

SEEDY BUSINESS

Tales from an allotment shed

By Warren Carter



This book is dedicated to anyone who has ever come up to our site and helped with the weeding.

Seedy Business

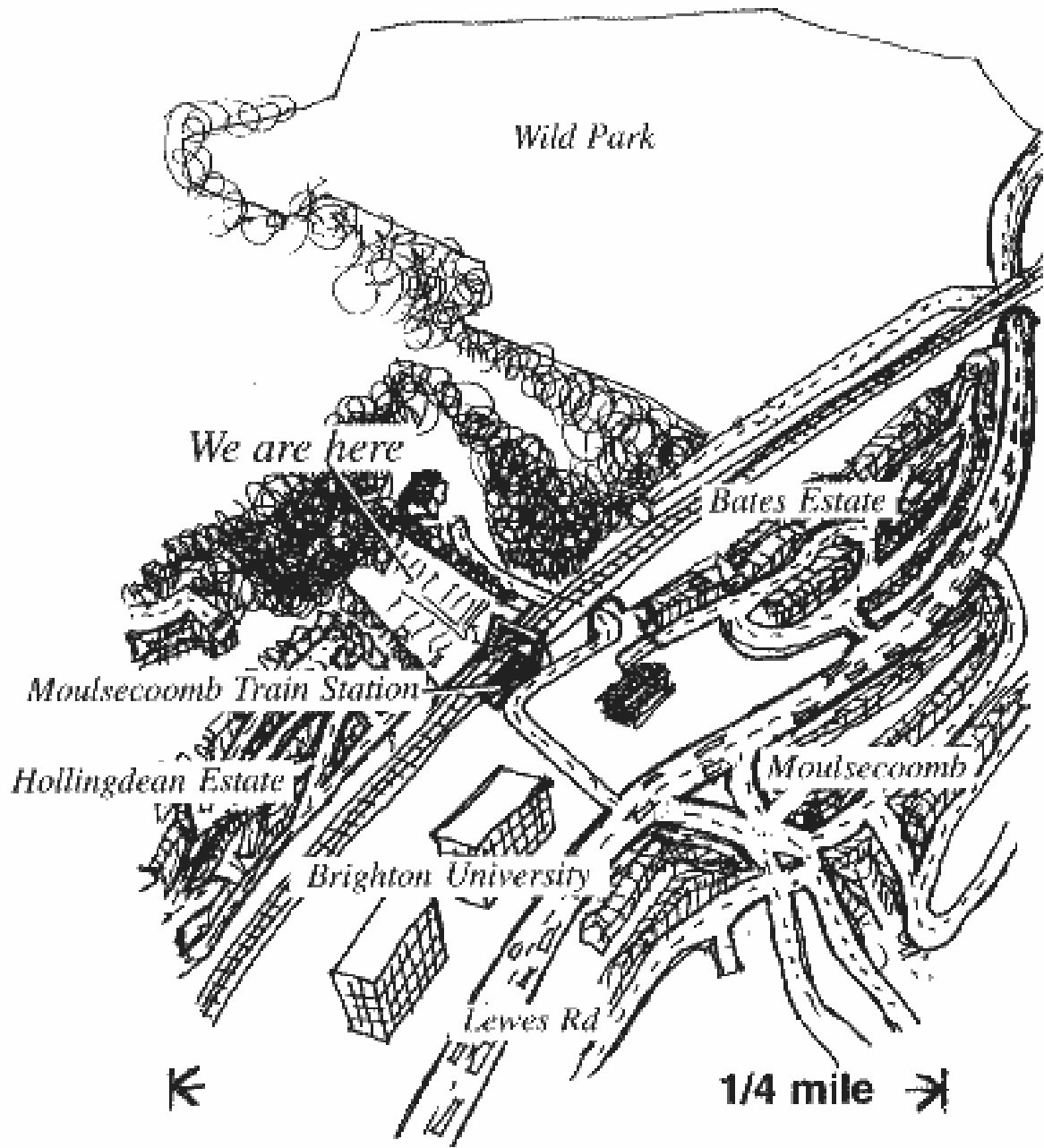
Warren Carter - 2001

This book is made up of a series of interviews with people who lived in a mile radius of what is now the Moulsecoomb Forest Garden and Wildlife Project allotments around about the second world war. The last chapter is about the project (although now very out of date).

It is now out of print but is available in Brighton and Moulsecoomb Libraries.

Not so long ago Moulsecoomb and Hollingdean were very rural areas: all the buildings in this picture have now been demolished, including the castle-like building by the railway arch which is where the Prince of Wales used to practise his flute.

This book has been published by the Moulsecoomb Forest Garden and Wildlife Project September 2001. We are based at the Moulsecoomb Place allotments, nestled behind Moulsecoomb railway station. If you look at the site from the station bridge, Hollingdean estate is on the left and a bit over to the right is the Bates Estate.



An Allotment Renaissance

Staring out of the window of a train at the tumble-down sheds, rows of vegetables grown to military precision and old men leaning on their forks, allotments are a reminder of the past. A past when people were a lot more in touch with the land. A time when food didn't travel thousands of miles before reaching our plates. A time that has become rose-tinted with nostalgia.

But allotments shouldn't yet be consigned to the history books. In Brighton and Hove alone there are over 1200 allotments spread over 28 sites, and up and down the country over the past few years they have enjoyed something of a renaissance. In times past many people would have grown food because of poverty; now people do it for a variety of reasons. Maybe they don't trust the chemicals and pesticides being sprayed on our fruit and vegetables. Maybe they want the exercise. Maybe they enjoy the connection with nature, the coming and going of the seasons. Our small project is part of that renaissance. Initially started by a group of friends who wanted to grow some organic vegetables it has, over time, evolved with regular weekly workdays and various events throughout the year.

Sheila Groom was a local resident who came to one of these events. She started to get involved and the digging and weeding triggered off memories of when her father had had an allotment, now buried under the Hollingdean housing estate. In fact, our small site is part of the odd fragments of those allotments which still survive. Not so long ago, the whole area was a mass of allotments, small holdings, pig farms, orchards and market gardens.

I felt there was a story to tell and so I started to try and find people who had once lived in the area to ask them what it used to be like. These interviews form the bulk of this book. But this is a story not just about the past, but also about the future. Our project is also more than just about growing food. It's a community space, which we try and encourage everyone to use, trying to reconnect people with the land and the seasons, because as Sheila says "Virtual reality seems to be more important nowadays than actual reality. It worries me that my

own grandson can't tell a primrose from a bluebell. If children don't understand nature they're not going to value it are they?"

So, enjoy the book, not just as a nostalgic peep into the past, but as a pointer to a future.

History Lesson

Moulsecoomb lies in a deep, soft-sided "dry valley" (that is, one with no running water along its bottom) surrounded by other Downland hills and "coombes", or "deans".

The Iron Age people who built Hollingbury Castle, high above Moulsecoomb, would have looked south to Whitehawk Hill and seen a camp there that was already 3500 years old. It was those earlier, "Neolithic" people who, with their flint tools, had cleared the forests of Lime, Elm, Oak, Yew, Maple and Hazel. The forest clearance brought with it soil erosion and the thick, brown forest loams would have slurried off the high Downs in winter, into the valley floor.

Moulsecoomb is a Saxon settlement named after Mul, an anglo-saxon lord. He is best known for laying waste to the kingdom of Kent and for being burnt with several followers as an act of retaliation.

The boundary between Moulsecoomb suburb and the farmed slopes of Falmer Hill is roughly the old boundary between the valley cornfields of Moulsecoomb Manor and Hodshrove Farm and the sheep pastures above.

Although not in Moulsecoomb the allotments and railway station would have once been part of the nearby manor house, a listed building currently used by the University of Brighton that has also been used as a school, a branch library and the headquarters of the Parks Department. There has been a manor house there from at least the eleventh century and attached to the rear of the building is a timber-framed cottage, one of the oldest buildings in Brighton built between 1350 and 1400.

Up the hill a dovecote was converted into a summer house where the Prince of Wales would play his silver flute. Further along is Queensdown School, which occupies the old site of Upper Moulsecoomb/Home Farm, and was also apparently once a monastery.

Before the estate was built on the allotments and fields Hollingdean was a small village best known for the abattoir and dust destructor on Hollingdean Road.

The Bates Estate was once Bate's Nurseries, where quite a few of the people I interviewed went `scrumping' for the fruit on the trees!

Moulsecomb Place allotments was, we think, a pig farm until at least the late 1950's.



The timber framed cottage. Part of the old Moulsecomb manor house and one of the oldest buildings in Brighton



The front of Moulsecoomb House 2001.



Moulsecoomb Home Farm 1889

Feeding the City

From the late eighteenth century (when the Royal Court arrived at Brighton) the sheep and corn economy was gradually replaced by a farm economy which catered directly to the rapidly expanding urban market. Big farms like Hollingdean were carved out of the sheep pastures and strip-cultivated open fields. Moulsecoomb Place and Hodshrove Farm would have had a more immediate market too, in supplying the soldiers down the road at the new Preston Barracks. These farms, and the field gardens and smallholdings that sprang up around them, would have produced dairy products, poultry, pigs, vegetables and fruit, grains, mutton, wood and beef.



Aerial photograph taken above Hollingdean and Moulsecoomb 1946 (Crown Copyright 1946/MOD).



OS Map reproduced from 1880 (with kind permission of Ordnance Survey) depicting a very rural scene.

Allotments and smallholdings

From the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century there was a parallel development of a working class self-help economy with allotments and smallholdings. The whole of east Hollingdean, the southern slope of Bevendean Valley, parts of Moulsecoomb Valley and much of Whitehawk Hill, Valley and Race Hill were devoted to allotments, interspersed with smallholdings. This represented a partial victory for the long-fought labour movement's demands for access to land, and many of the allotments were set up as a direct result of a series of Acts of Parliament. It is this economy that this book celebrates, and though much has been lost to housing, much still remains, and some of it is now part of the new Local Nature Reserves including our site which is within the Wild Park Local Nature Reserve.

Snapshots of a Bygone Brighton



Tea Time - Mum, Gran and a young Sheila Groom outside their allotment shed.

Sheila Groom has lived in Brighton all her life and was born in Caledonian Road, which is just off the Lewes Road.

My father had a ten rod allotment and my two uncles had plots next to him. Our allotment was surrounded by a neat little hedge with a green painted gate. They didnt spend a great deal of money on the allotment because they couldnt really afford to. They didnt go to any garden CENTERS - there werent any in those days even if they had had any money to spend in them! If they wanted to grow a hedge, they picked some privet and some hawthorn and stuck it in the ground. It wasnt exactly their hobby, we were poor and it was war time. But they enjoyed growing food

A ten rod allotment works out at 250 square metres, which is about the standard size of an allotment plot.

My father didn't grow flowers, he grew vegetables such as potatoes, Brussel sprouts, cabbages, runner beans, peas and onions. He had a mint and an old rhubarb bed and a compost heap which he moved around occasionally, growing marrows on the old heaps. One year he would save pea and bean seed from his crop, the next he would buy them from seed suppliers.

A lot of people had allotments, and some people kept chickens in their back yards. My aunt kept chickens and she used to kill them herself and distribute them around the family as Christmas presents. We had rabbits, though we never ate them. My granddad sold them on. I used to go out with him collecting food for the rabbits and he told me which plants to gather and which to avoid. We collected mallow, sowthistle, dandelion and lots of grass, and if any of the rabbits had the scours (diarrhoea) he gave them shepherd purse. We dried all the grass out in our backyard and then bagged the hay up for winter feeding.



Sheila on her Dads allotment before it was buried under the Hollingdean estate.

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We never went away, my father only had a weeks' holiday, and the highlight of that was a day out at Barcombe Mills. We hired boats for a day on the river from Mr. Brown's Boathouse and then had a picnic in

the meadow amongst the cows. I'm sure many Brightonians will remember those happy days!



Sheila's family pose outside the allotment shed

Most people worked quite long hours in those days, but he went up to the allotment most weekends, and in the summer it was almost like our little summer residence. We didn't sleep there, but it was a day out.

In the summer we used to have our Sunday dinner at the allotment. In the mornings, all the stuff that we needed like the meat was wrapped up and loaded onto my father's bike and we all walked up to the allotment. Dad picked the vegetables to cook for dinner and somehow my mum managed to cook using two saucepans on two primus stoves.

While she was cooking my dad would go down to the Hollingbury Pub, where he was captain of the darts team. It was so different then, women didn't ask 'why am I cooking the dinner while you're going down the pub?', it was just an accepted thing. In those days women didn't put their trousers and boots on and get digging, I never saw my

mother with a fork, she might pick a few peas, and possibly a little bit of weeding but that was it.

We had a little cupboard in the hut where we kept the plates and a washing up bowl. After dinner my mum would wash up, while my dad would sit and have a fag and then get on with some more gardening. That was our Sunday day out.

In the autumn we used to go early on a Sunday morning to the Hollingbury and Burstead woods to collect beech leaves. We'd load up his bike with sacks and I sat on top of them, then he used to fry us bacon in the allotment hut when he got back.

Every Autumn we sweep up and collect the leaves on the allotment and along the alleyway in front of the site. We put them all in a big wire mesh bin. A year later they've rotted down and become an excellent soil conditioner.

He saved all the soot from the chimneys, which was weathered before it was used around the carrots and onions, but he didn't buy any fertilisers. He was an organic gardener before anyone had even thought of the word!

My earliest job was picking cabbage white caterpillars off the cabbages, and putting them in a bucket of water. My father paid me an old penny for every hundred, and I was such an honest little girl I counted every single one.

* * *

Next door to the allotment we had a piggery, and my father used to get all the pig poo which he put in a huge great drum that was full of water. It was called Impsty shit and used to have huge white maggots in it - when you took the lid off, the smell was absolutely terrible. Infact before they took the lid off they'd shout out `beware impstys shit', before diluting it with water and watering all the plants.

One day I was playing chase with my cousin and fell in the impstys shit head first! Whereas now I suppose you'd be taken off to hospital for

injections, my mother dunked me off in the water tank, dried me as best as she could and I had to run around naked while my clothes were drying."

"Under the doorstep to our hut we had a wild bees' nest which we left alone. And we had mice in the hut. My father used to put a few seeds and potatoes out for them rather than poison. He said they wouldn't get into his sacks of saved vegetables if he put a bit of food out for them. But in those days you didn't feel like you needed to protect wildlife because there was so much of it. You could go out to Falmer pond and get a bucketful of newts - now if you find a newt it's a wonderful thing. Even down in the town we had wildlife. There was a street light opposite our house and on warm summer evenings as soon as the light came on the bats arrived, swooping round the light after the moths and night flying insects. We had a bombsite in our road which become overgrown and full of food for caterpillars and insects. Some of the bombsites even had little ponds with everything from tadpoles and frogs to dragonflies. The privet hedges in the front gardens in Upper Lewes Road always had privet hawk moth caterpillars which quickly grew until they were fat and several inches long with a long black spike on their tail.

Me and my cousins used to take a bottle of water, a few potatoes and a box of matches and go off to the Wild Park for the whole day. In those days everybody trusted everybody else, so we were quite safe to go and play by ourselves. We'd cut a turf and make a fire and put mud around the potatoes to bake them. Being the only girl I always got the burnt one.

Bates Estate had an orchard where me and my cousins used to go scrumping. There was iron railings on the front of it, but Mr. Bates used to come after us with a shotgun tho' I never heard him fire it. We didn't get very far in the orchard because we were so frightened of him. When I was scrumping Mr. Bate's apples little did I know that many, many years later I would be living where his orchard had once been. The old fellow still lives on - Bates Estate is named after him!

Next to the orchard were two playing fields - one we used to play on, and the posh one where we weren't allowed on. Moulsecoomb Place was all overgrown. There were two lovely mulberry trees that were leaning over and you could walk up and pick the huge great fruit. Down at the bottom of the allotments was a smallholding with a pony, kitten and dogs. One day a goat ate my aunt's straw hat when my cousin was wearing it.



Sheila, Mum & Dad outside allotment shed

People aren't happier and they don't respect people's property any more. We didn't ever lock our doors. If the door was locked, we'd all be

locked out `cos nobody had a key. Money doesn't bring happiness. I think children are missing out - virtual reality seems to be more important nowadays than actual reality. It worries me that my own grandson can't tell a primrose from a bluebell. If children don't understand nature they're not going to value it are they?"

Modern Day Impsty's Shit

The soil on the allotments is chalky and very poor, and so we often give our plants a feed of nettle or comfrey liquid. We cut the plants down and put them in a big tub of water for a few weeks. The smell is disgusting and just like Impsty's shit, big fat maggots appear every week for a few months before metamorphosing into god-knows-what. We then water the liquid down (about 10 parts water, to 1 part liquid) and pour it onto the plants when they are flowering. We always do this at the end of a day, because the smell isn't too pleasant, but the plants love it.

Judith Spencer was born in 1939 in Crescent Road. The street is on the top of a hill and overlooked the allotments, and was near the railway line that used to go up to Barcombe Mills.

"We had a big garden so we didn't need an allotment, but I remember spending a lot of time there. As kids we used it as a playground. We used to sit in a damson tree that we had flattened so it was like a huge armchair, singing songs and eating any fruit we'd nicked. We used to be able to hear our mum shouting across the valley when it was our teatime.

The entrance to the allotments was by the stonemasons, and opposite was an abattoir. You could hear the pigs squealing from our house when they were being killed. Occasionally a cow would escape and there'd be uproar with everybody chasing it!

During the war the allotments were like gold dust and they were really well looked after; straight rows of vegetables with no weeds.

Right at the top of the allotments used to be Bates Farm and we used to play a game where we would see how far we could get before the geese came out and chased us! There was also an army barracks and a school for 'backward' children, just off the Lewes Road.

When they started building the estate we were really angry that they were taking away one of our playgrounds. I only went on that estate once to visit a friend. We hated the place. From my house I could see the bulldozers moving in. The allotment holders moved out and we used to go up and play in the abandoned sheds. I used to take my dad's fork and dig up things people had left behind to stick in our garden. I remember one day towing a huge gooseberry bush home on a piece of rope - that old gooseberry bush went on for years.

We also used to go and play on Hollingbury golf course. There was one particular hole on that golf course, where you couldn't see the hole from the tee and we used to hear them shout four, see the ball, run out from the bushes put the ball in the hole - we put two in one day - and run back in the bushes and watch. The last place the golfers would look is in the hole! And they'd be 'well done old chap' and backslapping,

thinking they'd got a hole in one we'd be killing ourselves laughing! We also played on what we called the Roman camp (Hollingbury hill fort), on the Level and at Saunders Park.

We used to play in the streets and there was hardly any cars. If one came it was a major inconvenience `cos we'd have our skipping rope - my mum's washing line - across the road. There used to be the vegetable man, the coal man, and the milkman. We had our compost collected for the pig farm. They used to supply you with an aluminium bucket with a lid on and my mum used to put all her peelings and whatever in there and they'd come round and collect it.

We used to walk miles in those days, and when we were a bit older we'd take our bikes up to Ditchling Beacon, and cycle full pelt down it. It used to be the main Brighton to London road and was full of humps so horses could rest after a steep climb. The humps would stop the horses rolling backwards.

I feel sorry for kids nowadays, they think they're streetwise but they're not. Everything that I learnt about nature was from just going up the allotment and playing at the golf course. I take my grandchildren to the countryside and they're bored to tears and yet that was our playground. Vandalism was unheard of in those days. When we got hungry we scumped an apple or some blackberries or strawberries to keep us going for the afternoon. But we never damaged anything - it was harmless fun."

Roy Whitehead's family were one of the first to move into Newick Road on the Moulsecomb estate when it was built in 1928.

"The wages were poor in those days and no one had a proper education, they were just ordinary working class people and they had ordinary working class mundane types of jobs like assembly hands. Allen West was one of the biggest employers in the area and when my dad came out of the army he got a job there and worked there all his life.

He didn't have an allotment, but I had school pals whose dads had small holdings behind the old Moulsecomb Place (Manor house) where we used to go and play with the goats and chickens. It was only a little old flint lane leading up to the allotments and smallholdings and when it rained all the water used to tear down it.

A lot of people had pig farms up there. In those days you used to save all your old potato peelings and cabbage leaves and things like that and once a week someone would come round the street and collect it all up in a truck. They'd take it to the pig farms who would boil it all up before feeding it to the pigs. It used to stink the place out _ you could smell it for miles and it really was a sickly smell that made you want to heave. You'd have to be unlucky to have an allotment next to one of the pig farmers!

It was difficult to get into Bate's farm because there were very high thick hedges and only a couple of places where you could bunk in. So all the children came up with a better scam. On a Saturday morning if you took a bucket to the farm you could pick all the windfalls and take it up to the wooden shed where they would charge you 2p a bucket. But of course we filled 2/3rds of the buckets up with good apples that we picked off the trees and then put the maggoty ones on the top - no one ever twigged it and mums and dads were very pleased because you'd got all these nice apples. It was much better than scrumping. Besides if you got caught by PC Hyams, you'd get a cuff on the ear and he had a hand like a side of beef; if he hit you your ears were ringing for days after! He wouldn't go and tell your parents but tell you straight that if

he caught you again, you'd get another cuff and be up in court. But if he caught you once you didn't do it again."

" From the bottom of Coldean Lane to the beginning of Wild Park was Woolards Orchards which was easy to get into. But you had to keep an eye out for Slimey Joe who I think was a special constable.

There was a code of honour that you wouldn't thief off anybody's allotment, because they were all people in the same boat as you - you'd only scrump off the big orchards, and then you'd only do it until you got a smack round the head by PC Hyams.

We never used to stay in - what entertainment was there when you stopped in? You had an old coalfire to sit round on a winter's night and a radio to listen to. There was no television. We used to play football and cricket on the Wild Park - the pavilion doesn't seem to have altered at all.

John Rackham, in his book 'Brighton Ghosts, Hove Hauntings' talks about the many sightings of the ghost including this one: "Both Moulsecomb Place and the cottage are said to be haunted by the mistress of James II. Legend has it that she committed suicide by drowning herself in the well by the cottage. There have been several sightings of the ghost.

The most detailed account of the phantom comes from contract supervisor Vic Kemp who, with his family, occupied the flat from 1962 to 1972. Early one morning in 1970, he awoke to find a woman leaning over his bed. She was dressed in a long, grey gown and a bonnet-type hat. There was a slight haziness about her appearance. Mr. Kemp looked on in astonishment as the woman then walked over to the casement windows, where she seemed to go through the motions of adjusting curtains before finally leaving the room. She did this by walking straight through the closed door!"

When Bates was given up as an orchard for housing development all the residents of North Moulsecoomb were told that if they could get their own transport they could dig up 2 apple trees and move them to their own gardens free of charge. It was in 1936 and I was only 5 years old but I can remember me and my dad and sister with forks and spades going down with my old pram to get two trees. It was a mass exodus of the whole estate! People had old wheelbarrows, bikes, sacks anything they could find to carry them. Those two old trees were there right till we moved out.

I used to work for the University of Brighton as an engineer and help look after their buildings. One of those was Moulsecoomb Place, which became Moulsecoomb Library for a while. People used to tell me that one wing of the house was haunted by one of the Prince Regent's mistresses."

In her book Moulsecoomb Memories, Sheila Winter wrote:

"The policeman was called Mr.Hyams and he did a wonderful job in keeping law and order, at the same time being a good friend to everyone. Now I was quite convinced that Mr.Hyams was gifted with eyes at the back of his head, as well as both sides. He knew absolutely everything that went on. He seemed to be everywhere at the same time. Once when I decided to scrump a few apples from Woolards orchard at the bottom of Coldean Lane, I squeezed through the iron railings. Being the thinnest of my friends, I was able to get through easily. I had not thought about getting out again with my jumper stuffed with green apples.

As I backed out through the railings my shoulders got stuck and a pair of strong hands tried to pull me through. I realised with horror that it was Mr.Hyams. Even now I can recall the sheer panic, like electric shocks going all over my body. Now a clip around the ear would have been in order had I been a boy, but I did not escape punishment, although I did not realise until the next day just what my punishment would be.

Mr.Hyams made me stand and eat a good many of the very green apples. They were horribly sour but I chomped my way through them, thinking that I had got away with it nicely. It was my mum that had to call out Dr.Rutherford the next day, for my very bad tummy ache. I never scrumped again!"

Roy Driver's family took on a three and a half acre smallholding behind Home Farm during the Second World War to help Britain "dig for victory."

"I was born in 1930 and I was the third son. We lived in one of the new houses in Moulsecoomb. It was called the 'Garden Estate' and was built for the people that came back from the First World War. You didn't have to lock your doors, it was all decent working class people.

When the Second World War started my mum and dad decided to do their bit.

When we took it over it was quite barren and the soil was chalky. You couldn't take topsoil up there so we used the stuff from the cesspit and the pigsty for manure _ we didn't have the sprays in those days _ it was all organic.

When we first started we hired a tractor for ploughing but according to my dad it didn't go down deep enough, so we got a horse to pull the plough. We had four horses at various stages. We grew potatoes, cabbage, lettuce, all the usual stuff, but we didn't grow any grain because we didn't have enough land.

We also had goats, pigs, chickens, ducks and rabbits. The animals had to be fed every day and I went up there straight from school and took the goats and the horse out to the field at the back of the wood. Dad left home about 7 in the morning to work on the railways and came up after he'd finished. During the war it was double summertime so it was still light at 11 o'clock (during the war the clocks went forward two rather than the usual one hour).



Roy and his dad with their pigs.

By 1943, kitchen waste was being collected at a rate of 31,000 tonnes a month - enough to feed 210,000 pigs.



Roy's family and friends working on their small holding - with Moulsecomb Estate in the background

My brothers also helped before they joined up, along with one of my friends and two lads from the Guardianship Society. The Society was for people who were in an institution but wanted to live with a family. One night one of the lads accidentally knocked over a paraffin stove in the shed where we had our meals. The shed caught fire and then spread to the next building and all the rabbits were killed.

We used to go out under the cover of the blackout and steal the leftovers people had put in the pig bins that were on every street corner. Things were very tight and we couldn't afford to buy it off the council. We had no end of cutlery that people had thrown out into the bins by mistake. We'd boil up the leftovers in a huge cast iron pot and give it to the pigs who thrived on it.

If we killed one of our own pigs we had to give up six months' bacon rationing, so when the Ministry of Agriculture used to write to tell you an inspector was coming round to count how many pigs you had, two of them would `disappear' down to Jimmy Rose's farm. When Jimmy Rose had his letter from the Ministry two of his would `disappear' - it

was a bit like Dad's Army! Dad would kill the pigs himself and of course no one had freezers in those days, so we always had half a salted pig hanging up in the larder for ourselves and the neighbours. We also sold our pigs and stuff to Steyning market.

Only the other week I was talking to Denis McDavitt who owns Park Wall Farm at Falmer and he said the nearest market to Brighton now is Heathfield; Lewes has closed down, Steyning has closed - it's gone potty.

With all those chickens we had loads and loads of eggs which we sold. They were all free range, not like today. The goats' milk went to the isolation hospital in Bevendean where people had TB. The iron in the milk was good for them. I think we gave it to them free.

Because of food rationing everything in those days was valuable and we had some livestock stolen. One time some people took our pigs, drove them up to Hollingbury golf course and made a pig pen with all the rolls of barbed wire that surrounded the battery and searchlight up there, before they took them away.

We had chickens stolen too - I think dad and Harry Dynes had warning that something was going on so they stopped up there all night. Harry Dynes had a shot gun, and they spotted this chap nose'n around, challenged him, and he dashed across the railway line after Harry walloped him with the butt of the gun. A week later they saw him in the Ship or the Huss-ar Pub with his face swollen, so they followed him in my dad's van to a house in East Moulsecoomb, waited for him to go inside, and then they went round to the backgarden where the chickens were all crated up. They informed the police who asked how they could prove they were our chickens. My dad told them that if they allowed us to bring them back to the bottom of the hill of our smallholding he'd rattle a bucket at feeding time and see if they come up - which they did.

After the War we gave up the smallholding when they wanted the land for self-build housing. They were good days."



Roy and his mum and dad with their two goats, Snowwhite and Squib

Mike Short was born in Washington Street in 1933 and by the time he was seven was helping his dad regularly on his two allotments.

" With the coming of the War it was obvious that a lot of food we imported would be cut off, so allotments became a way of life, part of the government's 'dig for victory' campaign. My dad came from a rural family and had only moved into Brighton originally to work at the diamond factory at the bottom of Coombe Road (now known as the Deco building). When that folded he went to work at Allen Wests who were big electrical manufacturers. My dad worked from 7 in the morning till 8 o'clock at night and when he came home quite often he was on home guard or air raid duty, so it was me who had to do whatever I could on the allotments. From the age of seven I'd come home from school and work on the land.

We grew all the staples _ brassicas, potatoes, peas, beans - but no luxury type foods, no fruit; we used to get our fruit from Bates Farm. We also had quite a large garden attached to the house, with chickens and rabbits and more vegetables.

In 1940 we moved into one of a block of four houses known as Moulsecoomb villas which were originally the servants' quarters to Moulsecoomb Place. They were beautiful little oldie-worldie buildings. They stood where the university caretaker's houses are now. Apart from the Lewes Road we were surrounded by allotments, two playing fields and half a dozen tennis courts.

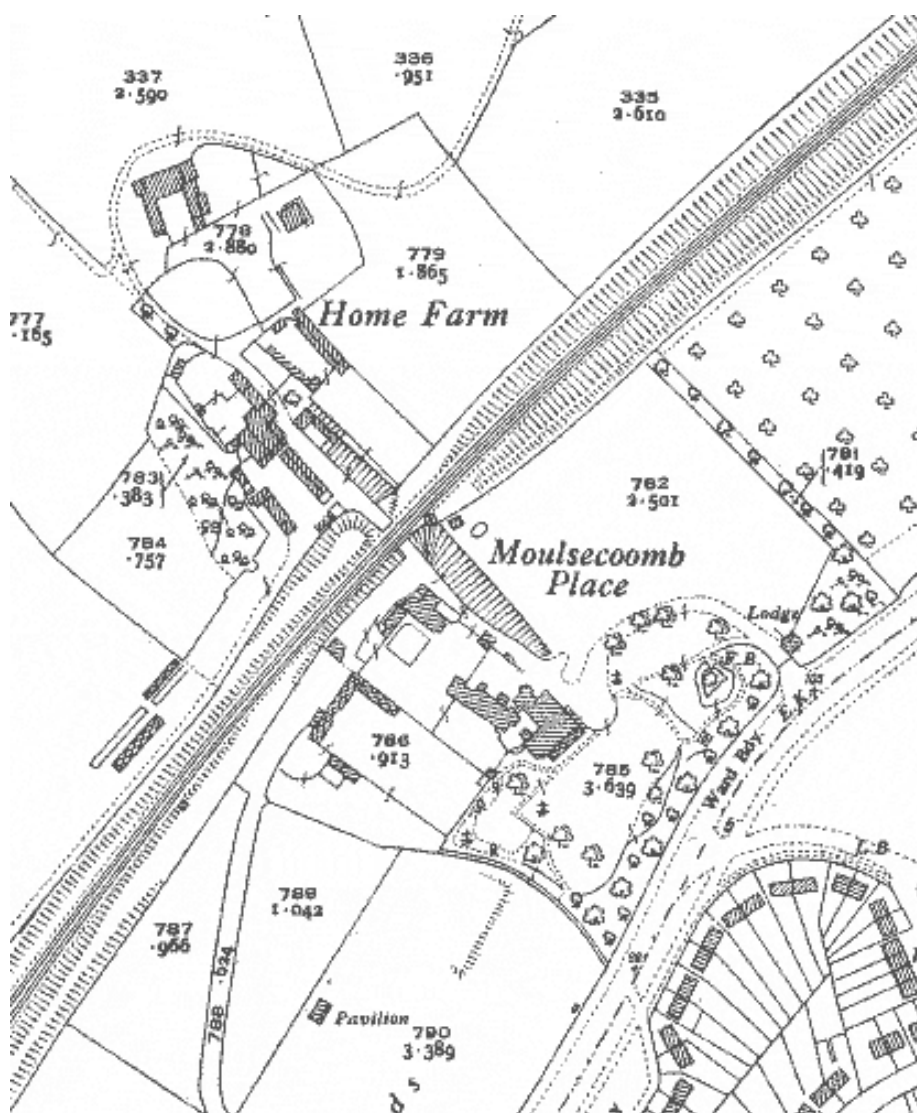
Because my uncle was a railway man he was allowed to have a supply of sleepers for firewood and I used to get the job of cutting them up - I've still got that bow saw out in my shed! When he died that eventually stopped and I then had the job of going out collecting firewood.

My life was also punctuated with queuing! Friday mornings I would go down to Coombe Terrace and stand outside the old Westerns chemist to buy saccharin tablets. Saturday mornings I would go down to the bakers at the bottom of New Market road and buy bread, and two other days of the week I would stand in a queue at Bate's farm shop.

On special occasions we went to the Open Market - on Saturday mornings you couldn't walk through it without bumping into people that you knew!

If I had any spare time after all that I would go wandering all over the Downs. I would take a kettle, some tea, a bottle of water and anything that I could scrounge to eat and go walkabout for the day.

They started to build the college and so we moved out of our cottage in 1961 just before they were knocked down. It was a Brave New World when they started building things like the Polytechnic and we thought it was good. Its only afterwards when it went on and on and on and on and you think `when are they gonna stop' and `when will the concrete end?' "



The area was also surrounded by smallholdings... (OS Map 1931)

" We used to get most of our manure for the allotments from Jock Rose, who owned Home Farm (the farm nearest Moulsecoomb Place near where Queensdown Road school is now). He was what you called a heavy farmer because he had a horse, as well as keeping pigs, chickens and ducks.

Another fellow had a smallholding where the school itself now stands - there used to be a flint barn there.

Harry Dynes had land just behind what is now Moulsecoomb station (to the left of the electricity sub station) He was a market gardener and had a horse and cart with a canvas roof on it which he used to take produce on and sell at peoples' doors. He eventually took over a shop at Coombe Road at the end of the war.

George White was a pig and goat man who had land on top of the hill. He used to keep his old Bradford van in another flint barn that was built into the side of the railway bank.

Along the road was Bates, an orchard and a market garden - where we used to go scrumping and many a thick ear I got for doing that, especially from the local bobby PC Hymes, who had a police box that stood at the bottom of Natal Road.

There were also a multitude of mulberry trees as well as lots of walnut trees in the area, which we would harvest.

Where the electricity substation now stands, there used to be an open area which was absolutely black, because that's where Brighton Corporation would take all the carcasses of the trams they'd replaced with trolley buses and burn them.



Moulsecoomb Villas where Mike and his family used to live

Allen West was an electrical engineering firm founded in 1910. During the war the workers built thousands of radar sets and sections for the Mulberry harbour, and after the war up to 3,000 people were employed by the firm. Mike recalls that when the hooter went for work to finish you could hear the sounds of hundreds of people on bikes leaving the factories.

Their administrative and design office was eventually bought by Brighton University and renamed Mithras House.

Summer Days at The Allotments

by Maureen Foster

The days were longer, the skies were bluer, and the sun was sunnier in the days of my childhood. Jeannie would say to me "let's go up to the allotments." So we would go round to call for the Webbons and the Deeleys, and off we would go, no boys allowed. Jeanie and I in little green check dresses, both with our hair in plaits. Mum would tell us all "posh" little girls had their hair in plaits, but that didn't worry us, we would pull them out as soon as we got up the road. Off we would go, up Hollingdean Road, past the workman's cafe on the corner owned by a lady called Mrs. Wickham; past Pannet's yard to the railway bridge; under the bridge (look in the big round mirror to see if anything was coming): the wonderland of the allotments was nearly in sight. But first you had to pass the Monumental Masons, with all the wondrous stones being carved. 'I'll have that one' 'no, you have that one'. By that time we had all picked out our headstones never really understanding that they were for people that had already died. We were much too young, and much too alive.

From the bottom of the hill, the path began, all higgledy-piggledy to the garden plots, tended so lovingly by the elderly men who hadn't had to go to war. There were all manner of things growing. I remember the celery with all the soot around it, thinking I could never eat that, it was too dirty. The apple trees, which we had been known to scrump in the autumn. The sheds, the cold frames, and the little heaps that made the bonfires that all gardeners had in the evening, which gave you the lovely scent on a warm summer's night, everything lovingly familiar. The path was made from cinders and bits of glass with little banks by the side of it. Most of the glass was green and I used to ask my mum if I soaked them in water in a jamjar would they turn into diamonds?

"Yes" she would say, "but you'll have to keep shaking them." I wonder when they dig their gardens in Hollingdean Road, do they wonder where all the bits of green glass come from?

But let us wander up the path, "Don't you kids touch anything you see growing", says the elderly man pushing his bike down the hill, "No we won't". We really felt quite important, because Maureen Deeley's dad had an allotment over there, where in the summer, all manner of marvellous things grew. Potatoes, swedes, carrots, parsnips, blackberries and most of all tomatoes. Beautiful red sweet tomatoes, he used to bring them down from the allotments and weigh them on scales, and sell them to the people in Hollingdean Road. The joy and taste as you bit into the fleshy red fruit. And now comes the joy of the most wondrous animals in the world "THE PIGS" they were in a sty, I think made of breeze blocks, lovely big pink, squealing, dirty pigs, with little piggy eyes, the longest of eyelashes, and big pink dirty snouts, little curly tails that waggled when they moved. We had walked up a long way, we hoped that they would be awake, not asleep under their corrugated roof, in the pig-pen in the heat of the afternoon sun. But for most times, there would be a big pig looking after the baby pigs that always seemed to be awake...did pigs really drink the water they had trod in, and eat the swill that had dropped out of their feeding tray onto the muddy floor? Well, they did...

When you looked at the view from Mr.Deely's allotment, you could see the big hospital on the hill, and the Extramural Cemetery (another favourite haunt for the kids) with panoramic views of Brighton. The bus station in Lewes Road, the Preston Barracks, Schweppes soft drink factory, Allen West, Densply's up Coombe Road, and the whole of Moulsecoomb. Views of Brighton that I remember in detail to this day.

As you progressed further up the path to the allotments, you came to the Golf Links, a beautiful land of mowed grass and sometimes, though very rarely, you would see somebody playing golf (they must be ever so rich). I will always remember the poppies, the wild daises, the cornflowers, the beautiful afternoons we spent at the allotments and in the summers of our childhood...We'd better go home, I hope mum is in..."

Amy Berry was only 14 months old when her father died. Born in 1927 she lived briefly in one of the tied cottages behind the Moulsecomb Place manor house ("we used to call it the big house") with her mum, dad and two brothers.

"My dad worked at Moulsecomb farm for a man called Herroit who was a 'wholesale pork butcher and market gardener' and only had one arm. My dad's main job was a pigman - my mum said he loved his pigs! When they were farrowing down to have their babies he'd stay up all night with his hurricane lamp and rub their tummies. They used to go down to the big hotels in Brighton for the pig swill - my mum used to have lots of bits of cutlery like spoons from the Queens Hotel - stuff that used to get thrown in the pig swill bucket by mistake. He was also known as a carter and he used to take all the stuff they used to grow on the farm up to Lewes on a horse and cart. They also had cows up there - when I was born, my mum couldn't feed me so my dad would go up every night and milk Dolly and Daisy the cow and bring the milk down for me to have in my bottle.

My dad was killing turkeys for Christmas when he cut his hand. He never went to the doctors and in January he died of pneumonia. On March 2nd my mother was given notice to get out of the cottage. She had nowhere to go and so she hung on for a while until Harriot took her to court to get her evicted. We all went to stay with her sisters in Brighton until she got her house from the council in November 1929. She had stored all the furniture into one of Mr.Morgan's cow sheds and it was all covered in urine from the cattle.

I remember there used to be a big turret by the train track that looked like a little castle (This was probably the old dovecote that was converted into a summer house where the Prince of Wales would play his silver flute - see picture on page 1. Editors note) My brother used to say there were tunnels under the big house that went all the way to the Pavilion but I dunno how true that is!

Everything's so fast nowadays. I think kids are missing out, because they can't use their own imagination so much. All they've got is computers and flippin' television. When we were young we could go

where we wanted and our parents would know we were safe, but you can't now with all the vandalism and cars shooting past."

Mrs Berry says she remembers coming home from school one day to find a petrol tank outside her mums house in the middle of the road. David Rowland's book *The Brighton Blitz* describes how it got there.

"Wednesday April 30 1941.

Lawrence Holford, a forty eight year old war reserve police constable, was on patrol in the Lewes Road area. His route covered Dewe Road, where the Allen West factory was engaged in war work.

At about 3pm PC Holford called in on the gatekeeper, Stepher Dyer; both were in the gatekeeper's hut when disaster struck. There had been a number of allied aircraft in the sky above Brighton. Suddenly two Beaufighters collided; there was a deafening crash and the planes disintegrated over the factory. The engine of one smashed down through the hut, killing PC Holford and Mr.Dyer instantly. The other engine fell on allotments in Roedale Road.

The Beaufighter, then, was still on the secret list, and local reports of the tragedy referred to the downed planes as Spitfires.

Such was the impact that pieces of the doomed aircraft were scattered over a large area of the town.

One pilot managed to parachute to safety but the other three aircrew of the two planes were killed - one crashing through the roof of a house in Roedale Road.

TELEPHONE:
BRIGHTON 5203.

MOULSCOMBE FARM,
LEWES ROAD, BRIGHTON.

March 2nd 1929

M.....

Bought of

A. G. HARRIOTT & SON

**Wholesale Pork Butchers
and Market Gardeners.**

All Animals Inspected before Delivery.

And at PLUMPTON.

Ms Langridge
Moulscombe Farm Cottage
Brighton

I hereby give you notice
to leave the said cottage
on or before the 9th
day of March 1929.

If the cottage is not
vacant by then, I shall
have to take further
proceedings for same.
signed

A. G. Harriott

The eviction notice given by Harriott to Amy Berry's mum.

Extracts from the memories of Gladys White (nee Yeates) - written for her grandchildren

"I was born in Hollingdean Road in January 1920. At the top of our road was an abattoir and I can remember cows walking past our house being driven to the slaughterhouse. The boys would follow excitedly to watch but I don't think they ever saw much. The little girls would run indoors because they didn't like to hear the squealing of the pigs and wailing of the cows. Opposite the abattoir was an incinerator with a very tall chimney, this was where the dustcarts brought all the rubbish from the town to be burnt.

These carts were drawn by big cart horses as were many of the trades vehicles, and many's the time our brothers would rush outside with a bucket and shovel to collect the manure left behind in the road. Dad would use this on his allotment; this was at the back of Popes Folly. We were never short of fresh vegetables - he grew them all by natural methods and every bit of household waste was saved for the compost heap; organic growing is not new!

Every corner of space on the allotment was used, even for flowers, which we kids would sometimes bunch up and sell for a little extra money. Our pocket money often came from selling empty jam jars to the local rag and bone dealer; ½ old penny for a 1lb jar and 1 old penny for a 2lb jar. If your dad or brother caught a rabbit for our dinner you could sell the skin for about 6 old pence - riches indeed.

My father had previously had an allotment on the site where Hollingdean Estate now stands; it was approached by a wide track just past the railway bridge. My brother Charles tells a tale in his book *Laughter is Free* of an incident which caused much hilarity amongst his allotment friends."

My father at the end of one summer harvested a crop of potatoes that filled 5 or 6 large sacks. To get them home he hired a barrow - upon which he loaded the sacks and both he and I (Charles) set off for home.

The journey involved a downhill land bordered by iron railings, behind which were other allotments.

At one point down the land the gradient suddenly increased. Whilst I normally walked alongside my father, who himself was in between the shafts, when we reached the steeper parts I was posted to the back of the cart to help hold it back as well as a little kid might be expected to. We had only gone a few paces when my father must have realised that on a steepish stony track, 5 or 6 hundredweight of spuds on a cart with no brakes would present some sort of a problem before very long. Realising this, he attempted something that he had seen others do before, which was raising the shafts to allow the back end of the cart to go low enough to scrape the road and act as a break. He had so sooner began to tilt the cart shafts upwards, whence two of the sacks rolled to the back of the barrow. Up went the shafts taking my dad with them some 5 foot off the ground. With his legs dangling and kicking, away went the chariot off down the hill utterly out of control and in danger of crashing into the railings and impaling the old man upon the spikes!

"It was in this same area where in 1925/6 onwards I remember that on Bonfire Nights we would have a huge Bonfire Party. All the neighbours would gather - all providing a few fireworks, and a little further up would be all the neighbours from Newmarket Road holding another Bonfire - each competing with each other for the best display! This lane, known then as 'The Turning', was the beginning of a long country walk for us children. It led us way up past the allotments to the edge of the golf course and onto the Ditchling Road which was then no more than a lane leading to a path to High Park Farm where we picked wild raspberries and on to Ditchling Beacon. On the way we would meet an old boy that lived with his dog on one of the allotments near the golf course. The Council probably told him to get off but he didn't move.

During the 2nd world war there were allotments on all spaces of spare ground. 'Dig for Victory!' was the slogan, and my husband took one over after the war in Ditchling Road by Hollingbury Copse. At the bottom of Roedale Road a Pig Club was formed by a group of people who reared a few pigs which were fed mostly on waste food and each had a share when a pig was killed.

In those days the children played together in the street, such games as hop scotch, marbles, tops and whips, ball games, statues, Sally-sits-a-weeping, Farmers-in-the-Den, and skipping games, all of which were seasonal. On Good Friday a long thick rope was stretched across the road and turned by two mums, everyone would join in the skipping, older brothers and sisters, mums and sometimes even the dads. Mrs Wickham who owned the cafe and florists in Hollingdean Road would make toffee apples and sell them at ½ old pence and 1 old pence each.

I remember the railway line from Kemp Town passing along the side of Hollingdean Road up a bank opposite our house. Here the children on their annual Sunday school treats would travel on to Hassocks Pleasure Ground, all the kids waving to their mums down in the Hollingdean Road as they went off for a day in the country!

In my childhood there were several young children in most working class families and a roast dinner on a Sunday was the main meal of the week. Some people took their joint of meat and potatoes to the local bakers to be roasted in the bread ovens. One young lad near to us was sent to collect the dinner at lunch time, when there happened to be pipe laying in the road. On the way home he could not resist walking along on the pipe balancing the dish of roast beef above his head - alas he slipped and away went the dinner into the road. In fear he went up the road crying, but his neighbours came to his rescue by providing a little from each house of their own dinners to help feed his brothers and sisters. We never let Tommy forget that occasion, and as adults it caused much laughter every time we met.

I remember another story, when one of our neighbours was laid out for dead, but when people came in to have a drink to console the family old 'Dicky' sat up and said 'Where's my bloody drink then?' He must have been in a coma, but they didn't realise it!

At the bottom of Hollingdean Road was the pub called The Allen, now called No Man is An Island. There was an ice cream vendor stood outside on the cobbles with his colourful cart, he was Italian and we called him the 'Hokey Pokey' man. It was our special treat to go with a basin or dish for six old pennyworth of ice cream - absolutely delicious."



The Hokey Pokey Man selling ice cream outside the Allen Pub on the Hollingdean Road. The Pub is now called No Mans An Island and surrounded by roads. Picture by Gladys White.

Hollingdean Road was originally known as Dog Kennel Road after the Union Hunt's kennels which were on the site of the abattoir. The abattoir opened in 1894.



The dust destructor at the Hollingdean Rd waste depot 1967.

Photo by Les Whitcomb



The view through the arch today.

Gordon Harwood was born in Brighton in 1927 and his family lived in the Hollingdean Road.

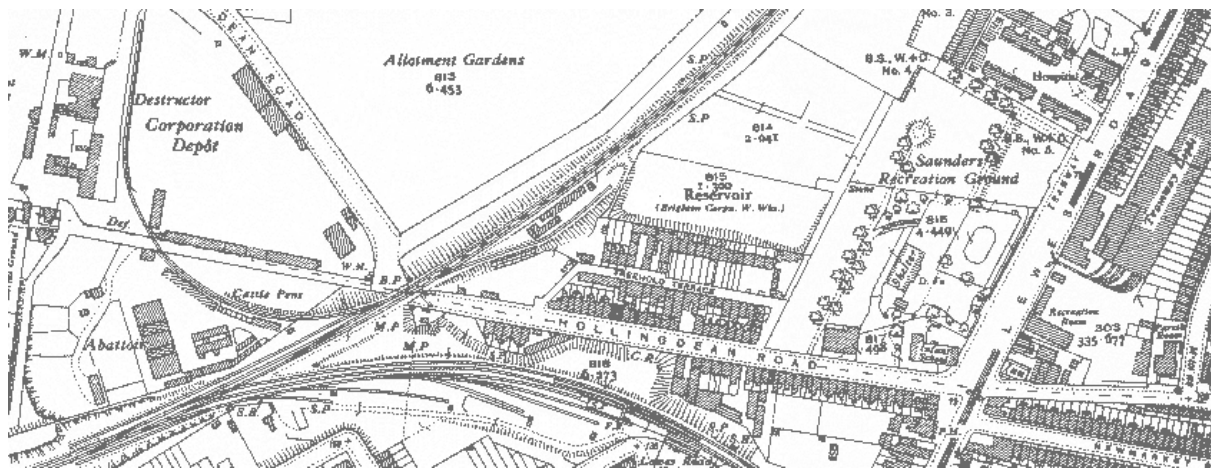
"My father lived at no.103 Hollingdean Road in one of the cottages. The house was only small but there were 4 boys in one bedroom sleeping top to toe, 3 girls in another one, and the grandfather and grandmother in the other room. We had a front room that you were only allowed in on Sundays. The rest of the time we lived in the kitchen and the scullery _ they were very small places and you tended to fall over yourselves trying to get around!

There was a lot of community spirit, people helped one another in them days, everyone knew one another.=

We made our own entertainment _ a four wheeler, whip and tops, a barrow, playing cards. If you were in of a night you would have games like Ludo and if you were lucky enough you'd have a radio. We never had one until I was at least 10 years of age, so the only other form of entertainment was an old gramophone with a big horn on it. Sometimes you might be lucky enough to go on a tram to the seafront. That was as far as you would go, but it was a day out. We'd ask mum if we could get some bread and dripping sandwiches and a bottle of water and off you'd go for the day.

You made your own enjoyment - you had to!

My father had an allotment at the back of the Preston Barracks _ there used to be a big gate at the top of Popes Folly and a track that took you to all the allotments. He was foreman at Preston Park, and by the time he cycled back from the Park and had a meal, he didn't always feel like going up to the allotment. In them days people worked very long hours. He used to start at 7 in the morning, and sometimes he wouldn't be home till 9 o' clock at night, because in the summer there was all bowls and tennis and things like that and he used to have to make sure that things were all right.



Reproduced from 1931 OS Map (with permission of Ordnance Survey)

We were quite self-sufficient in vegetables, he used to grow enough potatoes to last us the whole year, as well as cabbage, spinach and sprouts.

When you look around Brighton and see the amount of places that are built on today and think to yourself about when they were all allotments, there was hundreds of them in Brighton, and people took a pride in them. I used to go with him on a Sunday to push an old barrow with a set of pram wheels on them to bring the vegetables home.

There was no vandalism in those days, you could leave your tools in the shed. There was no artificial fertilizer apart from bonemeal which always seemed to be available, and a lot of people used to do double digging - dig a trench, in went the manure, they used to get much better crops that way. Today there's not a lot of double digging done, a lot of people keep on digging the earth and digging the earth but don't seem to put anything back into it.

During the war everybody was asked to save anything that was edible for pigs. It used to go into pig bins that were distributed in the roads around Brighton, and there were special vans that went round collecting it all. It was taken up to Hollingdean Road where it was cooked in these big vats and when it was cold it was cut up into cake and sent out to all different farms to keep the pigs going. They used to collect a hell of a lot of stuff."

Question: How do you turn a vegetable into a dangerous pollutant?

Answer: Simple, just put it in the bin!

There are some estimates that as much as 40 per cent of what households throw away in their bins is compostable, and yet the UK currently composts just 3 per cent of its total waste. So instead of being put in a compost bin and being turned into an amazing organic pick-me-up for the garden, it gets thrown into landfill sites where it produces methane, a potent 'greenhouse' gas and 'leachate', a liquid pollutant which can contaminate ground water supplies.

To find out all about composting contact the Henry Doubleday Research Association - address at the back of the book.

"I know that several people got into trouble for putting in newspapers and things like this in the bins - the corporation used to fine people a fiver _ which was a lot of money in them days, when the average person was earning about £2 10 shillings a week.

When I was 14 I worked in the abattoir to earn a bit of pocket money. It was a busy place with cattle arriving on the railway trucks once or twice a day. Inspectors used to come round to check for TB and any infected cattle were taken to the incinerators and burnt.

In those days you used to have a station in Hollingdean Road which was called Hollingdean Road Halt (This was later changed to the Lewes Road station). It was just above where the petrol station is now, and you used to have to walk up about 45 big wooden steps to get up to the station. The line went to Kemptown and there were trains running from there to Brighton station every hour. A lot of people worked in London and lived in Kemp town. It was very popular in them days.

Later on I worked as a sheet metal worker at Allen West for about 12 years when it was in Lewes Road. It was the biggest employer in Brighton.

The Preston army barracks used to stretch from the end of Saunders Park to Natal Road so you can imagine the hundreds of troops that were in there. Every Sunday morning you would see two gun carriages coming out of the Barracks driven by six horses with troops behind marching and they would go down to St.Peter's Church every Sunday on church parade. It used to look beautiful with the well-groomed horses and brass all polished. Of course with that many horses they had a lot of manure to get rid of and the allotment holders were grateful to take it off them."

In **Everything seems smaller: A Brighton boyhood between the Wars** Sid Manville talks about the overcrowding with his family somehow packing 12 people into a house. "Although the big bed was a monster of steel and brass, there was no way that it would take us four-in-a-row with any degree of comfort, so we slept sardine fashion. Pillows or a bolster top and bottom, and we kids in head-to-toe, two-at-each end formation...there was always a bit of a scuffle during the initial manoeuvring for position, during which time the brass knobs rattled like mad; but when calm had settled, the closeness provided by this method of sleeping brought with it a cosiness which modern kids find only in cuddly toys. For many years my brother Alfie's big toe was my Teddy Bear."

Doreen Blake has lived in the Hollingdean area since 1939. In 1943 she married her husband, who was the son of the sub postmaster in the Hollingdean Dip, and joined him in the shop.

"The Post Office was the focal point of the village. People used to come in for their allowances, to send parcels to their loved ones during the war, to get books from the library or just for a chat. Bread used to be very difficult to come by and a lot of women who worked at Allen West used to do shift work. By the time they finished the bakers were sold out, so my father in law, bless him, used to buy several loaves, wrap them up, and keep them under the counter for the women.

In the Dip there was our sub post office, two butchers, two greengrocers, a bakers, a wool shop, an off license, hairdressers, newsagents, chemist, and a boot menders which became a wet fish shop then a fish and chip shop. It was really like a little village - it was self contained. You didn't need to go to London Road or go to the market to do your shopping. Everything was in the dip. On the Hollingdean Road was the abattoir which I hated especially of a late summer evening when you hear the cows mooing - if i'd thought about it long enough I would have turned vegetarian.

With our shop being a newsagents and because there was only 3 days a year when they didn't print the papers - Christmas Day, Boxing Day and Good Friday - we were only closed for those 3 days. My husband was up at 4 every morning in order to open the shop at 6 - and with so many of the men working on an early shift at Allen West it used to be like a little club.

My father and my husband used to have an allotment. You had to grow your own produce during the war because things were rather scarce. Fruit was very, very scarce, you never saw a banana or an orange. And then the queues! Word would get round that they've got so and so at a shop and then you'd go down and tap on at the end of a queue and hope against hope that there was going to be some left by the time you got there.

They talk about all this organic farming but they're only going back to how it used to be years ago! My sister and I used to get a penny a bucket for collecting the manure on the road from all the horse and carts and that used to go on my dad's roses. As we got a bit older we felt it was a little bit beneath our dignity! In 1951 the Hollingdean estate was cut. I suppose we knew people had to have houses to live in but we were very sad because you were almost in the heart of the country. I used to take my eldest son up to see the pigs and calves and he loved it.



Doreen's husband Alan retires from the shop after near fifty years' service.



The shop as it looked in 1968

If I was a young mother now I don't think I'd ever know any peace, but in those days I'd pack my kids off with some sandwiches and a bottle of lemonade and they'd go off for the day. When the blackberries were ready they'd go off with their little plastic containers and pick the fruit and come back all stained with blackberry juice.

There was so much freedom in those days, everybody knew everybody else.

If anyone had any trouble or anything you all rallied round _ it was almost like one big family. There wasn't the selfishness that there is now.

The Dip was always a very bustling, thriving area, but its got a bit of a seedy look to it now. Sainsbury's and B & Q put paid to it _ that is why the hardware shop and the two grocers went to the wall."



Hardware Store in the Hollingdean dip 1936-37

Supermarket Sweep

The big four supermarkets now sell over half our food in the UK.

Number of food shops in Britain 1950 221,662

Number of food shops in Britain 1997 36,931



Hollingdean from Stammer Park Road 1933. The row of shops in the centre are known as the Hollingbury Dip. Photo: Les Whitcomb



Moulsecoomb Place when the council parks department were using it. The flowerbeds and greenhouses are now student accommodation. Note the old timber framed cottage and manor house on the right.

The Present



Collecting fruit in the forest garden



Our 'shed' built from scrap materials.



Kids from Moulsecomb Play Link busy at work



Our new wildlife pond





Storyteller scares the kids at Halloween Party!

MOULSECOOMB FOREST GARDEN & WILDLIFE PROJECT

invites you to a

story telling, face-painting, bonfire...
Kids' Halloween Party
pumpkin soup (bring ☹ + ☺), fancy dress if you can...
TUESDAY 31st OCT.
5-8pm

Don't throw away or burn those unwanted leaves.
Bag them and drop them outside the allotment
gates and we will turn them into compost! If
you can't make it to the allotment call Warren
01273 272411 and we'll arrange to pick them up.



You can't eat flowers! Well, yes you can _ borage, marigolds, nasturium, pansies. Infact flower salads are a sure hit if you want to impress someone. Check out Joy Larkcom's `The Salad Garden' for growing tips and mouth-watering recipes...



"I've always been interested in wildlife and concerned about the effects of pesticides on the environment. My dad had an allotment where the Hollingdean estate is now. I'd just retired when I saw a leaflet for the project and it seemed a perfect opportunity to put into practice principles I've believed in all my life."

- Sheila Groom, volunteer

It was in the autumn of 1994 when a group of us decided to get an allotment. I got a map of all the different sites from the council and cycled around town until I came across this secret little site hidden behind Moulsecoomb railway station. The first plot we took on was a long thin strip running from the top of the site to the bottom gate and was overgrown with ash and brambles. In fact the council gave us it rent free for the first year because it had been derelict for nearly 20 years!

We set about clearing parts of the area laying swales (a posh word for ditches) using an A-frame - a simple device that measures the contours of the land. Because the allotment is on such a slope we did this to stop our soil being washed away to the bottom of the site where the nettles grew lush amongst the rubble. We've also terraced some of the beds where we grow the more conventional crops to stop soil erosion. Not that there was much soil to stop being eroded when we first started! One of our regular and more exhausting jobs has been the carrying of heavy bags of compost and manure up the slope to try and improve the ground until slowly the worms are coming back...

Over time as friends drifted away we decided to put the project on a firmer footing - we started to have our regular 'open to everyone - no gardening experience necessary' workdays, became a charity and started to put on regular events.

We've now got 7 plots where you will find us doing everything from organic gardening, forest gardening, wildlife gardening and - the thing that gets people talking - outlawed vegetable gardening. Infact this isn't your normal allotment site - there's no corrugated iron, we've left areas for wildlife to hang out in, and other bits uncultivated so we can picnic, sunbathe and bake potatoes in the fire.

As Sheila points out "If my father saw our allotments he would have had a fit! The allotments they worked on had been so intensively cultivated for such a long time the weeds didn't come up like they do here!"

Ah, yes the weeds. There used to be an old fellow called Ernie who'd come up with his dog Chips to work on his plot. He'd be pulling up 'weeds' on his piece of land, and we'd be planting the same 'weeds' on ours! Which brings to mind an old gardening proverb "a weed is just a plant in the wrong place."

Before any plant makes its way to our compost bins we try and identify it - amazingly we've found that nearly 95% of plants on site have some use for us - the so-called weed might be left alone because it's the food plant of a butterfly. It might be put in some hot water and drunk as a herbal tea. It might be used as a medicine or stuck in a salad. A lot of

our salads contain plants which most people would call "weeds." In one record harvest we counted 26 different plants on our plate - a stark contrast to the usual tomato, cucumber and lettuce most people dish up! And as for people's reactions when you serve them up a salad full of flowers...

The Forest Garden

The top of the site is slowly turning into a forest garden. An edible garden of Eden which the late Robert Hart describes as "a tiny imitation of a natural forest designed to achieve the utmost economy of space and labour. Like a natural woodland it has three layers of vegetation: trees, shrubs and herbaceous plants. Once established it requires minimal work and provides fruit, nuts, salads, herbs and other useful plants and fungi."

So in our forest garden we have apples, pears, cherries, plums, damsons, mulberries, hazels and walnuts, with fruit bushes in the middle and over 50 different perennial crops making up the bottom layer. Not just the usual herbs like rosemary, sage and thyme but weird and wonderful plants that you wouldn't find in the shops like daffodil garlic or yellow asphodel with its beautiful sweet tasting yellow flowers.

Part of our ethos is to look to new foods that might be useful in the future - as well as protecting plants from our past.

As Ken Fern points out in his book 'Plants For A Future' "There are well over 20,000 known species of edible plants in the world, plus many more that have yet to be documented, and more than 5,000 of these can be grown outdoors in Britain. I wonder how many of them you have ever eaten?"

Nowadays fewer than 20 species of plants supply about 90% of all our plant foods. Isn't it dangerous to rely on so few plants? What would happen for example if all our wheat crops were destroyed by disease?

However, it's not just new food crops that are being ignored, older varieties of vegetables are being lost every year, and so there's one part of the site that always gets people talking...

The Outlawed Vegetable Garden

In the UK alone 97% of the vegetable varieties available in 1903 were no longer available just eighty years later. Does it matter? Well, the UK's largest organic gardening organisation, the Henry Doubleday Research Association thinks so, and have set up the Heritage Seed Library. As one of their gardeners pointed out "genetic erosion is a mass extinction every bit as important as the loss of species from tropical rainforests."

Every year seed companies decide that it is not worth their while or is too expensive to register certain seeds. That means they aren't put on the National Seed List and so they can't be sold. Plants that may have characteristics that might be useful in the future would be lost if it were not for the amazing work of the Library. You join the Library and choose some outlawed vegetables you want to grow and they `lend' you a few seeds. Over the past couple of years we've been experimenting and saving the seeds of vegetables that have done well on our site. One of these is the French Climbing Bean `Cherokee Trail of Tears'.

In 1838, the Cherokee Indians of North America were forced off their lands by European settlers. The move became an infamous death march; thousands died travelling over the mountains through the winter in appalling conditions. Some of the tribe carried with them a climbing bean with small shiny black seeds, and this became known as the Trail of Tears beans.

Just 3 corporations control a quarter of the world's entire seed market: Monsanto, Dupont and Syngenta. The corporations that have been steadily buying up all your favourite garden seed companies are the very same bio-tech giants that are trying to get us all to eat their genetically modified greens. According to one seed corporation owner "seeds are software. And we have the seeds." As Bob Sherman from Henry Doubleday spells out "The risk of concentrating so much commercial power into the hands of one corporate empire is that we have become subject to the dreams and aspirations of a very few people. Do they care about bio-diversity? Not as much, I suspect, as they do about profit."

And there's not as much profit in selling seeds to gardeners as there is to farmers, and farmers want plants that are ready to harvest all at once and crops that travel the long distances to the supermarket (like tomatoes with hard skins rather than varieties that go squishy.) Supermarkets want uniformity _ but gardeners don't want gluts and it doesn't matter to them if a tomato has a thin skin.

It's not just vegetable varieties that are disappearing, but our fruit trees as well. Over the last 30 years 60% of our apple orchards have been destroyed and in 1996 we imported 434,000 tonnes of apples, nearly half from outside Europe!

In 1999 the British Independent Fruit Growers' Association sent questionnaires to growers who supply supermarkets. Nearly a third of them reported they had been forced to grub up productive orchards because the superstore chains had suddenly decided to change the varieties they sold. Not that you're likely to find much choice. Even though there are 2,300 apple varieties and 550 pear varieties in the National Fruit Collection, just two apple and three pear varieties now dominate UK orchards. In fact you're more likely to find apples in the supermarket that have been flown in from New Zealand or South Africa than locally produced.

So we did a bit of research and came up with a few apple varieties that you would have once found in East Sussex - Anyone fancy a Forge, Lady Sudeley or Knobby Russet?

The Food Mile Quiz

Have you ever thought about where your food comes from? Even a simple meal has travelled the globe before it arrives on your plate, with potatoes from Egypt, apples from New Zealand and beans from Kenya. These are usually flown by plane, and air travel is the fastest growing source of carbon dioxide emissions - the principal cause of climate change.

- For every kilo of kiwi fruit transported from New Zealand, 5kg of carbon dioxide is pumped into the atmosphere
- 1 kilo of asparagus flown from California produces 4kg of carbon dioxide. If they were grown in Europe 900 times less energy would be produced
- 1 tonne of food in the UK now travels an average of 123km before it reaches the shelves, compared with 82km in 1978

Most of Europe's orange juice comes from Brazil. Demand for orange juice has doubled in the last decade, yet in this country there is a richer source of Vitamin C that grows everywhere _ rosehips. During the Second World War when it was impossible to get oranges, children were given days off school to go and pick rosehips _ by 1943 450 tonnes were picked a year. (for ways on cooking and preparing them see Roger Phillips book `Wild Food' which tells you all the free nosh you can get in the UK).

And how about this for madness. Vegetables being sold in two superstores on the outskirts of Evesham in Worcestershire were grown just one mile from the town. But before they reached the shelves they had been trucked to Hereford, then to Dyfed, then to a distribution depot in Manchester, from where they were sent back to Evesham. Not surprisingly, a quarter of our road traffic is now transporting food.

Organic Gardening and Volunteering

Doing a bit of voluntary work on our plot entitles you to whatever veg. is available. To show people that we're not completely mad and to make sure our volunteers go home with a bit more than a couple of nasturtium leaves and a few pretty flowers, our bottom plots are given over to growing your more traditional leek and potato type vegetables. All organically grown of course.

The arguments for organic food has been well rehearsed but its worth remembering that some lettuces have been sprayed 15 times. While shop bought fruit may look more dazzling, that visual perfection is a sure sign that it has been sprayed over and over again to prevent the slightest blemish. A typical commercial orchard may be sprayed 15 times or more during the growing season, including herbicides, insecticides and fungicides, and the fruit sprayed again in storage. Much of this spraying is purely cosmetic and has nothing to do with increasing yield. Tasty!

The BSE and foot and mouth crisis makes a mockery of those that argue that our present way of farming gives us cheap food. On the contrary the current system ensures that we end up paying three times for our food - once over the counter, a second time in tax subsidies for farming and a third time in cleaning up pollution. As the Soil Association points out "The quest for ever cheaper food is at the root of all these problems. It has encouraged farmers to cut corners, compromising food safety and animal welfare and damaging the environment. We all end up paying a heavy price through our taxes to clear up the mess." Professor Jules Pretty of the University of Essex has calculated that even before foot and mouth, the hidden costs of industrial agriculture to our health and our environment added up to at least £2.3 billion a year!

Wildlife Gardening

From the top of the site you can see the South Downs - a green desert of a landscape that looks like someone's taken a giant lawnmower to it and shaved off all the vegetation. Every year the rains come and wash away the topsoil and in the winter of 2000 washed it straight into some people's homes.

Our site, which is part of the Wild Park Nature Reserve, couldn't be more of a contrast and the local wildlife certainly seem to have given it the thumbs up. No chemicals or pesticides, a double hedgerow of native trees, a big pond and lots of hidiholes means that the whole site has become a wildlife haven - an important 'green lung' for the town, backing off into wood and farmland. There's foxes, moles, voles, frogs, lizards, slow worms, numerous birds, butterflies and insects. We even spotted a stoat once (in fact the only wildlife we don't take too kindly to is the slug which receives an organic solution of beer traps or a short sharp boot to the head).

Of course we want to grow as much food as possible but we also want it to be a peaceful place to sit and watch the world go by. A nice place to do this is the 'shed'. Made mainly out of scrap wood for the princely sum of £30 it's the place to be, lying on the sofa in the veranda out of the rain/sun pretending you are doing some work.

Nettles

The humble stinging nettle is probably one of the most useful plants in the UK. And if you only harvest it a couple of times a season, it will keep on coming up year after year without you having to do a thing.

It supports an amazing diversity of wildlife, acting as the food plant of the Small Tortoiseshell, Red Admiral, Peacock, Painted Lady and Comma butterflies as well as home to up to 107 different insects including hoverflies, lacewings, parasitic wasps and ladybirds, which all act as natural pest controllers for the organic gardener.

Freshly cut nettles, especially the young, soft growth, make an excellent compost activator and cut and left to soak in water for a few weeks can be used as a foliar feed around the garden.

It is also one of the first spring greens to appear on the allotment and up until May - after May there is a chemical reaction that make the plants bitter - I harvest the fresh tops of the plant and turn it into a delicious soup that contains vitamins A, B and C, serotonin (the hormone in the brain that makes you happy), iron and other minerals.

To make a soup that will feed about four people, get a good bag of nettle tops using scissors and wearing gloves. Cut up a few potatoes and boil in water with a couple of stock cubes. Fry a couple chopped onions or leeks and some garlic and add them to the soup. Add nettles and boil for about another 5 minutes. Liquidize the soup once its all cooked, adding salt, pepper, milk and even cream to taste. Serve with garlic bread, with some chunks of smoked tofu and a sprinkle of chives and parsley. Don't tell people it's nettle soup until after they've eaten it all up!

So who funds all this?

All of this work we have done on a ridiculously small budget, at first everyone chipping in what they could afford and, more recently, the odd grant to enable us to buy decent tools, trees, shrubs, herbs, pond lining etc.

One of those people who gave us a grant was Charlie Budd from Brighton and Hove Community Environment Partnership. He wrote "I particularly like the fact that you seem to make very good use of resources, both biological and physical. I know you say that this is because of your 'ridiculously small budget' but it is a good ethos to have, even if you do get hold of money."

The Future

"Food security rests in our hands, as transnational corporations have no interest in local agricultural systems based on diversity and community support. Since industrial agriculture we have lost diversity, fertile soil, and access to land. We have lost knowledge about plants, the land, and natural systems. We have lost skills like plant breeding, making medicines and developing appropriate tools. We have lost any sense of community that works with co-operation and mutual aid. We need to renew our connection to plants, land and community, organising alternatives, autonomous from power structures." - From the Primal Seeds website

As I've gone around the town interviewing older Brightonians it's apparent that not so very long ago the town just like every other place in England was fairly self-sufficient in food. If we are to rid ourselves of our present unsustainable agricultural system then once again every village, town and city will have to grow some of it's own food. Can it be done? Well, when Cuba faced economic crisis in the early 90's, it turned to organic food production, and by 1998 the Capital City Havana had gone from producing virtually no food to 115,000 tonnes with this figure rising all the time.

The popularity of farmers' markets shows that when people are given the choice they will buy fresh locally produced food. So couldn't the South Downs be covered in orchards and small scale farms?

Couldn't our vegetable peelings, tea bags and green waste be collected and turned into compost?

Couldn't we have more community groups with demonstration gardens to teach people who want to learn about gardening?

Couldn't every school that has the space have its own urban farm?

There are serious lessons to be learnt from the past, like how people were so much more resourceful and so much more inclined to help one

another out. But we should also remember that people worked long hours and often lived in poverty.

On our project we try to strike a balance between taking the best from the past as well as looking to the future. Safeguarding old plant varieties and protecting diversity while experimenting with food plants and gardening techniques that could be useful in the future. We also try to be as resourceful as possible and work with the natural environment. And perhaps most importantly we work collectively and try to involve as many people as possible.

So if this book has inspired you to eat more locally produced veg, why not come along on one of our workdays and learn how to grow your own, make new friends and hang out with some real wildlife!

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Most of the gardening books mentioned can be ordered through Eco-
logic books, Mulberry House, 19 Maple Grove 01225 484472 [www.eco-
logicbooks.com](http://www.eco-logicbooks.com)