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Keech, Daniel ORCID logoORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4112-9030> and Johanisová, Nad'a (2022) Allotment gardens in Britain. In: Zahrádkářské osady aneb proč neztrácet půdu pod nohama. Geonika, Brno.

Official URL: <http://www.ugn.cas.cz/event/2022/book/Zahradkarske-osady.pdf>

EPrint URI: <https://eprints.glos.ac.uk/id/eprint/10849>

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Allotment gardens in Britain

Dr Daniel Keech, Countryside and Community Research Institute, University of Gloucestershire, UK.

Dr Nad'a Johanisová, Department of Environmental Studies, Masaryk University, Brno, Czechia.

This text represents an approximate equivalent of the chapter *Historie a současnost zahrádkářských osad v Británii* in Duzi, B, Johanisová, N and Vavra, J (eds.) (2021) *Zahrádkářské osady aneb proč neztrácet půdu pod nohama*. Geonika, Brno.

The original English version was reviewed and subsequently revised by the Czech co-author, explaining why an accepted manuscript equivalent is not available in English.

While in central Europe allotments for food production began to appear in the second half of the 19th century in cities, in Britain the first allotment gardens, emerged in the 18th century, initially in the countryside. (The word 'allotment' means something that I am to be allotted or entitled to). And UK citizens (with the exception of those in Northern Ireland and central London, where slightly different regulations apply) are effectively legally entitled to an allotment of land to grow fruit and vegetables (and, in some cases, to keep rabbits and chickens).

To understand this peculiar fact, it is necessary to delve for a moment into British history. Between 1700 and 1860, the British Parliament passed more than 3500 Acts that allowed large landowners to privatise (enclose, fence off) more than 2 million hectares of so-called commons, i.e. woodland, wetland, pasture or upland, which we would call '*lada*', and which the country people used for grazing, gathering fuel, fodder, litter, building materials, nuts, mushrooms, herbs, etc. The enclosure of the commons was accompanied by controversy, protests and forced expulsions. The result was the impoverishment of small landowners who could no longer manage independently without the cushion of the commons. They also lost what land they still had and, if they did not leave for the cities, became agricultural sharecroppers on large farms. Poverty, desperation and crime followed, and from the eighteenth century onwards efforts developed to provide the poor with land to grow food. Hence the concept of allotment.

Further growth of the allotment movement followed urbanisation during the nineteenth century and by the turn of the twentieth century, there were already around half a million individual allotments. The majority are urban allotments as we know them in the Czech Republic. The standard allotment area claim is 250 square metres (traditionally the ten 'rod' units still in use), but today allotments often make up only half of this area, to be more manageable for contemporary needs and lifestyles. In the early 20th century there was an important change in the position of allotments in Britain. Whereas the provision and operation of allotments had hitherto been a voluntary affair, under the auspices of philanthropists, foundations or mutually supportive societies of gardeners themselves, the provision of allotments now became the responsibility of local authorities, the equivalent of our local councils or borough councils. Under the Allotment Act of 1908, the local authority was obliged to actively identify land which could be leased to people who demand it, if there were at least six such local applicants. The Act even explicitly allowed for the expropriation (or 'compulsory lease') of land and its purchase or lease by the local authority for use as a garden colony. A further important Act was passed in 1925, which limited the power of local authorities to dispose of land they provide as allotments. For example, if a local authority wants to change the function of land that has been used as allotment space, or sell it, it must seek ministerial approval to do so. The 1908 Act defined an allotment garden as 'an area 'not exceeding 40 'rods' (1,000 m²) and used by the tenant for the cultivation of fruit and

vegetables primarily for his own and his family's consumption'. The question of the amount of rent is interesting. The law does not specify the amount. The Allotments Act 1908 suggests that the rental level of allotments is based on 'such sum as the tenant may reasonably expect'. In reality, however, the amounts for renting allotments, even in large cities, are very low. One of the authors (DK), who rents a allotment from a local authority in the South West of England, pays £42 (about ČKr1,250) a year. Following this new legislation, allotments continued to grow rapidly, peaking during the Second World War. The British government launched the Dig for Victory campaign as early as 1939 with the aim of increasing the then 819,000 allotments by half a million. Citizens took up the campaign with enthusiasm, forming various associations and growing food in pastures, along railways, in parks, airports and even on bombed-out plots of land where dozens of tons of construction waste had to be removed. By 1944, there were an estimated 1.75 million allotment gardens.

After the Second World War a reduction in demand for allotments began. This may have been due to the gradual decline in food prices caused by the rise of industrial agriculture. Many allotment sites fell into disuse, were sold or developed. Between 1979 and 1997, nearly 10 000 former allotment plots were sold off each year, and by the mid-1990s only around 300 000 remained. But the new Millennium has seen a dramatic and persistent turnaround in demand, attributed to a growing ecological sensibility, an awareness of the mental and physical benefits of gardening, efforts to secure healthy and uncontaminated food, and the densification of development (and thus the reduction of home gardens).

The waiting time for a garden allotment in some cities or urban districts can now run to years. A project to regenerate allotments took place between 2002 and 2006 thanks to the Esmée Fairbairn Foundation, which invested £1 million in The Allotments Regeneration Initiative. This has enabled allotment associations to regenerate and expand existing facilities and introduce new community models to complement existing council allotment networks. In some cases, this has meant working with local authorities to find and secure new sites, regenerating disused allotment settlements and their infrastructure, or negotiating long-term use agreements with local landowners. Even independently of this initiative, some farmers are offering land to gardeners. Notable examples include Chynahall Allotments in Cornwall, in the south-west end of England, which was established in 2008. The Hick family farm, with the support of a national allotment association, offered families from nearby towns a lease land on their land on the understanding that they would permanently cultivate at least 75% of the lease area and build much of the infrastructure themselves. Chyanhall Allotments are now thriving and the farm itself has benefited - in addition to the rent, it has gained an outlet for its meat products and manure from its gardeners. Gardeners in turn praise the familiar multiple benefits of allotments, including the new community they feel part of. It should be added that although much of contemporary British allotments are still provided for citizens by local authorities, these 'community' allotments tend to be democratically managed by the gardeners themselves, to whom the authorities delegate a range of powers. For example, they manage waiting lists, collect and pay rents, maintain common areas and security, or organise community events. Despite very favourable legislation which requires UK local authorities to both maintain and actively seek land for urban gardening in response to demand, existing allotments here, as in the Czech Republic, are under enormous pressure from developers, particularly in the larger cities. Yet demand is still growing, not least in the context of the recent COVID-19 pandemic. This has highlighted, in many countries, pressure points in the global food system. Allotments remain important spaces of security and community, and their low-cost contributes to household food security and social cohesion. Hopefully this insight will be reflected in a greater emphasis by urban planners on their preservation and development in the future. High levels of support for allotment from civil society

networks and the increasing emphasis in UK planning on the green and blue infrastructure promises to keep allotments high on the urban agenda.

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