

allotments in Reepham

Reepham was amongst the first villages in the county to establish garden allotments, in 1830. Southern England, including Norfolk, had been the seat of disturbance stemming from poverty and extremes of hardship experienced by agricultural labourers who had lost winter income when threshing machines replaced manual labour. The riots were called Swing Riots after the signature 'Captain Swing' at the foot of threatening notes pinned to the doors of the mob's targets, named by association with the threshing flail, or swinging stick.

Since the end of the eighteenth century when allotments were first introduced in Wiltshire and Gloucestershire, arguments had taken place amongst landowners, agriculturalists, clergy and farmers about the benefits of allotments and who exactly were the beneficiaries. Some farmers believed that the labourer would work less hard in his employ and might even become a competitor since 'spade husbandry', as hand cultivation was termed, produced more per acre than the plough. Members of the clergy considered it as a reforming institution, since only those men of good conduct and sober habits would be allocated an allotment, on the condition of church attendance. Some were sceptical that land left untouched by enclosure and improvement, deemed the only available source of the quarter-acre required for each labourer, would yield anything: all that remained or had been allocated as fuel or poor's allotment was considered waste and was often boggy ground, as for example is Booton Common to this day. All interests were reluctant to relinquish their land.

But the *Norfolk Chronicle* for 20 november 1830 records:

‘Having often advocated the plan of letting small portions of land to industrious cottagers, we feel much pleasure in stating that it has been acted upon at Reepham, by Messrs Birchams who last Michaelmas divided and let eleven acres of land, which has proved a great accommodation and comfort to 33 poor families. Also at Heydon by Mr Richardson (author of the district farm plan) who has let a field of nearly seven acres to fourteen industrious men of that parish. Men, women and children, to the amount of about forty, are employed in digging their several portions of half an acre each [the standard area in those days, deemed to be what was required to support a family, while not being commercially viable and therefore a threat to other producers] with an alacrity and cheerfulness that is quite gratifying. The seed has been purchased for them and the money is to be repaid after the crops of wheat and potatoes are got in.’

Bircham estate records do not reveal where on his many acres the allotment land was located, and neither are there references to them in White’s Trade Directory for 1845.

Despite their increasing popularity throughout the nineteenth century, as the perceived threat to landowning and farming interests was not realized, allotments in Reepham disappear, perhaps literally; there is no record of them on enclosure maps of 1846, 1882 and 1904. The earliest Ordnance Survey map of 1886 is similarly empty, but the O/S map of 1906 shows two sites, one of 1.956 acres behind Newland Villas, on Ollands Road and

another of 1.462 acres at right-angles to and between Ollands Road and Station Road, just below the junction of the latter with the Kerdiston Road and north of the Cattle Sale Yard. Both plots were owned by a member of the Eglington family. The first of these, but not the second, is recalled by Mr Wesley Piercey, a resident of Reepham since 1917; the land was finally taken for building in the late 1980s. Mr Frank Bibby tells us that the Ollands Road site also went under the developer in about 1985. Mr Micky Downes also recalls that Mr Cyril Eglington, another of the same family, let allotments on yet another piece of land next to Robins Lane, again lost to houses in the 1980s. Mr Piercey has a further recollection of Parish Council-owned allotments behind Sunbarn Close on the land now occupied by the Fire Station but these were lost in the 1970s, presumably when it was built.

Reepham in wartime did not see an increase in sites in response to the 'dig for victory' campaign; the population, it appears, were well-served either by existing sites or traditional large gardens but allotments history here evidently reflects the trend of loss to development in the 1980s. With the recent resurgence of interest, for the existing 6 plots off the Norwich Road there is a waiting list of in excess of 12 people and expected wait of 8-10 years.

Thanks are due to all these local people for helping to add another piece of the allotments history jigsaw.

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