

DIGGER'S DIGEST

Welcome to the winter issue of *Digger's Digest* – and season's greetings to all, albeit a bit early! It has been a mixed year for many members, with some crops excelling and others failing. See page 2 for views from three members. Allotments have also been in the news recently, with a High Court case between Farm Terrace plot-holders in Watford and the local council. **Please read** a summary of an article from *The Guardian* newspaper on this page. On a lighter note, Stefen Plummer from Clewer Park Allotment reports how local children are gaining their **green fingers**.

Caroline Jones
Editor



AGM 2017

The 2017 Annual General Meeting will be held on Friday 13 January. Full notification details are enclosed. Do try to come along if you can. It is a chance to find out what has been happening and what is planned but, most importantly, it is an open forum where members can have their say and ask questions.

Fete: A Grand Day Out

A big thank you to everyone who supported the fete either by helping, contributing or coming along on the day to join in. Despite rather dodgy weather, there was a great turnout and everybody really seemed to be enjoying themselves. It was pleasing to see so many young families. The teas and the

produce stall were particularly popular and the live entertainment kept the day swinging along. As a result of everyone's hard work, an amazing £1,000 was donated to Thames Hospice and we are extremely grateful to all of you who made this donation possible.

Allotment Land Under Threat

With Government pressure growing on green and brown field land for housing and development, attention has recently turned to allotments. Historically, allotments have been safe, but the situation has now changed. The following has been reproduced courtesy of *The Guardian* newspaper.

PLEASE read.

"A group of amateur gardeners have lost a high court battle to prevent their allotments being built over, which they hoped would help protect green spaces across the country from development. Gardeners at Farm Terrace allotments in Watford believed that a favourable ruling would save not only their own allotments, but also other similar sites under threat. However, after Mrs Justice Lang ruled that Watford Borough Council and the Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government – who backed the local authority's plans – were entitled to concrete over them, the gardeners warned that her judgement was a 'developer's charter'. The claimants, who had fought off two previous attempts by the council to develop the site, said in a statement: 'We feel that at

every stage where we have won the rules have been changed to make it increasingly difficult for us. This judgement is, in our view, a developer's charter for development on any allotment site and in particular threatens urban allotments that have become targets for redevelopment.'

"Despite being 'bitterly disappointed', they said that, after consultation with their legal team, they had decided not to appeal against the judgment, which will pave the way for the building of housing, a car park for the town's football club and a possible future hospital development.

"Watford's elected mayor, Dorothy Thornhill, who had previously described the allotments as a 'really hideous, derelict site', welcomed the decision.

"A year ago, the High Court overturned a decision by the then Communities Secretary Eric Pickles, which would have allowed the 128 allotments to be dug up. But Watford council then launched a third bid to develop the site, giving the remaining 24 allotment holders three months' notice on 4 July, with financial compensation of £1,000 if they were giving up their tenancy, or £750 if they were moving to another site.

"Under the 1925 Allotments Act, councils can build on allotment sites only if stringent rules are followed, but the government updated guidance in 2014 granting the Secretary of State power to allow development of allotments in 'exceptional circumstances'.

"At the hearing on 21 October, the gardeners had argued that those two words indicated a 'strong presumption against the grant of

consent', but that interpretation was rejected by Lang. The council argued that the allotments needed to be removed in order to address the town's 'acute' housing crisis and the Communities Secretary highlighted the benefits of the regeneration scheme. In a written judgment, Lang ruled that 'the interference with the... rights of the allotment holders was justified and proportionate because of the wider public benefits to be gained'.

"The gardeners said after the judgment that 'there is no clear benchmark for what is actually exceptional. We feel the term can and will be applied to close other allotment sites throughout the country and we are being made aware almost every week that a new allotment site is under threat of closure for development.'

"In a freedom of information request, Save All Allotments found that between 2007 and 2014, 194 of 198 applications to close allotments were granted by the secretary of state.

"The number of allotment holders at Farm Terrace had dwindled in recent years after some people took the compensation and the 2012 closure of the waiting list."

Green Fingers Of The Future

Stefen Plummer, a Mill Lane resident, Clewer Park allotment plotter and former teacher at the St Edward's Royal Free Ecumenical Middle School, reports: 'Every Tuesday afternoon from Easter until the summer, and for one full day in June, children from the Middle School next to Clewer Park allotments came to clear, prepare, plant, toil and reap the rewards of the school allotment plot. Up to 15

children joined the school Allotment Club, and the greatest enjoyment came about when they got their hands in the soil. Onions, potatoes, courgettes and pumpkins were planted at the appropriate times and bumper crops of each were transported to grateful parents and teachers. 'The Allotment Club proved such a success that a full day of allotment fun, for a whole year group of 120 children, featured during the school's Health Week. For this day, all the teachers and pupils in Year 5 (ten year olds) came to the allotment. They completed quizzes to identify all the things they can find in plot and were able to get their hands dirty.'

Good Year or Bad Year?

Graham Ashley and Colin and Barbara Coombs from Clewer give us their 'bests and worst' from the 2016 season.

Graham Ashley: For me, it was a mixed year as always. Sarpo Mira blight-resistant main-crop potatoes did well again and I'm growing more next year and less of other main crop. French beans generally were good, but broccoli has just bolted this year. I tried Sweetie Pie sweet corn and it is very sweet and I'm growing more next year. I've tried cut flowers for the first time and rudbeckia, zinnia, Clary and snapdragons were a success, but didiscus, monarda and alonsoa were not. Incas tomatoes were reliable and I had a second crop by planting the pinched-out sideshoots in damp compost. The garlic from a greengrocer in Slough did much better than the Isle of Wight garlic.

Colin and Barbara Coombs:

Best – Beetroot, Foremost and Charlotte potatoes, with heavy crops of Aquadulce Claudia and spring-sown broad beans. Cabbages, especially early summer varieties Primo and Greyhound, were good, while Cobra climbing French beans produced an abundant supply. We had plenty of white currants and sufficient red and black currants, with good-quality Bramley apples and more than enough plums. Gardener's Delight and Alicante tomatoes grown in a polytunnel were a bit late, but produced a good crop when they eventually ripened and escaped the blight.

Worst – Both over-wintered and spring-planted onions failed to develop good-sized bulbs. Most of the over-wintered garlic crop rotted before spring arrived. Salad crops just didn't get going, and seed failed to germinate. We didn't pick a single gooseberry, although there was plenty of blossom.

Trading Shed News

During 2015 there was a major refit of the Maidenhead Road trading shed, which involved replacing the storage area by a prefabricated building. This autumn we have embarked on an upgrade to the Fairground trading shed. The aim is to replace the old storage area with a prefab building that will ultimately become the shop area. The existing shop will then become the storage and bagging-up room. The new shop, being smaller than the old one, will be easier to keep warm in winter. In the short term, some of our stock has been moved to Maidenhead Road, where we

will continue to maintain a full range during the transformation. The seed potato order has been placed for February delivery. Three of the varieties – Accent, Nicola and Sarpo Mira – are classed as organic, while the early variety Swift is new to us this year. Please note that the sheds will open as normal until December 18. Over Christmas both sheds will be closed on December 22, 25, 29 and January 1 2017. They will reopen on January 5.

Allotment Etiquette!

Etiquette is defined as the code of polite behaviour in a society or, in this case, an association. In other words, those terms and conditions that you signed up to, possibly some time ago.

Recently, a few examples have been brought to attention of the Committee, so this is just to keep you up to date.

1. Dogs: If you take your dog to the allotment, please keep it under control (the rules say on a leash) and make sure you clear up any mess that it makes.
2. Roads: The roads and paths on allotments should be kept clear, so please don't block them with your car or gardening equipment.
3. Gates: Please make sure that gates are closed after you and where necessary locked. This at least stops the casual vandals and thieves.
4. Waste: Rubbish and waste should not be brought on to allotment sites. The exception is compost and manure in reasonable quantities. Also, please do not leave discarded tools and equipment lying around as they can become hazards.

The Association has to have terms and conditions to be able to operate effectively and many of them are either about consideration towards other allotment holders or maintaining sites to a good standard. Please help by sticking to the rules.

Security Update

As hard as the Association tries to prevent shed break-ins and thefts, they still occur. However, there is something you can do to protect your tools and equipment – mark them with a security coding kit. Visit the Maidenhead Road trading shed and ask to use the Cre Mark tool-marking kit, as supplied by the local police. And if you do have items stolen, report it via email to jon.brooks@thamesvalley.pnn.police.uk.

Need tips or advice?

There will be a talk for new and newish allotment holders on Sunday 15 January at 10am in the Rose Bar in Gardeners' Hall.

Chairman's Greetings

Merry Christmas! OK, I know it's a bit early, but this is the last newsletter before 25 December. Every year we talk about how the weather was unusual how it affected their allotments successes and failures and it was no different this year. Whether you hibernate during winter or get out there digging and prepping, may I wish you all a Merry Christmas and a Happy New Year.

Frank Tarrant, Chairman

