

Hill Rise Allotment Association

Newsletter No.1 October 2008

Hello !

This is the first newsletter from the Hill Rise Allotment Association (HRAA). Some of you will know us already, some of you may have seen our web site (www.hraa.org.uk) but not made contact, while others, both old and new tenants, may know nothing about us. This newsletter aims to contact everyone who is interested in improving the allotments and building the community we have.

Please contact us

The main purpose of this newsletter is to make contact with you. Because the Town Council cannot give us the addresses of allotment holders, this mail shot is the only way we have of contacting you. If you are not already a member of HRAA and want us to send you information directly (for instance dates of meetings) then we need your email or postal address. Please respond to this newsletter by mailing Allan Lewis at alanmar@ntlworld.com, or go and see Allan on plot 125, and give us your contact details.

Important: Date for your diary

HRAA are planning a social evening open to all allotment tenants. The following date and venue has been provisionally booked: Saturday the 22nd of November at 7.45 pm in the Parish Church hall. It is hoped that the evening will include a talk by a local plant disease expert. Please check the web site nearer the time, and we will of course email you if you have contacted HRAA as described above. All welcome.

History of the allotments in St Ives (we are 160 years old !)

The allotments were the brainchild of Potto Brown (1797-1871), miller at Houghton and a prominent Nonconformist, involved in many local good causes. He bought land for allotments at Houghton and Warboys as well as St Ives, as part of a general campaign to help working people (and keep them out of the pub – does this still work for allotment holders?).

The Norris Museum has a map with details of some plots of land in Ramsey Road sold by auction in June 1848. Writing on it shows that two plots of about an acre each were bought by Potto Brown for £485 – they are on the east side of Ramsey Road immediately north of Slepe Hall, about where Westfield School and its playing field is now. Potto paid £485 for the two fields.

The area of allotments expanded later. By the time of the first detailed Ordnance Survey map of St Ives in 1887 another 8 acres had been added to the south of the original plots, on the site of the present-day Langley Close, Langley Court and Norris Road, including what is now the Police Station. And by the time of the 1901 OS map the site of Eastfield School had been added, together with another area on the east side of Ramsey Road and north of St Audrey Lane, where All Saints Green and the Pound are now. The area of all these plots amounted to nearly 35 acres.

Air photographs show that all these areas were still allotments in the 1950s (but it's not possible to see from the photos how tidy they were being kept!) They must have disappeared bit by bit under new buildings as St Ives expanded in the 1950s and 1960s. All Saints Green and the Pound had been built by September 1961 but the other allotments were still in being then. A photograph of 1966 shows Westfield School (looking very clean and new). By 1972 Eastfield School, Langley Court and the Police Station had all been built and there seem to be no allotments left in this part of the town. The allotments were moved to Hill Rise and re-sited on the heavy clay we now know and love.

It is fair to say that through the 1990's the allotments suffered a period of neglect, and much of the area recently opened up next to the cemetery had reverted to natural shrub. In the early 2000's, plans were put in place to extend the cemetery and the Town Council began to remove the vegetation (mainly hawthorn which had self-seeded), and the original allotments plots began to disappear. However, around 2002 there was resurgence of interest in the allotments, and we now have a healthy waiting list, despite the council opening up a number of new plots in the last couple of years.

Communal hedge

Earlier in the year, members of the association planted a hedge along the western side of the allotments. In time we hope this will provide some windbreak along that edge of the allotments, as well as providing some habitat for wild life. The trees (1500 whips) were supplied by Huntingdonshire District Council, and heeled in on a vacant plot in January. The hedge was then planted over a few weekends in January and February.

Round up of the summer

So what was good for you this summer ? Sweet corn, French beans, onions and tomatoes turned out really well in the end. Celeriac and parsnips are looking good now, enjoying the wet weather and autumn raspberries have yielded well, assuming you could harvest them between the showers. The sweetcorn turned out well despite the lack of sun, but many people found that squashes (including courgettes) did not do very well. Let's hope for a more 'normal' season next year, particularly a warm summer where we may be able to have a BBQ.

Vandalism

In the past there have been some terrible stories of vandalism on the allotment site. Thankfully we have not had any major problems in the past 5 years. It is worth saying that despite your views as to whether anything will be done in the short term, the only way police will recognise that there is a problem, is if incidents are logged and recorded. The only way we can get more resources from the council in order to improve security, is if problems are being logged with the police. But if you never report anything, then there is no point in complaining at a later date. The most important thing you can do as an individual is to lock the gate **every time** you enter **and** leave. **Leaving the gate open is an open invitation to those who will come in and strip the allotments of every bit of metal (greenhouse frames, tools etc).**

Herbicides (weedkiller) in manure

Many of you will have read in the news this year about a problem of herbicide residues (chlorpyralid) in cattle manure. Luckily we seem to have escaped any serious problems, but it is worth noting that this is not a new problem – advisory leaflets in the 1980's warned against residues of related herbicides in straw, when the vogue was to grow cucumbers in, or on straw bales. The message has to be: always check with the person who supplied the muck whether they applied herbicide to the grass they then fed to the animals (and the problem can arise with muck from horses as well as cattle). You also need to know whether they bought in hay, straw or silage to feed the animals, and if so whether the supplier of the forage used chlorpyralid. If you do have a problem, the only thing to do is to turn the heap regularly to get plenty of air mixed in and to get any straw residues to break down as quickly as possible. In any case, fresh manure should be stored for six months before using it.

Jobs for the winter

If you store any produce in a shed on your plot, and you also compost kitchen waste up there, then rats can be a big problem. Read the 'pest' section on the web site – tell tale destruction of sweet corn in September is a sign of rats. Make sure all compost bins are secure – wire under the compost bin is essential. You should also seal around the bottom of your shed if it has spaces underneath it (e.g. if you have built it on bricks), otherwise you may find a nest underneath. You may not think it is a problem now but if you end up with a dead rat under your shed you will soon know about it from the smell. Secure sheds now (particularly the roofs) as someone's shed blows down every winter. Modern thin walled sheds, which are tacked rather than bolted together, cannot withstand the fierce winds on the exposed allotment site.

Why do we need an Association ?

You may feel you don't, and that's fine. Many people like to potter along with their allotments, not being part of a bigger group, and if we are honest that may be part of the attraction. However, as you will see accompanying this newsletter is a new tenancy agreement from the Town Council. We have spent much time over the summer debating various drafts with the Town Council, and hope we now have a balanced document that everyone can sign up to. We can only do this effectively as a group.

What are the costs and benefits of joining HRAA ?

At present it costs nothing to join HRAA. The allotment Association is new, so we have inherited a blank sheet of paper. If you want improve facilities or just the sense of community, we would suggest that you will get further through joining the Association. The benefits are whatever the members want to make of it. As mentioned earlier, we can organise meetings through the winter, with expert speakers coming along to talk about gardening topics. Another thing could be a communal shed/store to hold bulk purchases of seeds and compost for members benefits, which could reduce costs for everyone. These are the sorts of things that an allotment association can do. If you feel you want to get involved, then please contact Allan Lewis at the address above.

And finally, thanks to...

The Town Council for printing and distributing this newsletter to all tenants, and to Bob Burn-Murdoch of the Norris Museum for providing the fascinating history of the allotments.