

“Opening up the Land”

Britain is a Country where a strong concentration of 'landownership' is vested in a small percentage of the overall population.

The historical basis for this position is tied up with the process of what is known as 'enclosures' during the 17th, 18th and 19th centuries. This describes a system in which strip farmed land once held by peasant families is 'enclosed' and re designated as being held under the ownership of a landlord; be it yeoman farmer, church authority or squire.

This no doubt traumatic process of land reclassification and redeployment remains a controversial issue to this day. In fact, it could justly be described as 'unfinished business'.

The realisation of any form of 'Agrarian Renaissance' cannot be complete without the incorporation of a critical examination of land distribution patterns within the UK (and elsewhere); thereby helping to open up new possibilities for the integration and involvement of those wishing to gain access to fertile soils upon which to grow their own foods.*

If the 'dispossessed' families of the past were still around to stake their claims, I would suggest that we should hear their cases and respond accordingly. However, since this is unlikely to be the case, it will be best to start from where we are today. Especially so since the sudden rise in demand for allotment plots, which has far exceeded the ability of virtually all local authorities to meet it, appears to be a reflection of a deeper need amongst the population at large - to re engage in matters of the earth. A need which is fundamental, and a necessary antidote to the speeded up and stressful life styles that accompany the majority of approaches to modern living.

Given that I support the axiom 'practice what you preach' I have embarked upon a project to open up ecologically managed farm land for local people (South Oxfordshire) to grow their own fruit and veg on. The decision to take this step has been made for the following reasons:

Allotment plots are now experiencing over-demand with long waiting lists and many individuals are being turned away.

Private 'Land Owners' (of which I am one) control approximately 50% of the UK's agricultural land and are well placed to offer affordable plots to those unable to gain access to productive land.

There is an overriding imbalance (historical as well as present) between land retained exclusively for the purpose of growing crops and livestock for personal profit – and that made available to those wishing to help feed themselves.

Human beings need to get their hands in the soil. Physical and psychological health can be greatly enhanced by regular contact with the land.

Genuinely affordable plots enable those on low incomes to grow some of their own food. The first step in food independence.

On October 17th, 30 local people came to a first meeting at Hardwick, my South Oxfordshire home. They were all responding to information put out a month earlier – offering to establish three different sizes of plots for public use: 10x5, 10x10 and 10x15 yards. These are smaller than allotment sizes, but useful for people starting-up and/or having limited time to garden. I decided upon an annual renewable licence for each plot (following guidelines in the legal template of Channel 4's 'landshare') and a code of ecological land management for all.

The room was full and the atmosphere imbued with a quiet sense of excitement. The BBC were present in the form of a journalist from Radio 4's 'You and Yours' programme.

I had thought long and hard about what might be the appropriate rate to ask for these plots and it was with some trepidation that I suggested a scale of 30 to 50 pounds a year – water included - dependent upon the size of plot. Happily these prices were deemed 'very fair' by the general consensus of those present – who included single young people living in apartment accommodation in Reading (5 miles) to older, semi-retired couples from nearby villages.

The ground is now being marked out according to people's choice of plot size (pretty mixed) and the scheme is due to officially get under way on March 1st 2010. However, eager 'plotters' are planning to get on site and start digging as soon as we can complete arrangements. These include: laying on a stand-pipe, organising some sort of parking facility and putting up a dividing fence to enable half of the 5 acre field to be grazed by livestock. There are plans for a communal 'relaxation' area and a garden shed for keeping non transportable items.

Lastly, I have asked those involved to form their own committee and run the plots by consensus – without unduly calling upon the intervention of the initiator!

This project is in line with recommendations in "Changing Course for Life – Local Solutions to Global Problems" www.changingcourseforlife.info

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* For further reading, Simon Fairlie's recent essay on enclosures in 'The land' www.tlio.org.uk