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THE PLOTHOLDER

ROYAL PADDOCKS ALLOTMENTS NEWSLETTER No 12 – February 2002

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The Royal Paddocks is a self-governing allotment site, but this fact has been well-hidden over the years, thanks to a dedicated band who took on the lion's share of the work. Last autumn saw our first major attempt to mobilise the democratic spirit, with the questionnaire in September's newsletter. Your answers, analysed and reported to the November AGM, have resulted in some important decisions. Much of this issue is concerned with those decisions.

Seventy people sent in replies, just over 40% of those polled, a proportion comparing favourably with public response in local government. Many used the opportunity to add further comments, which were all taken into account when decisions were being made – much better than the committees guessing what tenants want on the basis of hearsay around the pump.

Home-grown talent

Focus of the questionnaire was the future of our two Victorian buildings, whose maintenance has always been left to us. Thanks to your answers we now have a Paddocks Buildings Project steering committee, whose members have a variety of expertise in building, architecture, surveying and legal experience – we always knew the talent was out there. Great thanks to Marina Lim who has taken on the job of secretary to that committee, and David Harnden for chairing it.

Your answers made it clear that we should not leave the buildings to collapse. So, as parts of the office building are in little better state than the lockups, the committee plans to renovate them both, using the space to accommodate Seed store and shop; machinery store; individual storage areas for many more tenants; toilets; office space and meeting room. Nick Baylis has kindly agreed to survey the office building, and make drawings to enable best use of space in both buildings.

Green, Educational, Inclusive

Three aspects set the theme for the project. It should be *environmentally friendly*, (bioneutral is the buzz-word). Accordingly, rather than costly connection to mains drainage, the committee is pursuing the option of compost toilets, and Chris Pocock has provided details of the model used at the Centre for Alternative Technology in Machynlleth. Handwashing facilities could be provided by catching water from the roofs and using a solar-powered pump to pipe it to a washbasin.

It should be *educational*, helping new tenants learn as quickly and effectively as possible how to garden, and, we hope, giving local schools a chance to teach children that food comes via the action of sunlight on soil, not from factories. A meeting room would allow our reference books and RHS magazines to be consulted by tenants at other times than an hour on Sunday mornings.

And it should be *inclusive*, catering for all the groups of people who come to the Paddocks, old and young, novices and experts, working or retired, fit or no longer so fit. All need varying kinds of back-up to make a success of their plots. The buildings can provide shelter from bad weather, maybe a place to make a cup of tea, somewhere to keep tools, and a space to meet other gardeners and swap plants and advice.

Funding

The grant situation looks encouraging, and the Parks Agency has offered help with applications. The committee is also in touch with an organisation keen to use our project as a training exercise for building students, who supply free labour, working under their tutors' supervision.

How long will all this take? We know nothing happens fast at the Paddocks, but the pace is quickening. The first two weekends in February will see some clearing of the accumulated rubbish in the buildings, so that Nick can get a proper look round, and we can get some estimates of the cost of materials needed.

A working set of buildings, adapted to our needs, will be a great gift from today's tenants to those of tomorrow.

CUP WINNER IN LOCAL PAPER We had good coverage in the *Richmond & Twickenham Times* of our AGM presentations in November, plus some publicity about renting a plot. The standard of the winning plots was very high last year, partly thanks to the weather, though the winners all know what they're doing, and deserve every congratulation on their hard work. **Hans van der Meulen** took first prize for a full plot, **Barbara Wood** came second, and **Wally and Annemarie Locher** were third. For the half plots, **Tony Walker** came first, **Boula Rice** second, and **Betty Hockley Hills** was third. Awards were made this year for Best Newcomer, the criterion being the greatest difference made to a plot during the first year. **Jochem and Nicole Hollestelle** (and Bente) took the prize for a full plot, and **Donna and Mark Barron** (and Howie) won the half-plot award. All the winners were given National Garden Tokens and a certificate. Thanks to Philip Brew who took the photos for this and the Open Day. **There's an interview with Hans on the back page of this issue.**

If you have any pictures of the site you'd like to give to our archive, please drop them into the office. It's been suggested we might have our own Royal Paddocks Christmas cards - has anyone taken any good pictures of the Paddocks in frost?

WELCOME to new tenants Lorraine Groves (27b), Jenny Bourne (27f), Nicholas Whitely (32f), S.G. Halkyard (38), Ashley Chuan and See-see Leong (73), Christine Tarrant (144), Mark Turner (160), Lindsay and Jane Hatchett (161), Andrew and Evangeline Wainhouse (175), Richard and Ingrid Crane (187), Bill Kent and Betty Guyatt (188) . . . and goodbye. Every Autumn some have to give up their plots. Perhaps they've moved house, have too much other work on, or have reached retiring age (this comes late to gardeners - presumably because we eat our greens). Among those leaving, we're very sorry to say goodbye to John Frith and Bill Parpworth, tenants for many years, and Gail Carlill and Nicky Boyce, who helped set up our first Open Day.

~~~~~ Sadly, we report the deaths of two tenants. Alec Mead, who had been a member of the Plotolders' Committee for a number of years, until 1998, had been unwell for some time, and died in hospital in October. Earlier this month, Fred Adams died at the age of 88 after a fall at home. For many years he was our gatekeeper, coming down every morning and evening to ensure the Paddocks were secure. Till Mike Veysey took over from him he also ran the manure deliveries from our local stables, and was a familiar figure around the site in his trademark white woolly hat. He kept his plot, and continued riding his bike, almost until the end of his life. He supported his housebound elder sister at their home in Hampton Wick. The affection his fellow plotolders felt for him was shown by the number at his funeral on 23 January, when Mike presented flowers on behalf of us all.
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MIKE VEYSEY IS HANGING UP HIS COMMITTEE HAT, so that he can spend more time actually on his plot. For 24 years Mike has been a mainstay of the Paddocks as committee member, treasurer and Plotolders' Chairman. He's still the manure maestro, following in Fred's footsteps, but has decided it's time to hand over his other responsibilities. The Plotolders' Committee tried to persuade him to change his mind, but can't deny that he's earned a rest. He deserves thanks from us all for his patience, good humour and perseverance, despite everything independently-minded tenants could throw at him. But Mike is a modest man, who doesn't want any 'fuss', so a gift of appreciation to him and Shirley is being given privately, from all the tenants.

TERRITORIAL IMPERATIVE A number of tenants would like sheds. There are arguments against, too - one of the most disfiguring aspects of other allotment sites is the number of collapsing shanties they contain. And they are forbidden under the rules of our licence, though we could apply for this rule to be reversed. No change is likely until the building repairs are complete - but meanwhile, there is no ruling against lockers, some of which are very roomy. Take a walk round the site and check out what's currently in use. Wickes do a drop-front garden chest, 970 x 1195 x 845mm, for about £80 (thanks to Tony Walker for providing this information).

MONEY FOR RUBBISH

Rubbish costs a lot to remove, that is, if we pay someone else to do it. Since Mike's retirement we no longer have the use of the Garden Gang's lorry at unreasonably reasonable rates. The skip we used to have over the Easter weekend would now cost around £300 – to take away things which at some time someone brought in for free.

There are some solutions to the unwanted junk problem. The first, obviously, is that if we brought it in and find we don't need it, we can take it to the tip. Part of the high cost of professional rubbish removal is the charge made at the tip according to the weight of the load. Private cars don't have to go on the weighbridge, and can tip for nothing. A second is to burn what we can, bearing in mind that this shouldn't be attempted with anything likely to make a lot of smoke. Plastic and carpet won't burn satisfactorily. A third, and again this seems obvious, is to compost as much as possible – a proportion of what turns up at the incinerator is a candidate for someone's compost heap. Even couch grass, confined in a plastic bag for a year or two, will produce compost, though perhaps the results are best used on paths.

So, if the rubbish is yours, please deal with it yourself. If it's been left behind by a predecessor, and unfortunately there's a lot of this about, talk to the committee.



While we're on the subject it's remarkable what turns up in the INCINERATOR. The reason we have one is to allow people near the perimeter walls to burn things without smoking out the neighbouring houses. But the stuff must be combustible – that is, reasonably dry, and not glass, metal, plastic, or building materials (do we really need to go into the physics of this?). Extraordinarily, someone went to the trouble of bringing down a Christmas tree to cram in there. The council takes them away for nothing, actually, George Loosemore, who does a lot to keep the incinerator area tidy, is a very forbearing man, but even he has his limits.

RENT TO RISE NEXT OCTOBER Unexpectedly, one of the sections in the questionnaire produced an almost unanimous response. Of the 70 who replied, 64 said they would find a rent of £10 per full plot acceptable. Accordingly, the Management Committee, which sets the rents, decided at its annual meeting that from October 2002 this rise should take effect. Yes, it is a rise of 100%, but to set it in context, a plot elsewhere in the Borough will cost £40 a year. There was considerable discussion about this at the AGM, and eventually a vote was taken, showing all but five present in favour of the Management Committee decision.

Last accounting year over £900 was spent on running the site. If we let 180 plots at £5 a year (in actuality it's never that neat) we're not breaking even, let alone building up a reserve to maintain the buildings and replace equipment. However, the committees have decided that any pensioners who feel unable to pay the increased rent will be able to continue at the lower rate for the next year.

No one is ever interested in the RHS special offers. Our Affiliated Society membership brings us not only a monthly copy of *The Garden* and our insurance policies, but also two cheaper tickets for Chelsea, group rates to all other RHS shows, including Hampton Court (saving £3 on the normal rate), a free visit each year to any RHS garden, and free gardening advice. If you find a slight stirring of interest after all, contact the Editor – phone number at the end of this newsletter.

Sunday parking Again resulting from the 'any other comments' section on the questionnaires, the Plottolders' Committee has proposed allowing Sunday car parking for a trial period of six months, that is until 9 May 2002. Though not everyone is happy about this, a vote at the AGM showed a large majority in favour of a trial. More cars on site means extra care and consideration when parking.

Dutch Master I ran into Hans van der Meulen early one August morning as I was sneaking round photographing the winning plots in their full glory. I'd hoped to avoid meeting their tenants, but Hans was there, soon after seven, walking with his watering cans past the wall of cleome and dahlias, all colours in the morning sun, at the end of winning plot 89.

When I met him again just before Christmas, it was another bright sunny morning, but this time everything was edged in frost. Despite the cold, there were a few people about. Albert Batting had arrived on his daily visit to feed Lottie the Paddocks cat, who was snugly tucked into her expanded-polystyrene box. Barbara Wood had come to pick something for dinner; someone on the 'wild south' side was having a bonfire. On one of Hans' three plots I could see a dark red row of kale, Redbore F1, and patches of leeks. The dahlia tubers were still in the ground, protected by a layer of composting straw.

Hans, who grew up in Holland, always liked gardening, he says. He remembers growing nasturtiums in his parents' garden, perhaps aged 4, but it was from his grandfather and a family friend that he had his first lessons in growing things. By the age of 12 he was growing some vegetables for the family. His parents didn't share his ambition to become a professional gardener, and to please them he went to art college. He gained a qualification in graphic design, and worked at that till the mid '90's. After being made redundant, he began helping a landscape-gardener friend with the maintenance of his clients' gardens. Around the same time he got his first allotment, in Acton, then moved to the Paddocks, and soon won the Cup for the first time (2001 is his third).

Hans dislikes using chemicals, though like many of us he still uses a few slug pellets, sprinkled sparingly at quite a distance from the plants. He feeds the soil with compost, pelleted chicken manure, green, and horse manures. Mulching is important too, in his system. He makes compost in low rectangular 'barrows', incorporating woody hedge trimmings, leaves and straw into the softer vegetable mixture. A similar mix is spread under fruit bushes, where it suppresses weeds, and over anything, like the dahlias, which needs protection from cold.

His plots are divided into beds, of vegetables and fruit, herbs and flowers. At the time of writing (late January) there are (among much more) several beds of autumn onions, now about 6 inches high, broad bean seedlings protected by mesh netting, leeks, kale, chard, spring cabbage, purple sprouting broccoli (no flower yet), sprouts (picked). First shoots of rhubarb are beginning to show, protected by an open glass frame and surrounding straw. In the board-edged herb bed sage, thyme and rosemary stand, with marjoram shoots beginning to push through the soil. Another plot has rows of sweet william and wallflower for flower this spring, shoots of iris just emerging, and nearby the handsome glaucous clumps of globe artichokes.

Hans advises beginners with an overgrown plot not to cultivate too much to start with. 'Dig out about three beds, and cover the rest with carpet. Start with simple crops like lettuce, potatoes and onions.' He's clearly a methodical gardener, but there's something more to his success – perhaps it's sympathy with the plants. 'I know which ones in the row are doing well, and which one is a bit weak. Gardening teaches you to live with disappointment, and you learn to be patient and observant too.' Useful skills, not just for plants, but for people.
In the next issue, Hans's tips for beginners.



DIARY DATES for 2002

SPRING SOCIAL, SUNDAY 21 APRIL, between 12.30 and 2.30 p.m. Bring some lunch to share, and have a drink with your fellow gardeners.

OPEN DAY, SUNDAY 9 JUNE, a couple of weeks earlier than before, when we invite our neighbours in to look round and take a plot.

PLOTHOLDERS' ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING, Friday 8 November from 7.30 p.m. at the Bullen Hall, Bennett Close.



To contribute to The Plotholder contact Susan Saunders 8977 4675. All comments and contributions welcome