

I spent a long time reflecting on ODFAA and its members for 'A Growing Concern' so this farewell is largely from Ruminations and Farewell from ODFAA's Chair 2007-2020



I remain enthusiastic after more than 40 years on the same plot on Cripsey Meadow. Times have changed since I first joined my allotment association. The 'committee' was the person I met at the site shed as I paid for the plot, as long as the rent day notice had not blown away! When site vacancies grew apace those few committee members were vital, and the most recent reclamation of plots has depended on those who ensured the sites' survival in hard times.

As a vegetarian and an organic gardener, I have watched as insects and birds have diminished over the years. I work hard at reducing my own carbon footprint and I am grateful for the opportunity to work with the soil and seasons to grow food. It has been a major recreation for me, and one with benefits. Allotment gardening is unusual in being a productive activity. I enjoy harvesting, cooking, storing and preserving food and whilst I have a large upright freezer to accommodate some sauces, soups and soft fruit, we eat fresh allotment food seasonally all year round. My plot extends beyond the mechanistic or the material and fulfils a need to grow food where I know how it was grown...I know it tastes better.

Plot holders and allotment communities are diverse but there is a common identity that transcends class and income

barriers; a shared relationship with growing things, and often an interest in the culture, folklore and paraphernalia of kitchen gardening. Over the years the inevitable successes and failures have turned me into a gnarled veteran, alert to pests, diseases, barriers and solutions that avoid slaughter. Nowadays I am keenly aware of the health of the land that all children and grandchildren will inherit.

At one time the struggle for allotments was a necessary collective approach to enable some to feed a family from a small share of earth. Nowadays plots are one way that people can choose to relate to one another. However, life can throw up problems like redundancy and illness so that growing food can become a necessity. 'Growing Well' is now a well proven approach to loneliness and mental health issues and appropriate, supported GP referral would benefit many. However, food production is no longer a priority for all: for some the plot is valued for its close and continued involvement with the soil; a sought-after privacy; a means of escape; the answer to too small a garden, or the attraction of a non-commercial and non-competitive way of living. Many plot holders share concerns about climate change, exercise, food, pesticides, herbicides, wildlife, organic, no dig....

Mostly plot holders just want to turn up and work their plot but increasingly the sustainability of sites is dependent on members working together as part of a shared culture, within a mutually agreed ethos, generally determined by the lease and the law. This has proved to be an effective way of managing change. Growing food contributes to the health and well-being of individuals, their family and friends, but for them to be able to do this, allotment association committees need to manage all aspects of the site. My own experience of working with others in managing the reclamation of Cripsey Meadow led to opportunities to engage and work with more through ODFAA.

Gardeners like Lawrence Hills, Geoff Hamilton, and books like John Berger's 'Pig Earth'; 'The Allotment: Its Landscape and Culture' by David Crouch and Colin Ward; 'Growing in the Community: A Good Practice Guide' by David Crouch and Lesley Acton's 'Growing Space: a history of the allotment movement' have been inspiring, illuminating and useful. The primary source of 'A Growing Concern' was ODFAA and OCC minutes, but much of

the context is derived from reading and notes over the years when I had no thought of attention to credits. Apologies and thanks are certainly due to my reading list.

ODFAA's strap line, developed for our web site in 2013, is 'working together for Oxford allotments' which is both the process and the desired outcome. The brunt and responsibility for administering the site inevitably falls to the **allotment association committee. Thanks are due to all who volunteer their time, passion and hard work.**

Since 2000 many of ODFAA's sites have been involved in reclamation so that the land is well used and more plotheolders can share this privilege. ODFAA has tried to positively engage the ALM, and through them committees and plot holders, in developing and sharing good practice of sites and plots. Associations have been challenged to improve their financial management, as being more well used and self-sufficient will best preserve these spaces.

In times of uncertainty people often turn to self-sufficiency. Nationally we are told there are 90,000 currently on allotment waiting lists. In Oxford the reclamation of plots on survived sites has generally met the additional needs of the 21st century. Here waiting lists have never strained at the seams but vacant plots of self-seeded trees, weeds and brambles threatened many sites' productivity in the 60s, 70s, 80s 90s and early 2000s.

Nowadays many of the people I meet on our allotments - generally to find them a space - are politically and environmentally conscious millennials who show a growing awareness of how insecure our food system is and the harm it can do to our environment. They have done much to reduce the age profile of associations and our more experienced gardeners have welcomed them, and often acted as models and mentors. As food production accounts for about a quarter of the world's greenhouse emissions, working with the soil and sowing seeds is a direct way of making a difference.

Oxford Allotments are in a healthier, more environmentally sound, democratic place than at the turn of this century. Self-management has played an essential role in this, but it must continue to be fair. Plotheolders and associations must use the land and resources wisely and individually and collectively we must be good guardians of the soil. Similarly, as the local authority hands over more responsibilities to volunteers, the authority must do their bit to monitor fair management and provision. For 100 years OCC and ODFAA have worked together and sustained a good allotment provision for the people of Oxford and the 2021 agreement must be a partnership.

In recent anxious months, as we are told some have stacked baked beans under beds, allotments have again been mentioned in parliament. In March, Labour peer Baroness Andrews asked of the communities minister, Lord Bourne of Aberystwyth: "Does he agree with me that once we have left the European Union we are probably going to have to grow a lot more of our own food and therefore we are going to need many, many more allotments? Can he tell me whether the Department for Exiting the EU has this on its agenda?"

In its most recent survey of allotments, APSE noted that 36% of local councils were planning to increase the number of plots they offer, a significant number when the trend for many years was for cash-strapped councils to sell them to fund other austerity-hit services. Allotment history has shown you must use them well or lose them. We know that periods of indifference lead to allotment provision being chipped away, usually irreversibly.

ODFAA's work has focussed on encouraging associations to develop their skills in managing sites. Many now use working parties and levies to share the load and nowadays most are aware of the need for sustainability. ODFAA has focused in recent years on water harvesting, composting, soil health, the use of natural resources, biodiversity, natural power sources, sharing expertise and knowledge. We invite speakers and organise events that seek to involve and enable sites and plotheolders to work together.

Many plotheolders, myself included, speak of the immense enjoyment, the depth of meaning and hard work involved in working the earth. Where they are more reticent their plots speak for them. Talking about plots and plants, asking for guidance, sharing seeds and plants, creating structures, sharing time over a beer or glass of wine, organising the site, enjoying the sun and rain, harvesting--these experiences acquired in shared surroundings can throw a light on the way we live now. All sites have tales of old fiefdoms, mavericks and eccentrics and gardening has lots of myths to be busted. Observation is key as sometimes a 'different way' can show the way to a greener, more environmentally sound way forward but the primary aim is to sustain land for cultivating food. We all know of plotheolders who leave their plots in a damaged condition and too often associations have to clear others' weeds and rubbish. The allotment is a humble part of contemporary life, but it enshrines some worthwhile values and priorities and whilst it would be easy to prophesy that land prices will erode allotment provision, the retention of a space to grow should be a vital part of planning future green spaces.

I will not list the many ALM association representatives I have worked with over the past 13 years. I have come to know many well and benefitted from their experience. I have found working with allotments and associations has similarities to my previous work as deputy head....only with no pay! Both come with that mixture of frustration and reward that form all worthwhile activities. Almost all have been a pleasure to work with – not unusual in folk where gardening is important in their lives. Thanks are due to all for their time in keeping the allotment culture going. We all know that the potent mixture of people and land can produce some very strong feelings

I have spent many hours over the past 18 months working on a new agreement for Oxford allotments. It has been a long process with a surprisingly big learning curve but my writing and reading for 'A Growing Concern' was good preparation for ensuring we have a secure arrangement with our landlord. ODFAA, associations and Oxford City Council should be rightly proud of the allotment provision it has preserved but Oxford City Council need to recognise and be more specifically proud of the many volunteers without whom this would not exist. ODFAA associations and committee members save the council thousands of pounds a year in managing their allotments. They are better run thus with volunteers on site committees bringing many skills from their working lives and making a massive contribution to social capital. We all recognise that allotments are a unique mix of public and private realm and I believe it is right they should be largely self-financing but our landlord must recognise their responsibilities and ensure they do their fair share to support and protect the provision by ensuring that the land can be used as designated and that volunteers are supported. Plot holders have the privilege of productively working with the land and seasons but the contribution growing food on allotments makes to the health of citizens, the land and biodiversity is irreplaceable.



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ODFAA's hard work in delving down into the past agreement with OCC will mean the next 21-year lease will be fitter for purpose. There are exciting, demanding times ahead with a new lease and safety for committee members in incorporated status. I will spend more time on my own site and plot, do more paintings and enjoy time with our grandchildren. I hope they will not be too disappointed in the world we leave them. Allotments have been a lucky synergy for this vegetarian cyclist, in her 70th year.

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