

The History of

1842 *St. Thomas Allotments* 1950

Introduction

A few curious allotment gardeners in Exeter became interested in how and when St Thomas Allotments Association was formed and set about looking through the old Minute Books held by the Devon Heritage Centre at Great Moor House. Overwhelmed by the quantity of information, they quickly realised this was a job for the professionals. With generous support from Exeter and Devon Councillors' community funds, Dr Clare Greener of The Devon Gardens Trust was commissioned to carry out the initial research with the volunteers.

The aim of the research is threefold: to create an archive of material to be held available to all at the Heritage Centre; to keep this as a 'live' project, adding more photographs and memories as these become available; and to publish the findings in a series of booklets. Clare Greener set to work and the rest, as they say, is 'History'...

The History so far...

The first mention of allotments in St Thomas was in the Exeter Flying Post on January 13th 1842. Twelve allotment holders shared seven acres. They grew potatoes, wheat and barley; these were basics for the family and enough to keep a pig. In those days, potato picking and harvesting was done by wives and children. By November 1846 the St Thomas District Allotment Society had 28 tenants each with plots of $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ acre. There are now 12 sites in the Association with approximately 669 full-size plots.

September 1875: St Thomas Local Board had received a complaint from a Mr Wolland about the smell from the pigs kept in an allotment field adjoining his house. Although the Surveyor commented that the pigs were kept in clean conditions, it was agreed that the owners of the pigs be served with abatement notices. During the Second World War the Ministry of Agriculture and Fisheries encouraged the keeping of pigs by allotment holders and suggested that Pig Clubs should be formed among the allotment holders in the City. It seems that the St Thomas Allotment Association did not take up this suggestion.

During the 1880s there was an increased demand for allotment plots. So the Clerk of the City Council



wrote to sixteen land-owners requesting them to lease or sell land for allotments, but they were reluctant to do so. In the end the Council had to resort to compulsorily purchasing land. Allotment holders were told they would have to pay 1s 6d (7½ p) per yard.

Allotments and WWI

1917: Food shortages in the First World War led to War Allotments being created. There were 380



St Thomas Produce & Flower Show 1925 (Photo courtesy of the Venn/Sclater family)

applicants for plots in St Thomas in February of that year. Local nurserymen, including Peter Veitch (of Veitch & Co) helped teach allotment holders how to garden effectively. They supplied cabbage plants and packs of seeds and the City Council bought seed potatoes for resale to plot-holders. Rents were set at 1s 3d (6 p) per yard

10 June 1918: a committee was formed by Messrs. W. Hawke, E. Denham, Watts, Jackson, Baker, Vicary, and Winser to represent St Thomas Allotment Holders.

1920: Allotment Committees joined together to form the current St Thomas Allotment Association partly in response to proposed rent increases from 1s 3d per yard to 1s 8d (8½ p) per yard or 16/8d (83½ p) per plot (£37.51p at today's values).

November 1920: Following a city wide appeal for twenty tons of potatoes, allotment holders from St Thomas donated potatoes and vegetables to the Royal Devon & Exeter Hospital.

1921: The first St Thomas Allotment show was organised and held at St Thomas Pleasure Ground.

March 1925: All new allotment holders to be charged 17s (85p) per plot, £45 at today's values.

January 1926: It was decided not to hold a show this year as the previous year had had a poor showing.

May 1928: After much negotiation with the owner the Town Clerk was authorised to pay £1000 (£54,755 at today's values) for Mr Guy's field on Okehampton Road. The purchase was finalised in September of that year.

June 1930: St Thomas Allotment Association submitted a claim for £13. 5/- for damage caused by flooding at Okehampton Road. Compensation was authorised for damaged crops.

1930s: Due to the recession there was no money available for fence repairs, provision of water or creation of cart tracks through new allotments.

Allotments and WWII

April 1941: A demonstration allotment was set up at Pines Gardens and in St Thomas Pleasure Ground with a view to fostering public interest in the Allotments Campaign: the Groundsmen on duty answered enquiries from interested people

September 1941: Since the beginning of the War 648 war allotment plots had been created in Exeter making a total of 142 acres let as allotments for 2,000 tenants, 700 plots at St Thomas. There were

also approximately 400 allotments on privately owned land and vacant building sites.

January 1942: Local newspapers reported that crops to the estimated value of £10,000 were reported to have been grown in 1941 by members of St Thomas Allotment Holders' Association. Further research can find no mention of this figure in the Association minutes, nor in the City Council Allotment minutes. However, if this amount is divided by 700 allotments, that comes to about £14.50 per allotment plot per year, which does not seem unreasonable.



German Luftwaffe Reconnaissance Photo 1940 - Guys & Hylton Allotments are bottom left next to the Great Western railway line and would have been hit if the line had been bombed

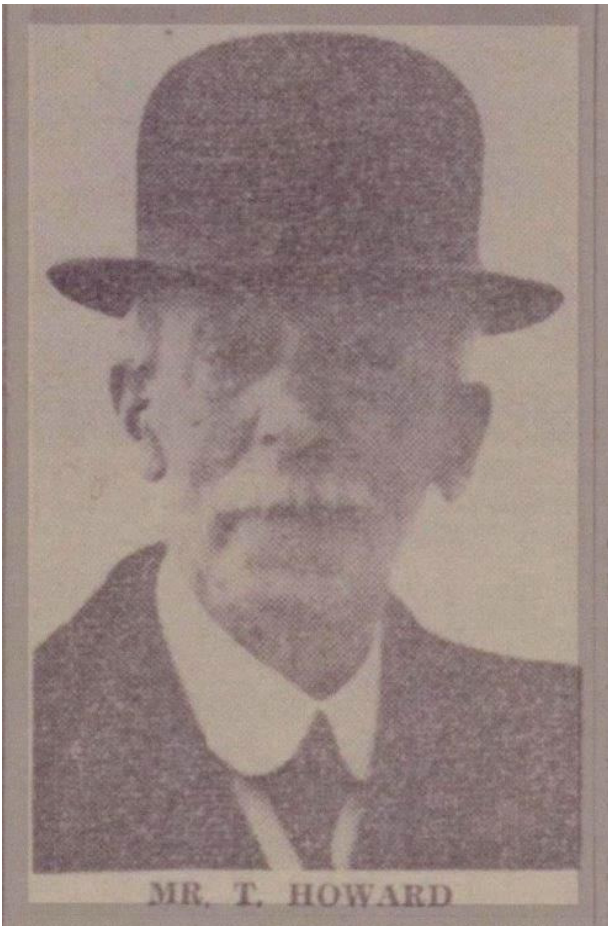
(Photo Courtesy of Nigel Clarke - see www.hitlersukpictures.co.uk)

January 1945: Local newspapers reported that in 1944 about £40,000 worth of food stuffs was grown on Exeter allotments, £12,000 worth from the Allotment Holders' of St Thomas. Again there is no evidence for this figure in City Council minutes looked at; however the Allotment Association recorded that £1200 worth of produce had been grown in the previous year (that is approximately £48,000-worth at today's values). The National

Allotment Society, does not know how the produce was valued and does not have records of the value of produce grown during the war. DEFRA archives have been contacted to see if they can help with this, but so far have not responded, so look for our next instalment and hopefully there will be further information to verify which figure is correct.



Emily Sclater nee Venn at Produce & Flower Show 1940(?) (Photo courtesy of the Venn/Scalter family)



April 1950: Retirement of Mr Thomas Howard, President of the St Thomas Allotment Association for 30 years.

Mr Howard was a City Councillor for 31 years and a member of the Exeter City Council Allotments Committee.



The next edition of this History will take us from 1950 to the present day - and any photographs or memories people have from this period would be most welcome.

*Please contact:
info@bystock.eclipse.co.uk
 or text
 07773038689*