'A pen man finds a use for every bit of wood': Fabians, leeks, carrots and spuds.

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Abstract.

A short ethnographic study of an East Lancashire allotment site monitored and administrated by the Borough Council revealed a variety of activities partially related to self sufficiency. It is suggested that the approaches adopted by plot holders within a twenty-first century context reflect in many ways the early principles of collective socialism and the ownership of land by the public for the public good without the interference of private capitalism as advocated by the early Fabian Society pioneers. The study revealed plot holders reflected a diversity of socio-economic groups and there was a commonality of purpose and will to share produce and ideas. Cooperation not competition is the norm and the profit motive largely redundant and swamped by a shared perception of creating an environment conducive to well-being. Interviews revealed a high level of satisfaction in growing produce for themselves as well as other families, materials and resources shared without any anticipation or expectation of financial remuneration. It is argued such a context reflects the principles of the early Fabian movement for a reconstruction of society ‘in accordance with the highest moral possibilities’. It is further argued that the context does not reflect a ‘green’ idyll for the middle classes adopting an alternative self sufficiency agenda but rather a small example of egalitarian agronomy.

Keywords: socialism, Fabian Society, economics, morality

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Introduction

This paper outlines briefly the historical development of the English allotment, notes the early principles of The Fabian Society and suggests modern allotments, albeit perhaps unintentionally, endorse some of the principles of the early United Kingdom socialist movement in terms of land reform and administration. It is based on a short ethnographic study of allotment holders on a north west England site. The ‘pen man’ of the title is Lancashire dialect for an allotment holder though it is no longer so gender specific with a steady growth in female participation (English Allotments Survey, 1997). Plymouth City Council (2010) note a 40% female participation compared to two percent in the 1960s. Buckingham (2005) explores the change from retired male patriarchies to women in low income families having an opportunity to provide fresh food. The ‘use of every bit of wood’ was an overheard remark alluding to the recycling and ‘make do’ ethos which traditionally characterises the approach of allotment holders. The purpose of an allotment as defined in the Allotment Act of 1922 remains today as, “The expression “allotment garden” means an allotment not exceeding forty poles in extent which is wholly or mainly cultivated by the occupier for the production of vegetable or fruit crops for consumption by himself or his family”. 1 rod/pole/perch equates to 5.5 yards (reputedly the distance from the back of the plough to the nose of the oxen) or approximately 250 square metres. It is revealing too that such an allotment can annually produce approximately £800 of produce as calculated to shop prices (Harrison, 2008).

Brief historical overview of allotments

It could be argued from the afore mentioned 1922 Act definition that the production of food for a family as a human activity dates back to the period in history when humans changed from hunter gathers to living in organised settlements. However, if an allotment is interpreted as a formalised arrangement, then the peasant holdings of the middle ages administered by a lord can be viewed as the earliest form where the land ‘was expected to provide a proportion of the family’s food, and most of the labour came from family members’, (Dyer, 2003, p. 168). The Saxons also created shared common land solely for food production. The Domesday Book notes the 1086 economy of England as mostly agrarian, 90% of the people living in the country and earning their food from the resources of the land. An Open Field system was administered, the fields surrounding a village divided into strips allocated to the villagers. The first mention of the term allotment is during the reign of Elizabeth the 1st as common land became enclosed and ‘allotments’ of land were tied to tenant cottages as a means of compensation. There is a modern irony in that Elizabeth the 2nd has an allotment at Buckingham Palace (Davies, 2009). Allotments in a form recognizable to the 21st century can be traced back to the General Enclosure Acts of 1836 and 1840 which created enormous powers for landowners who could enclose land without parliamentary approval so long as a majority agreed. Unsurprisingly, this created considerable civic unrest (Moselle, 1995) and the 1845 Enclosure Act amended the draconian arrangement to include the provision of ‘field areas’ which are recognizably modern allotments. It wasn’t until the Smallholding and Allotment Act 1907 that a formal legislative arrangement was created with responsibilities on parish, urban district and borough councils to provide allotments, an arrangement still in place.

Food shortages created by the two World Wars accelerated allotment use. In the First World War, railway companies were particularly proactive in leasing small pockets of land to railway workers which explains partly why today spotting allotments near to railway lines is not unusual. The ‘Dig for Victory’ campaign was a government initiative designed to promote self sufficiency as Nazi forces successfully blocked food imports which also created an innovative culinary movement (Davies, 1993: Patten, 2006). Boyd (1947) noted how allotments made a substantial contribution to the nation’s food supply. In 1943 there were 1,400,000 allotments, the highest number recorded (Poole, 2006). One positive outcome in these very
difficult times was a healthier diet, Berdanier (2006) noting in World War II a reduction in obesity for example.

In the 21st century the role of allotments has possibly changed. They now could be considered as a partial sustainable food source and part of the healthy living agenda, a community resource and an educational tool with an insight into bio-diversity. Coughlan (2006) notes a post-war decline to 300,000 allotments though Wallop (2009) cites the National Society of Allotment & Leisure Gardeners who claim over 100,000 people are on waiting lists suggesting their remains a keen interest. Crouch (1989) sees the allotment as a vernacular landscape, a collective cultural landscape representing an alternative to the predominant business landscapes, a perception describing a cultural experience beyond the early impetus of the allotment as a supplementary income source or a means of economic sustainability. Mougeot (2005) describes participatory research suggesting the function of allotments has changed to one of recreation. It is also possible to view allotment use as representing a small part of the Prime Minister’s ‘Big Society’ vision, individuals acting collectively for the common good without government interference, though this paper views this as a very nebulous and vague concept and suggest a very different paradigm.

The Fabian Society.

The Fabian Society is affiliated to the Labour Party though remains robustly editorially and organisationally independent with a reputation for developing left of centre political ideas and policy. It was founded as a socialist society committed to gradual social reform as an evolutionary rather than revolutionary process. The name derived from Quintus Fabius a Roman general with a reputation for delaying engagement in battle to the right moment. Why are the many poor published in 1884 was their first tract which began a reputation for radical reform. Page 2 sets the revolutionary tone with passionate vehemence and uncompromising language which over a hundred tears later retains a zeal and campaigning strength; “The competitive system – which leaves each to struggle against each, and allows a few to appropriate the wealth of the community – is a rough-hewn expedient which perpetuates many of the evils of mere brute force supplemented by tricks of trade so vile and contemptible that words cannot adequately denounce them”. Other early tracts included a proposal for a reform of working conditions, An 8 hours bill (1890), a lovely satirical poke by George Bernard Shaw Socialism for Millionaires (1901) and the start of a Fabian tradition of social investigation, Maud Pember Reeves’ remarkable 1914 Family life on a pound a week. The thread from then to the present is reflected in new research commissioned to examine causes of inequality and poverty today reflecting the work of Beatrice Webb’s 1909 Minority Report to the Poor Law Reform Commission.

The open, democratic ethos of the Society allows and even encourages diverse opinion and debate (all Labour Prime Ministers have been members) and reading Tony Blair’s contributions one begins to appreciate how wide is the remit. In terms of land ownership, the central theme of this paper, there has been considerable debate and in the Food in Wartime tract (Smith, 1940) there is a strong vein repeated elsewhere as to the need for social reform and justice. In this tract Smith warned against the policy supported by the Government of corporate monopolies with guaranteed high returns of profit undermining small distributors and farmers. Sidney Webb on page 7 of his famous 1899 tract no. 51, Socialism: True and False sets the position of the Society largely recognised as the position of common land ownership based upon need not profit:

“The political effect of this change is seen in the gradual transformation of party programmes, especially on the Land question. In the Liberal party the new Collectivist
section is in direct antagonism to the “old gang.” Its aim is not the sub-division of property, whether capital or land, but the control and administration of it by the representatives of the community. It has no desire to see the Duke of Bedford replaced by five hundred little Dukes of Bedford under the guise of enfranchised leaseholders, but prefers to assert the claim of the whole community to the land, and especially to that “unearned increment” of value which the whole community creates. It has no vain dream of converting the agricultural laborer into a freeholder, farming his own land, but looks to the creation of parish councils empowered to acquire land for communal ownership, and to build cottages for the laborers to rent.”

The theme of communal ownership and the utilisation of land will be returned to later.

**Allotment site case study**

The research was conducted via semi-formal interviews with the interviewees’ consent and understanding that the data would be administered ethically and confidentiality was assured, all contributions being non-attributable. Transcription was by note-taking and the random sample consisted of holders new to the site to a few who had practiced there for nearly 40 years. The setting is a large borough administered allotment site of over 100 plots, one of 22 sites in the area. It has recently benefited from a regeneration grant which has enhanced facilities and is carefully monitored by the borough council who encourages active use and begun to introduce community food growing pods.

The allotment holders were invited to comment as to why they continued to work their plots. The following represents a typical cross-section of perceptions tabulated into categories of emphasis:

<table>
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<tr>
<th>The natural environment</th>
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<tr>
<td>I enjoy being outside</td>
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<tr>
<td>It gets me out of the house</td>
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<tr>
<td>I see so much nature</td>
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<tr>
<td>I like to see things grow</td>
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<tr>
<td>It’s such a cheap way of getting out and having a little area of your own which you can do whatever you want with.</td>
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<tr>
<th>The experience of growing produce</th>
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<tr>
<td>It’s never the same two years in a row. Each year is different and so you never know what will grow.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I always grow more than I need.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>If I don’t know someone I ask for help. Everyone is so friendly. If I’m stuck I just ask. Some of the lads have been here for years.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
I like to plant things and see what happens. I don’t know much but it’s great when ‘it takes’.

I grow what the family asks me to.

I’m teaching my son how to plant and grow things. He has his own little area which he keeps. He’s very proud of it.

Nothing tastes as good as your own stuff.

The rationale for administering a plot

I grow far more than I need for myself and my family. I give a lot away, especially onions!

It keeps me and the family going. I have onions and potatoes all year. I also freeze a lot.

I swop things. One lad keeps chickens and if he’s passing and has some spare eggs I’ll give him a lettuce or something.

I like the freshness. Tastes so much better than the shops.

It’s cheap! Food is so dear.

I take orders from the neighbours! I grow what they ask. (I asked if he sold anything). – No, I give it all away. I give a lot to my mum too.

As can be seen, the feedback is incredibly positive which is perhaps unsurprising given that allotments require a considerable amount of work and the participants are keen gardeners who enjoy the recreational opportunity. However, the next section argues that the structure reflects more than simply a small group gardeners indulging in a pastime and certainly not a ‘green’ idyll for the middle classes as per the BBC’s The Good Life.

Conclusion

The allotment site is administered by a borough council reflecting the position described in the previously cited Sidney Webb 1899 tract no. 51. In this tract, Webb calls for ‘communal ownership’ which is very much the position of the allotment site. The early tracts were in part informed by the Chartists and there is a view that the restructuring of society to a set of socialist principles will not just create economic reform and working class emancipation (the Marxist view) but rather create conditions that recognise the intrinsic good of humankind and therefore create a structure that promotes harmony and mutual trust, the comments quoted above substantiating this ethos. There is no element of competition, no trading as required under the capitalist model, no profit motive (see Smith, 1940 above) and a spirit of cooperation. There is no owner as in the Robert Owen experiment but in the true sense an egalitarian agronomy based upon community respect and cooperation. Produce is shared within the community, surpluses are not wasted as with supermarkets but freely shared, there is pride in success and a respect for others. No hierarchies exist and possible measures of social standing irrelevant. The structure is communal and exists solely for the local community and the common good. As there is no free market there are no
entrepreneurs, no competition, no profit motive only support and cooperation as revealed in the comments. In a world that embraces and insists on economic prosperity as a measure of success, perhaps allotments represent a small structure of what is possible when greed is replaced by common humanity, the essence of the Fabian Society’s vision.

References


Davies, C. (2009), Queen turns corner of palace backyard into an allotment. Observer newspaper. 14.6.09


Wallop, H. (2009), **Allotment waiting lists reach up to 40 years.** The Daily Telegraph. 2.6.09

**Additional material.**

The Fabian Society on-line archive is available at: [http://www.fabians.org.uk/about-the-fabian-society](http://www.fabians.org.uk/about-the-fabian-society)