their animals, forage, gather wood for fuel and building, and take small game. The removal of this land was not a minor inconvenience: it brought about massive hardship, starvation and death.

As happens when a great injustice is carried out, people got angry. There were riots and mobs. Real change to the privileged landowners' status was threatened – just as had followed the French

Revolution and would later follow the Land War in Ireland. The landowning classes offered a pressure valve: allotments. These small patches of land provided just enough to ease the gnawing hunger, but not quite enough to allow the plot holders to step outside the economic system.

The third General Enclosure Act (1845) was the first statute to require some of that land to be handed out to the poor in the form of allotments. It made provision for the enclosure of 615,000 acres of land, of which just 2,200 acres were returned as allotments.

This was a small concession, but it worked. Allotments made life bearable, and the status quo was maintained. Environmentalist Marion Shoard writes in *This Land is Our Land* that 'the English labourer's right to his allotment would be seen more as a symbol of his dispossession than of privilege'. It is worth noting that neither France nor Ireland has a great allotment tradition. Neither needs one. Land is far more equitably distributed: the majority of the land is in the hands of many small-farm owners, rather than a few aristocratic landowners. In France and Ireland it is normal to own and farm land.

So yes, when trying to save our allotments we are quite right to talk of them as centres for the community, wildlife refuges and the green lungs of our cities. All of these things are what allotments have become, and they are glorious things worth fighting for. But we should also be mindful of their history, and even more of what we gave up for them. They are our last fingerhold on the vast tracts of land we could once call upon, carved off millions of acres at a time. No-one should ever be regarded as selfish for defending that. ●

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