

Community Gardens: Golders Green Allotments

Community gardens are land acreage set aside for the purpose of residential cultivation. Usually they are divided up into plots. Each plot is assigned or rented to a plotholder, who then is responsible for the cultivation of the area. Plots can range in size from very small to quite large; it depends on how much land is available and how many local gardeners are interested in having a plot.

In England, the practice of having allotments has a distinct historical background. Allotments were originally advocated during the mid 1700's as a manner of providing a living for the poor after the enclosure of common land.⁶ In recent times, allotments were created by municipal authorities to enable the town dweller to produce his own vegetables.

The Golders Green Allotments are located on Hendon Way, in Golders Green, in the London Borough of Barnet. The area is bounded by a stream to the west and south, Hendon Way to the east, and a housing development and a Tesco supermarket to the north.

At the turn of the century, Golders Green was still a remote, rural village on the outskirts of London, isolated from the burgeoning city by the formidable clay hills of Hampstead Heath. A single track, Golders Green Road, held all the village buildings, a smattering of public houses, a country inn, a few farmsteads, and a hospital. Finchley Road, the roundabout way into London, intersected with Golders Green Road, forming the main crossroads of the tiny village. The land surrounding Golders Green was gently rolling fields and farmlands. Off in one of the fields, far away from everything, stood the Fever

Hospital. A recent addition in 1896, the Fever Hospital treated the residents of Hendon suffering from Tuberculosis and other infectious diseases.

However, London had been expanding explosively through the 1800's, driven by the Industrial Revolution. Neighboring villages had been devoured and assimilated into greater London by the enabling force of the railroads. Plans were in the works for this sleepy village hidden on Hampstead's far side. In 1892, Parliament authorized the Metropolitan Railway's most ambitious undertaking yet: the drilling of a tube underneath Hampstead Heath, emerging at the route terminus of Golders Green. This marvel of engineering was completed and opened to the public in 1907.⁷ As had been proved throughout the second half of the 1800's, where the tube went, suburban growth followed. Golders Green was no exception.

By December 1913, the newly expanded neighborhood of Golders Green was looking for open space to use as residents' allotment gardens. In a flash of inspiration, after a discussion of renting land held by the Church, Councillor Sturgess suggested that a "portion of the Hospital Field be set apart for the purpose of allotments."⁸ After much wrangling with the Local Government Board over finances and regulations, the allotments were laid out by the borough surveyor and opened for cultivation in October 1915. By the beginning of November 1915, thirteen people had applied for plots at Hospital Field Allotments.

During the First World War, allotments came into their own as useful and even necessary things. In the autumn of 1916, public opinion demanded all available land be used for

cultivation. In December 1916, the Hendon Urban District Council responded by concluding satisfactory negotiations with the Church to expand allotments southward from the original Hospital Fields. By January 1917, 105 allotments were created. Bylaws were passed to safeguard the new plots, such as rules against trespassing or damaging the lots.

In the interwar years, the immediate necessity of having arable land for food cultivation decreased. At the same time, the pace of building in Golders Green spiralled upwards. The Golders Green Allotment land was reduced by the sale of a tract to the Hendon Electric Supply Company for a substation in 1929. In that same year, the Hendon Council converted the Fever Hospital buildings into a works depot, appropriating the adjacent allotments in the conversion. Hendon Way was widened and paved, and construction of new housing proceeded, creeping northwards from The Vale and westwards from Golders Green Road.

World War II likely stopped the encroachment of residences into the Allotments, as growing food locally for the community became essential once again. The government's "Dig for Victory" campaign encouraged home and allotment gardening with demonstrations, gardening tips and recipes. Competition gardening had its beginnings, with prizes offered for the most successful plot.

The food rationing that continued after World War II ensured the popularity of the allotments for a time. Since then, the practice of allotment gardening has been subject to alternating cycles of popularity and disinterest. Currently, allotment gardening is enjoying a resurgence of popularity, stemming in part from

⁶ Galinou, Mirielle, ed. *London's Pride: The Glorious History of the Capital's Gardens*. p. 190.

⁷ Howkins, F. *The Story of Golders Green*. p. 16.

⁸ Hendon Urban District Council, *Council Minutes*. 15 Dec 1913. p. 191.

the recession of the early 90's.

The Golders Green Allotments are currently managed by the Golders Green Allotment & Horticultural Association on behalf of the London Borough of Barnet Council. The typical size of an allotment plot is 10 square poles, a measurement equal to roughly 2700 square feet. Most plots are 25 by 105 feet, with a two-foot wide walkway separating. Payment of £29, signing of a straightforward letting agreement, and joining the Association are all it takes to lease a plot from April to April; borough residency is not a requirement.

The Golders Green allotments are cut through by Hendon Way. Hendon Way is a "dual carriageway," the British equivalent to a state highway. It has three lanes of traffic in either direction, yet access to the road is unrestricted, unlike American interstates or British motorways. The smaller section of allotments are on the eastern side, numbering 26 plots. The larger portion of the allotments, numbering 170 plots, are on the western side of Hendon Way, as well as the Association's on-site headquarters, the trading post.

The Allotments are accessed on both sides of Hendon Way by short driveways off of the main road. For security, the sites are enclosed by chain-link fence on all sides. Locked gates in the fence allow vehicles to enter to a small parking lot. Gate keys are provided to each plot holder at payment of initial rent. Neither of the parking lots seem that they would be large enough to provide for the needs of allotment holders; for the 170 plots on the west, there are only 10 parking spaces. Of course, it is rare if not impossible that all the plot holders and all their cars are on the allotments at the same time.

Of the three sites I've examined, the Golders Green Allotments are the largest, yet they reflect the lowest level of conscious and aesthetic design. The Borough Surveyor laid out the plots in a utilitarian and uninspired grid. However, the lack of obvious design intent is not a failing. The Allotments are an example of the philosophy "form follows function." The functions of the Allotment are addressed within the layout scheme. Initially, the simple grid layout allowed the Surveyor to prepare the site for use as rapidly as possible. Individual plots are clearly delineated, and direct and easy access to the plots is available.

The allotments allow the expression of individualism within a framework of conformity. For example, storage sheds, of any shape or design, can be built on the allotments. However, there are a few minor rules: the shed's footprint must not exceed 6' x 8', and they must be located at one end of the allotment to keep the access path at the other end clear. Sheds of all varieties and conditions appear on the allotments, from the prim 'Swiss cottage' adorned with flowers, to the ancient construction about to topple sideways. The rows of sheds provide linear and vertical elements in what would otherwise be a flat, open area. In addition, the sheds also subdivide the large space of the entire allotment into smaller, more social groups.

Individuality is also expressed in the way each plot holder chooses to cultivate his or her plot. Provided the application does not interfere with neighboring plots (i.e., no large shade trees, no "wild gardens" dispersing weed seeds) plot holders have free reign over their own piece of land. The great majority use their spaces for vegetables, but most horticultural applications are acceptable. A couple, who had no land

available near their flat, divided their plot in half, dedicating one part for a flower and climber display, the other for vegetables. Another plot had no garden to speak of, but instead, a row of fruit trees: apples, cherries, and pears. In the far corner, a plot was being slowly transformed into a picturesque, rambling garden. Some people had dug out portions to form ponds for small water garden collections. One plot holder proudly showed off her flower and herb garden, each bed edged in low box hedges. She had been inspired by monastic knot gardens. Further, to save money, she had propagated all the box hedges herself from a single parent plant. The

time, effort and loving care invested in each plot was evident. This freedom of horticultural expression is one small way of circumventing the increasing regulation of modern society, of reasserting one's individual, unique identity.

The real attraction of the Allotments rests upon the users' attitudes regarding it. People garden on the Allotments for a wide variety of reasons. Adding home-grown vegetables to the table is one way of providing materially for one's family, of validating usefulness. This sense of usefulness is especially important among today's aging population, who may have retired but still want and need a meaningful, productive activity. Participating in the care of an allotment offers a forum for social interaction, for learning and passing on knowledge; a remedy to the splintering of community and alienation created by the urban lifestyle. In addition, the act of gardening is a reconnection to the earth, to the natural processes that shape and affect us on the basest level. These human emotional responses truly define the value of the Allotments, more than any design aspect.