

Transcription of an interview conducted 11 September 2018

Interviewee: GLORIA WALLIS (GW)
Interviewer: KEITH MCMAHON (KM)
Kingston-Upon-Thames, England

Transcription: JAREK ZABA

[00:00] KM: Good afternoon. This is Keith McMahon. Erm. I'm taking an oral history this afternoon from Gloria Wallis. Erm. Errm. On behalf of the ShedX er project and Kingston history room. Er - first of all Gloria could you er - could you just introduce yourself and tell me what your role is within the er Federation of - is it the Federation of Kingston Gardeners?

GW: Well I've got two roles. I'm secretary of the Kingston Federation of Allotment Gardeners, K FAG. Erm. And was a founder member. And I'm also secretary of my own allotment site, Beverley Park.

KM: Right.

GW: And I've been secretary there for many years and had an allotment up there for 34 years. Erm. I don't know if you know Beverley Park allotments.

KM: I don't. But I - I hear that y- that it's a particular picturesque-

GW: It's a very lovely site and we're very lucky. It's set in the park, actually in Beverley Park, tucked **[01:00]** down in the corner. It has trees all the way round so we're quite secluded. Erm. It's very small which probably adds to its charm. There are quite a few plots which can't be used because it's too shady so they're grassed over so although it's small it's not cramped, we've got plenty of open green space.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: And it's very well run. It's been voluntary managed for 36 years - over 36 years. Which has been the making of it.

[01:33] KM: That's quite a long time because a lot of the sites within the borough were managed by the borough or by its subcontractors.

GW: They certainly were. The council first started promoting voluntary management in 1981. They saw it as a way of managing the allotments cheaply. They get very little income from the al-or then they got very little income from the allotments because they'd **[02:00]** let the sites get run down over the years. A lot of the plots weren't let. And it was a drain on their resources. Which as you know the council never has any money. It never has had. It hasn't today. Erm. So in 1981 the council approached all the allotment sites in the borough and rolled out this idea of voluntary management. Under which each site would have its own allotment association. Each plot holder would be a member. And they would have a committee - a management committee which would do everything on the site. They would collect the rents. They would set the rent. They would let the plots. They would manage everything and they would have a 12 year lease. And this was a renewable lease. So at the end of the 12 years they could-

KM: Yeah.

GW: -carry on. Erm. A few sites were interested. Beverley Park being one of them. And after a year or so of negotiations **[03:00]** Beverley Park signed their first lease in 1982. And we were the first site to go voluntary managed.

KM: Oh right.

GW: And a few others followed in the next few years. And then there was a lull. At that time you have to remember allotment gardening was not very popular. Interest was very low. And any site you went on to you'd find most of it was covered in brambles, [seedling?] trees. Very attractive charming places but more like nature reserves-

KM: Right.

GW: - than allotments.

KM: Yep.

GW: There were always a few dedicated people working away on their plot but worrying all the time that this land they were working was valuable, could be used for other purposes. And they were always very afraid that it was gonna be taken away from them.

KM: Right. I understand.

GW: They had this strange feel- they didn't feel entitled to the land. But most of them were unaware of allotment legislation that y'know the council have a duty [04:00] to provide allotment land. And they - the general attitude was well, keep your head down, don't make a fuss. Don't draw the council's attention to us.

KM: Yeah.

GW: And they might not take us for building. That was a fearful sort of attitude. Erm. And very little d-was done to improve the sites. And then in the next ten years or so at my site things just ticked over. Plots were let but a lot of the site was underused. And then there was a change of committee. My husband was persuaded to take on the role as chairman, very reluctantly cos he doesn't garden.

KM: Right.

GW: But he does do a mean AGM committee meeting.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: And I became secretary and we had a younger committee. I mean this was some years ago. Er. Over 30 years ago. Erm. And things - [05:00] w-we realised that if we didn't do something we'd lose the site.

KM: Mm.

GW: So we had a plan. And the plan was we'd reclaim plots, we'd try and let them in a reasonable condition and we would advertise. Prior to that it was very much oh we don't advertise, y'know we like to know who's coming on our site.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: The bit - very cliquey.

KM: I can understand yes.

GW: But we've got to open up, we've got to get new people. We've got to get younger people. And that's what we did.

KM: Yep.

GW: The plan was for five years and I have to say it took a lot longer.

KM: Right.

GW: But we worked hard. We cleared brambles. Oh. All manner of stuff. And we started using carpet. Banned now.

KM: Yeah.

GW: Absolutely banned.

KM: Uh-huh.

GW: But it worked, I have to say it worked.

KM: Yes.

GW: I scrounged scaffolding sheets from scaffolding firms. I scrounged carpet. I scrounged cardboard.

KM: Just to suppress all the weeds?

GW: Just to lay down and [06:00] suppress the weeds. And then after a year it would be clear. And the carpet worked because we kept moving it.

KM: Yep.

GW: Of course it doesn't on people's plots because they don't move it.

KM: Yes.

GW: It's not managed properly so now we ban carpet. But it did the job at the time.

KM: Yeah.

GW: Without the carpet and scaffolding sheets we would not have won. And we did win and in the year 2000 we were fully let. And we had a waiting list. And I sat down and cried. [Laughs]

KM: [Laughs]

GW: I was so happy. For the first time in the history of the site - once the war years were over.

KM: Yes.

GW: And the great enthusiasm had gone. But for the first time that I'd been up there the site was fully let.

[06:48] KM: So in those nearly 20 years did you see the erm the people that were taking plots. Did - did the sort of person change?

GW: It did change. [07:00] Women changed it.

KM: Right.

GW: The women came in-

KM: Uh-huh.

GW: - once we got the women in things changed a lot. Before- when I first took my plot on it was mostly men -

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: - that had allotments. Erm. I was in my late 30s then.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: Erm. And I pitched up, started an allotment. And they looked me up and down and as you can see I'm not very big. Erm. And they used to will hubby be helping you? And I say I jolly well hope not, he's no gardener you know.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: And I think they thought she won't last five minutes. And I had my daughter with me who was about 4 at the time. And she was moaning and groaning and whining cos the grass was scratching her legs and it was hot and - so I was carrying her. And I heard one of these old boys who were showing me around saying - he was probably a bit younger than I am now - saying to another one she must be [08:00] stronger than she looks y'know. She's carrying that kid all round.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: So they let me have a plot. And much to their surprise I made a go of it. I mean I did have help, my husband came and lugged stuff.

KM: Yeah.

GW: And he cut the grass. But not gardening, no. Erm.

[08:19] KM: So overall the- there has - there has been this shift from - erm dare I say the sort th-the maybe a retired gentle- retired retired men.

GW: Yes absolutely. That's exactly what it was yes. Yes.

KM: Erm doing doing doing the gardening.

GW: There were younger people there. The women were on the site but usually it was their husband's plot or they came up with friends.

KM: Right.

GW: I think I was probably the first woman to sign a tenancy agreement in my own name.

KM: Yeah.

GW: Erm. And then after that other women started to go. It just happened. It was nothing to do with me or anybody, it just happened. And I'd say no half our plot holders hold the tenancy, it's a woman who has the tenancy.

KM: Really?

GW: And they're the driver on the plot. The husband will c-or partner or whatever **[09:00]** will come and help. But the women are the - a-about - on about half the plots.

[09:06] KM: So that changes over 35 years or something like that. Yeah.

GW: Yeah, it's changed yeah o- 30 - 33, 35 years. A shift. And we - I'm not saying we weren't taken seriously to start with. But I think they thought we wouldn't be stayers. We wouldn't last the distance.

[09:23] KM: Mm. And have you noticed - er and I'm just reflecting on other conversations on - erm w-regarding other sites. Erm. The time of day, the time of week that people actually work on their plots.

GW: That's a strange thing about allotments. You can go up to a site and there's not a soul there. And you think hmm - and yet you look at the plots and they're all worked. And you think where are they all? Yes it has changed. A lot of people go at the crack of dawn.

KM: Yes.

GW: Barmy. They're there at half past 5 in the summer. Half past six. And watering, weeding. And then they go to work.

KM: [10:00] Right.

GW: So we're getting a lot more people who - so the time factor has changed.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: You don't get people generally who are there for hours. I used to be there for hours up until the accident with my leg. But - so I'd see people - but people come and go much more than they used to. Used to be they'd come, the old boys as I call them, would be there from about ten o'clock and they'd stay til lunch time and they'd bring their snack or whatever. Or they'd even be there all day. But you don't get that now. You get people coming and going, popping in, popping out and that fits in with life as it is now. Get people in the evenings. You get more people first thing.

[10:43] KM: And is that a reflection on the - the - the greater demands upon everybody's time that there is now? Whether it's work or families.

GW: I think so. I think it's the demands of work and the fact that so many women work now.

Yes.

GW: Which of course they didn't when - when I w-when I had a young family. You generally [11:00] didn't go back - life's changed so much for women.

KM: Yes.

GW: Y'know it was different - you did not go back to work unless you absolutely had to. Until your children were well settled in school and if you go two or three or four kids that was years.

KM: Yes. Yeah. It might be until they were in secondary school that-

GW: Could be. Y'know. The oldest could be and the youngest is still-

KM: Yeah.

GW: - y'know is very quite small.

[11:26] KM: Yeah. So have you noticed fa- so reflecting on the sort of 30, 35 years erm - moving from erm retired gentlemen having - having their plots and curious about a lady wanting to take on her own plot.

GW: Very curious. [Laughs]

KM: [Laughs] Have you noticed families coming in or - because 30 or 35 years ago you wouldn't found children on allotment plots.

GW: You found my children but they were a bit frowned upon I have to say.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: But we do get families. We [12:00] get some lovely families.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: That now - a great joy seeing the kids. Especially the little ones. But you don't get much gardening when you've got your family with you. Everyone accepts that. There's the ideal thing oh give the kids a bit of ground, y'know let them see how things grow. Yeah, right. Lasts five minutes and [?] mum [a hundred?], mum I want this that. Used to drive me crackers. So I used to go to the allotment mainly when my kids were at school. And then perhaps at the weekend. But the allotment was my place.

KM: Yes.

GW: It was my bolt hole. And for a lot of people that's what it is. It's very therapeutic.

[12:40] KM: Absolutely I c-yes. I have my own plot so yes I can absolutely understand that yes.

GW: We have people who have various problems. Health. Life. And they find great solace in their allotment.

KM: Yes.

GW: And I have to say [13:00] it's a place of - if I'm really sad I will go to my allotment because it's away from everything. It's completely away. No - I - this and course in the days before mobile phones it was amazing. You couldn't be contacted at all. And you were up there and you weren't seen as skiving off. You'd gone up to do something useful.

[13:20] KM: There are times when I go to my allotment and I consciously leave my mobile phone either at home or in the car.

GW: Yeah. I think it's wise.

KM: Or maybe just turn it off.

GW: Turn it off, mm.

KM: And it just gives you that hour, couple of hours escape.

GW: Yes. Absolutely. And it's very relaxing working on your plot and your mind just relaxes and stopped thinking about things.

[13:45] KM: So thinking - so just rewinding right to the very beginning. What was it that drove you to getting your allotment in the first place?

GW: Well I'd always wanted to grow vegetables. And stuff to eat. Erm. **[14:00]** And I'd got two small boys. And vegetables and stuff to eat and two small boys and a football and a cricket bat do not mix.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: So I tried to grow runner beans and raspberries in the garden. And I used to spend more time at the backdoor yelling at them, mind the beans y'know. And I thought this is ridiculous, the garden - we came here for the garden for the kids really.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: And of course when my father turned up as well it - and they were out there planning, it was bedlam so this is not gonna work. I'm shrieking all the time. I need somewhere. And the garden's not particularly suitable.

KM: Sure.

GW: So I thought well I'll have an allotment, I'll have a go. And I fancied the idea of that and I was also interested in organic gardening. Erm. So it sort of clicked in place. And I was very surprised to get a plot. I thought they'd be waiting lists for years. But y'know there were empty plots, I had my pick.

[14:57] KM: Well certainly here anecdotally stories about very long [15:00] waiting lists in - in some - certainly in some parts of London.

GW: Well there are - my sites got a very long waiting list.

KM: Have you?

GW: We've got 22 p- well it's long for us. We're 22 people on our list and I checked that list every January to see that they're still interested so it's not y'know historical they've gone off somewhere else. And they all want say they want to stay on the Beverley Park waiting list every January. Apart from this one because of the accident. Er. But. I don't know - I think Beverley Park is a special site, that's why they're so keen. And they're all local.

KM: Yes.

GW: So they're prepared to wait. I do - if I hear plots elsewhere which I do occasionally I will let them know-

KM: Through the federation.

GW: Through the federation yes.

KM: You've obviously got the network.

GW: Yes. So I let all the society's know there are vacancies. Erm. At any one particular site, is there anyone on your waiting list who might be interested? Please pass on the details. But I've not lost - I don't think I've lost many off my list. **[16:00]** They all come back. They've a- people I do lose tend to move away. But you see we don't very often get a vacancy. Very very rarely. Y'know people unless someone moves. We started letting quarter plots. Partly because it suits y'know the standard plot if a full plot. But most people have a half plot these days.

KM: Absolutely. It takes a lot of effort to manage a full plot. And dedication.

GW: It's too much isn't it? Unless y'know you're really really keen and got the time. So a full plot for most people is plenty. But we found that there were some people who has they got older they found a full plot just too much. And it became a chore. But they didn't want to give up. And you can't chuck someone off who has been on site for 30 years.

KM: Yeah. Not at all.

GW: So they were offered - and rather than share which I don't think ever works very well we decided to split some half plots into half again and offer a quarter plot.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: [17:00] And of course they can manage that and it's fine and they - that means they can stay. They can stay with us and still be part of the allotment community which matters a lot to people.

KM: Yes.

GW: And also we've found beginners have looked at a half plot and have been surprised at how big it is.

KM: Yes.

GW: I mean it's - what is it 125 square metres.

KM: Yes.

GW: Which means nothing.

KM: No but br- yeah.

GW: On my site that's roughly 30 foot wide, 40 foot long. For some people don't have a garden as big as that do they? So they look at these half plots and they think I don't know about that y'know - but I've not done this before. So we said we'll take a quarter and see how you get on, and then if a half ever comes up and you want to spread your wings then do. And it works well. We had a couple of people who have progressed from a quarter and their - the other bit's come up and they've taken it on. So-

[17:53] **KM: So the - we talked briefly about the - about the other benefits of having an allotment and being on the site. The erm - [18:00] if you like the therapeutic benefits and erm - and the fact that as an individual you - you wanted to get your allotment to grow - to grow food for the family because it was impractical to do so at home.**

GW: Yes.

KM: Is that general amongst most plot holders or is it - is there a - has there been a change over the years have you noticed anything as to what - as to why people are-

GW: I think there has. I think people - a lot of people are attracted by the organic side of things. Organic food. Organically grown food. It's still quite expensive comparatively. And they like the idea of knowing what's gone onto their food - they're putting on their plates.

KM: The provenance of it yes.

GW: Mm. Erm. That took - well it was - it wasn't unheard of when I started but it was regarded as a bit of a crankier thing y'know. [All Mark and Magic] was a programme on the TV at this time, donkey's years ago. And it was regarded as a bit y'know [19:00] they're a bunch of hippies.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: [Laughs] It won't last. And of course the older generation they've got all the chemicals that had been developed in the war. They were chucking these chemicals on, it was horrendous. But no that's changed. Now I'd say most people may not be totally organic I mean who - who can resist putting the slug pellets down? It's very hard not to. Erm. But generally they're far more organic - they don't use the

chemicals that they used to use when I first started. Erm. So yes I think the provenance of their food is one thing. And also the benefit - they're more aware of the benefits now. People wouldn't have put it into words 30 years ago, they wouldn't have talked about a therapeutic value of allotments. It would have been seen as a bit daft really. But now it's recognised as such. And they wouldn't have - well I suppose they would have talked about the benefits of being outside in the open air and the exercise, that was very - yeah exercise was good 30 years ago as it is [20:00] now. Erm. I think 30 years ago they might have grown to save money.

KM: Right.

GW: But I don't think you do - because they all had much bigger plots then generally.

KM: Yes.

GW: But I don't think you save money now. Unless you grow things which are very expensive and I always say to people it's not really worth growing things which are cheap to buy.

KM: Right. Yeah.

GW: If you've only got a little bit of land go for the expensive stuff. Go for soft fruit. Because - or - either go because it's very expensive to buy so you grow it, or go for quality.

KM: Yes.

GW: You can't beat raspberry, strawberries etc picked and eaten the same day. You get them from the supermarkets it's a different thing altogether.

[20:44] KM: It's like growing erm - shall we say main crop potatoes.

GW: Oh I know.

KM: Erm takes up a huge amount of space.

GW: And what's the point?

KM: And erm.

GW: Well for some people there's a point. But then you store them.

KM: And then you've got to store them.

GW: [Laughs] But you grow [21:00] new potatoes, first early's or whatever, second early's, Charlotte potatoes. Absolutely delicious.

KM: Yes. And there's nothing nicer than being able to dig up your potatoes at 5 o'clock in the afternoon-

GW: Take em home for tea.

KM: - take them home, quick wash, eat them all within two hours.

GW: Yeah. And the flavour is so much better. People don't - people who don't grow potatoes, new potatoes don't really understand. Difficult to grow erm Jerseys though. Have you succeeded?

KM: Er not personally no. But I do - I do grow the Charlottes. And erm er-

GW: I've tried everything that's supposed to be like a Jersey but it comes close but not as good as.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: So I've tried Jersey potatoes. But Charlotte definitely. Absolutely.

KM: Yes. I think we all - we all have our - the ones - the things that we can and can't grow. I've tried asparagus and have failed dismally and yet I know my neighbouring plot holders have -

GW: I know, strange isn't it?

KM: - have had great success. Erm so er - but th-that sort of leads onto another thing about shared -

[22:00] about the social side of things and sharing. Erm. If everybody grew exactly the same produce and had exactly the same gluts at exactly the same time life would be very difficult.

GW: Yes.

KM: But when you've got too many courgettes as we all do-

GW: I don't grow them.

KM: So you get your courgettes from somebody else.

GW: I do.

KM: Exactly. So there's this social side of things-

GW: But I grow masses of runner beans. And a lot of people don't cos they're not always that - especially this summer it's been dreadful but we're picking up now. So I - I always get a glut of runner beans. But I have a system going with my neighbours. I'm a great composter. I always have been. I love making compost.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: But - course you never get enough of a stuff. So I have arrangements with my neighbours, they save me their good garden waste that can be composted. Yes but you noticed when you came, most of that's from my garden but the little bags -

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: - they save me their **[23:00]** vegetable peelings. Which is perfect-

KM: Yes.

GW: - to heat the whole thing up. All their kitchen waste.

KM: Yes.

GW: But no eggshells. Because the rats like them.

KM: Yeah.

GW: And they dump them on my front driveway. Which is fine. My husband's quite used to having to take all this - not more rubbish. Up to the allotment. For every couple of days. And in return I give them some of the gluts, which is nice - it means I get to see the neighbours and have a little catch up, chat. They get a few r- not so many stuff this year of course. But generally I'll be giving them soft fruit.

KM: Yes.

GW: And they keep bringing me all the composting stuff and there's about - there must be half a dozen of them if not more. Who put stuff on my front garden. And we take it to the stie.

[23:51] KM: So there is this social inter-interaction?

GW: Yes. Absolutely. And the same on the allotment site. It's very sociable. It's strange. If you don't want - **[24:00]** if you go up there and you're not in the mood or you're sad or y-you just want to think about something then nobody bats an eyelid if you just say good morning or whatever and walk past - nobody's bothered. But y'know if you've got that look on I'm up for a chat then they'll come over

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: - and people will chat. And you just pick up when people are too busy. Erm. It's very sociable. But it doesn't have to be.

KM: Yes.

GW: And you don't feel uncomfortable about not being particularly sociable. I mean there are some people like me who chat to everybody and there's other people - just their nature they don't want to chat to everybody so it - it mixes up very well.

[24:42] KM: And I've always found that erm - and I'd be interested to know what your thoughts are - that allotment sites are a great - what I call a leveller.

GW: Oh absolutely yeah.

KM: Because you can walk in there and what your day job is and what your background is.

GW: Mm.

KM: Become-

GW: It's irrelevant. **[25:00]** Totally irrelevant. There's no status is there?

KM: No.

GW: It's who's got the best plot really. Who grows the best this. Who grows the best that. How do they - how do you manage to grow your beans so big? Y'know it's your skill and your expertise or your knowledge that people are interested in. I'm not inter- I mean yes sometimes it's useful to know well he's a solicitor, he can look at the lease for-

KM: Yes.

GW: - but nobody thinks oh well - there's no class. Nothing like that at all. We're all gardeners - that's all that matters. It's never-

[25:35] KM: And has that always been the case do you think? Just personal experience over 35 years or something.

GW: Yes, it has. Yes it has. It - yeah. You would be judged on your plot.

KM: Mm.

GW: And that was all there was to it.

KM: Rather than-

GW: Rather than your job, your status.

KM: Rather than what your day job, what your day job, what your day job or what your status might be, yes.

GW: It was never - yeah. No that was unimportant. We were all there as equals.

[26:00] [26:01] KM: Yeah. So within the - within the community of Kingston and m-more specifically th-this part of the borough in New Malden. Erm. The social make up of the - of the communities has changed over the past 30, 40, 50 years.

GW: Mm.

KM: I've certainly noticed it and I'm sure you have. Is that reflected in the allotments do you think?

GW: I think so. Erm. We're certainly more of a mixed bunch. I mean a lot of - I don't suspect you know New Malden's the centre for Korean people. Erm we've the highest number of Korean people in one place out in Europe or something like - I don't know.

KM: Yes.

GW: And a lot of Korean people are very interested in gardening.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: And then there a lot of people from Portugal and erm - all the eastern European countries. Who are also pr-perhaps from **[27:00]** where they came from that their families were gardeners.

KM: Mm.

GW: And they just need the land.

KM: Yes.

GW: People have a feel for land. People who don't have the feel for land don't understand. But people - it's - it's difficult for me to explain. How you feel that's my land. You have to have a piece of land - doesn't matter that it doesn't actually belong to you it's the council's land of course. But once you're working it it becomes your land.

KM: Yes.

GW: And it's important and we used to have a Dutch neighbour - she's long died now. But she came over just after the war from a farming family and she used to see me going up the road. And she'd say are you going to the land? I yes I'm coming to the land - she used to come up with me sometimes. And she oh, I love the land. Should you love the land, we understand each other.

KM: [Laughs] Wonderful.

GW: And I knew exactly what she meant.

KM: Yes.

GW: **[28:00]** And I think for a lot of people who come from abroad to live here, yes they have that feeling for land and it's very important to them.

[28:09] KM: And I think it's erm - particularly from continental Europe erm - it's in-in a lot of countries people are very used to growing their own food.

GW: Yes.

KM: On a plot of land not necessarily immediately adjacent to where they live. So it may not be called an allotment, it may just be a corner of a field that there's some sort of informal arrangement with the farmer. Erm. But it's where they grow their food. And it's somewhere they can grow - they can go - I know in France there is a similar sort of structure to allotments but-

GW: I think there is in Germany too.

KM: Yes. So what I'm trying to get to is - the allotments are er reflecting the changes in society makeup. So maybe [29:00] 30 or 40 years ago erm we didn't have Koreans or Portuguese on your allotment sites.

GW: No we did used to have Italians though.

KM: Yeah?

GW: I miss them because they grew some amazing stuff.

[29:13] KM: And do you find that different ethnic groups grow different produce?

GW: Yeah.

KM: So maybe if it's erm classical British, it's-

GW: No I think people are far more adventurous now.

KM: Yeah?

GW: That would have been the case when I started.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: Because allotment gardening then was very traditional - stuff was growing - grown in rows. People grew cabbages, miles of cabbages and cauliflowers and all that sort of stuff. Generally. But over the years it's changed - people grow what would be seen as then more exotic stuff. They'd start growing asparagus and they started growing erm all the different squashes - not just normal ordinary ones. All the **[30:00]** fancy ones. And they started growing corn a lot and then of course now that - people will try

anything from anywhere. Whether that's the influence of people from other countries coming here I don't know. Or whether it's just a sort of a widening of food experience.

KM: Yes is it a widening of food experience but is it celebrity chefs introducing us to different cuisines?

GW: Exactly yes. Different ingredients. And people think oh I'll give that a try on the allotment. And it's surprising what will grow. Especially summer like one we just had.

[30:35] KM: And did I read something on one of the emails about a stable?

GW: Yes.

KM: Tell me more. [Laughs]

GW: That is the stable - the stable is the Beverley Park allotments communal shed.

KM: Right.

GW: The allotments were set up just aft- just during the war in 1941. Erm. But prior to that it was all parkland.

KM: Oh right.

GW: So **[31:00]** half the park was turned over to allotments as part of the Dig for Victory thing.

KM: Yes.

GW: And that was in 1941, 42 a bit more was added. Erm. And they had something like 99 plots. Which compared to the 20 or so we have now is huge. Erm but before that when it was a park of cour- and it was a very popular park set out in 1915 I think. 1913. Erm. The park was set out. And it needed to be mowed. So the horse drew the mower. And the horse was kept in the stable which is still on my site. Erm. The horse - so the stable building is actually a hundred - over a hundred years old. It was built in 1915 from materials the council already had in hand. It says in the minutes.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: **[32:00]** It was Malden and Coombe County Council.

KM: Bits and pieces laying around.

GW: Yeah. Erm so they built the stable. The horse - which was called the lady mare, lady mare. Erm. Pulled the mower. And one of my neighbours who was elderly when I first knew him, came here. He remembered as a boy playing in the park when it was all park erm and this wonderful horse - I don't think it was the same horse. [Laughs] But it always had the same name.

KM: Yes.

GW: In the stable. And going to see it. And seeing it with this massive mowing machine, pulling it and mowing the grass. And he said they used to go up to the park to play. And come home when the milk train went past.

KM: Oh right.

GW: In the evening, it was tea time. Yeah. So the stable building is still being used.

[32:51] KM: So the par- the park originally - it started life as a erm a-a public park I-laid out by the - [33:00] by by Malden and Coombe.

GW: Yes by the council. Yeah Malden and Coombe Urban District Council purchased the land to be used for Beverley Park in 1906 for £6,000.

KM: Crikey.

GW: But it was not until 1913/14 that the land was drained and the area set out as a park with shrubs, trees, central footpath, tennis courts, cricket, football, hockey and a children's play area. And I believe at one time they had a bandstand. They certainly had a boating lake when I first came here in the 70s.

KM: Really?

GW: It only had rainwater in it, it'd cracked. But the kids used to get in the large puddles and play in the lake.

KM: Yes.

GW: It was very popular - all sorts of events were held up there. Erm.

[33:44] KM: So the allotment site started life as erm allotments created as part of the Dig for Victory campaign.

GW: Yes. The whole of the south side from the central path from the s-the south side of the park, the central path, the **[34:00]** back of the houses in Egmont Road was turned over to allotments.

KM: Right.

GW: And then in 1952 it was decided that all of it would be returned to the park apart from 2.7 acres. And that would be used as allotments.

KM: As allotments.

GW: And 1953 it was decided to put a chain link fence around it. And a mixed hedge of hornbeam and beech. And we became a statutory allotment site. Recorded in the minutes of the -

[34:34] KM: It's interesting that it was part of the Dig for Victory campaign site that it started because Mr Middleton who was behind the Dig for Victory campaign lived in Tolworth.

GW: Oh did he?

KM: Yes.

GW: Ah.

KM: Lived in St Matthew - and I've had a look -

GW: And is that why Kingston had such a lot of allotment sites do you think?

KM: Er I honestly don't know. I honestly don't know.

GW: We lost an awful lot in the 70s.

KM: Certainly during the war there was a huge - I mean I- there was a lot of industry [35:00] around Kingston. There was - I mean the hu-Hurricane was designed and built in Kingston. There was a lot - so it may have been coincidence that in order to feed the people who were working for the war effort. It was decided to create the allotments.

GW: Yeah.

KM: Additionally Kingston - if you take K- albeit during the war it would have been Malden and Coombe, it would have been Kingston, it would have been Surbiton as different - as different - as different boroughs. If you take them as a whole they are a very green area. So there's plenty of land. And it would have been natural then I suppose for-

GW: Yeah. Well any space would have been grabbed for land.

KM: Yes.

GW: For food wouldn't it?

KM: Yes certainly in more er urban built up areas it - y'know people were turning over their front gardens and their back gardens to grow food. Er and I think it was possibly just - it would be interesting to erm why Kingston - Kingston - [36:00] Kingston does have a lot of allotment sites.

GW: 22.

KM: Yeah.

GW: [?] - the smallest only has 2 plots. And I think Tolworth Main's possibly the biggest. Alric Avenue's pretty huge. Well over a hundred, perhaps even a hundred [?]

[36:17] KM: Tolworth -Tolworth Main's pretty big.

GW: And it was bigger.

KM: It's only half the size that it was 15 years ago, something like that. 20-

GW: That was in the 80s, I remember all that. Oh it was a huge political hoo har. Taking away - so then they built the mound and turned it into parkland. That's when the Lib Dems got in.

KM: And it was-

GW: It was a huge political thing.

KM: And then it was the Millennium Park.

GW: Yes. Yes. They built the mound and then it was called the Millenn-the Millennium Mound or something.

KM: Yes or something.

GW: But unfortunately nobody thought that what would happen to the water that fell on the mound.

KM: Mm.

GW: And it all drained into Tolworth allotments.

KM: Yes.

GW: [37:00] I think they may have solved that problem now.

KM: Er certainly I've not heard it mentioned recently.

GW: I think -

KM: And I know a few people who have got plots there.

GW: I think the hoo har over the Tolw- and it was a huge public outcry over the loss of the Tolworth - I remember it quite clearly. Erm.

[37:18] KM: It's interesting because in the - in the 80s and 90s as you were saying earlier there wasn't necessar- allotmenting wasn't viewed the way it is today.

GW: No.

KM: The demand for allotments wasn't as high as it is today. Y-you were saying that you've got a waiting list of 20 people. And yet when there was a debate about changing some of the use of Tolworth Main allotments from allotments to erm parkland or something like that erm - it would be interesting to know how many of the allotments were actually being d-were actually cultivated.

GW: I think that the focus of the objections wasn't so much that they would be losing the allotments but they would be losing [38:00] open land. Because the proposal as I recall was to use that land for building.

KM: Ah.

GW: So it wasn't just the allotment people.

KM: So it was complete loss of amenity.

GW: It was loss of amenity.

KM: Ah. That makes perfect sense.

GW: And of course residents would have - were up - residents were up in - it was part of a big political thing.

KM: Mm.

GW: Erm. And it caused - th-there was a lot of fuss. It caused - there were a lot of things happened because of it.

KM: Mm.

GW: And I - it's one of the first really public erm - how would you put it? Demonstrations if you like. That I'd seen in this area erm where the public came together.

KM: Mm.

GW: And there was a big public outcry over this proposal.

[38:50] KM: Yes because the - shall we say the erm the borough had always been conservative with a very - well with a small c. And maybe weren't up to demonstrations and erm and [39:00] objections and things like that.

GW: And I think it's always been conservative with a big c.

KM: Yes. [Laughs]

GW: Yes you're probably right there. And that's - all around that time there was great change. Great change in the borough. Politically. All sorts of things were changing. Erm. Educationally. All sorts of stuff was changing around that time.

KM: And people were realising that - if - once they'd lost a public ame- a public amenity. Once they'd lost public space they'd never get it back.

GW: It's gone forever.

KM: Because once - nobody's ever going to demolish a housing estate and build a park.

GW: No absolutely not.

KM: But they're quite happy to take a park and build a housing estate.

GW: I think a lot of allotment land had been lost over the years in the 70s and the 80s. And I think Tolworth Main was possibly the last straw. It's well loved open space. And people just thought - as you say it was gonna be built on, they'd never get it back and they didn't want it. And **[40:00]** amazingly they managed to organise themselves.

KM: Yes. To actually keep it going.

GW: To protest. Yeah.

KM: Yes. Yeah.

GW: I should imagine it was quite exciting.

[40:11] KM: I - er I was certainly around at the time but I wasn't involved in allotmenting.

GW: I remember but no I don't think I was. Although - yes I was. Because I wa-I had my own hoo harr with the council. I won't go into it. But it took two years to get stuff sorted out such as [factually] which we did. But I remember some of us saying oh they're only giving in because of the Tolworth fuss. So it must - so that must have been a couple years after the Tolworth thing but I can't remember. That would have been - about in the early 90s. Late 80s, early 90s that that all kicked off.

[40:50] KM: I - I haven't been close to the Kingston - my allotment's actually just inside Elmbridge so.

GW: Oh right.

KM: So Gloria it's been absolutely fascinating listening to your [41:00] reminiscences of what er-

GW: You make me sound so old. [Laughs]. Reminiscences!

KM: I'm sorry, that wasn't intended at all. Of how things have changed, of what allotments mean to people. Erm. Er and of how things have changed over the years. Why you got an allotment. Ern. And why you still got it. Erm.

GW: I shall have it until I can no longer stand on one leg.

KM: And also we haven't actually covered the - interestingly your involvement as erm as secretary of your own allotment association.

GW: Mm-mm.

KM: And also of the Federation. Erm.

GW: Yes.

KM: How's that - well obviously the allotment that your- that your own allotment association or site is self managed. What are the benefits of the Federation do you feel?

GW: Federation - [42:00] well. As secretary of an allotment association, my own allotment site. Various duties to do with that. Is - it's quite an isolated thing. I didn't know people from other sites. There was never any to miss - to meet them. And particularly when we had some problems I could have done with advice from someone at another site who perhaps dealt with the c- you know I was completely ignorant of how council's worked.

KM: Yes.

GW: The difference between councillors and council officers, really simple things. Never done anything like that before. I could have done with some advice or a steer, how to deal with this.

KM: Someone else who had done it before.

GW: Yeah. Someone with experience so I didn't have to work it all out by myself. So that was one reason it seemed to me that a federation would be a good idea. The other reason [43:00] was that the dire state of the allotments, clearly something needed - generally in the borough something had to be done because they were not being managed properly. Although there were quite a few voluntary managed at the time I think there were erm about nine possibly voluntary managed sites. There's 12, 13 now. Erm. Most of them were run by the council. The council didn't have the resources to manage them properly.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: Plots weren't being let. There weren't - that were vacant. Nobody was checking that the plots were being worked. So they weren't - a lot of them weren't worked but on paper they were let. So they - the council could say to people oh I'm sorry there's no vacancies at that site but you'd go and look at it and think goodness sake, look at this, it's dreadful.

KM: Yes. Mm-mm.

GW: Erm. And although - [44:00] with the best will in the world a council or a company like idverde they cannot manage a site as well as a site that's run by its own plot holders. They can't be there every day.

KM: Yeah, understand that.

GW: They don't see the problems that pop up. Things take so long to get sorted with the council. And it - that's the way it is.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: But if you've got your own committee things get dealt with. And you only have to go and look at the voluntary managed sites and you can see that they are so much b- generally so much better run. So much more efficiently run. It saves the council money. The site's which are voluntary managed pay their own water bills. The ones which are run by idverde the council pays the water bills. The sites which are run by th-an association pay a ground rent which is 25% of - not their income but of their [45:00] potential income if every plot's let at the full rate.

KM: Oh right, uh-huh.

GW: So it takes no account of pensioners.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: Reduced rates, so on. So the council get an income. If it's managed by idverde, idverde keep the whole income, the council do not get a penny. So voluntary management is a win win for the sites.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: And financially - I know it's a drop in the ocean compared to the millions but you know look after the poun-pennies and all that stuff. They get - the council will get an income and they do not have to pay the water bills. And they get their sites looked after properly.

KM: Yes.

GW: They get their sites loved if you like. Erm. So that was another reason - more sites needed to go voluntary managed. And the council weren't promoting it anymore. They'd done their bit in the 1980s, that was it. So-

KM: It's not up on the priority list.

GW: I hear that so often from the council.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: Y'know allotments are not a priority. Well [46:00] there's lots of little things go in the borough that aren't priorities but actually put them all together and they make a nice big chunk but they don't see that.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: So there was all these feelings amongst people that I knew that y'know this is - situation is bad. And then we got this very very keen and very good Agenda 21 officer. I don't know if you remember Agenda 21 or - it was a buzzword. 12, 13 years ago.

KM: No.

GW: Oh it was all to do with environment and climate change and all that sort of thing.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: Erm. Green stuff really it would have been then.

KM: Yes.

GW: And the council actually appointed an Agenda 21 officer, Suzanne West her name was, she was very young and very good and very keen. She called a meeting - she contacted every allotment site in the borough, voluntary managed and council run cos idverde weren't around then. And we all turned up to this meeting about allotments, it was [47:00] very generalised. And we all - a lot of people thought oh crumbs they're going to announce closures. So they turned up in force, as soon as Suzanne said well no, there's no money at the council and we're not planning to close any of the sites but I would like to see things improve. A lot of people cleared off and went. And that left a group of us and from that initial meeting we formed the federation. We met a few times at Guildhall.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: And a group - y'know the core formed the federation. And the aims were to promote allotment gardening in the borough. To promote voluntary management. And to encourage people to take responsibility for their own sites.

KM: Yeah.

GW: And that's really what we've done. We've worked quite hard with [?].

[47:47] KM: So you were a founding member of the-

GW: I was yes.

KM: - federation. Was - was Joan - Joan -

GW: Joan was too.

KM: Joan was as well.

GW: Yes. Joan took over as chair last year. We had a bad year last year healthwise. Erm. And our chairman **[48:00]** had to give up - he was a founder member. And Joan's taken over. But we spent years visiting sites. Establishing the site liaison volunteer erm system at direct managed sites. Council managed sites. Where a volunteer on each site does the lettings. Erm. So at least at that time - there was some communication between all the sites. And that's been one of the main benefits is communication - we keep the federation keeps the sites informed of any developments. Erm. And we liaise with the council, we meet regularly with the council. With Rob Waite at the council. And we can - we can take concerns to the council. And we can advise where sites want to go voluntary managed. And just steer them through the whole - the whole procedure.

KM: Exactly what you didn't have.

GW: **[49:00]** Exactly the s- we're supporting yes.

KM: When your site went voluntary managed.

GW: Yes.

KM: You didn't have that support network of how to-

GW: No and when we had problems at any stage we didn't have a support network.

KM: Mm.

GW: And this - on each site working in isolation, fighting its own corner. Y'know it's taken - it takes up an extraordinary amount of time but you get together.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: And y'know you've got solutions to problems.

KM: Yes.

GW: Oh yeah, oh that's what they did. And there you go. And you also don't get the situation where once sites being played off another.

KM: Yeah.

GW: We all know what's what.

[49:38] KM: And I guess it gives the - it - it's er the benefit to the council is that they've got if you like a single point of contact.

GW: With the federation they have yes.

KM: Rather than having to talk to 12, 15 different associations. They can just talk to the federation and the federation can then-

GW: And we can-

KM: - can talk to.

GW: Disseminate the news or whatever. And that is [50:00] one big advantage to the council because if they get people - well it's idverde now of course. If they get people who want an allotment site they'll either phone or they go on the website. Or the contacts for the voluntary managed sites change.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: People give out, move away, whatever. Erm. They never - I've never had an up to date list of contacts. So potential plot holders are lost.

KM: Mm.

GW: So KFAG agreed we would hold the list. And we keep it on our website. And it's updated regularly. So if people want an allotment plot, they either phone and they're directed to the council website which then directs them to the KFAG website where all the up to date information about voluntary managed sites is. Erm. Or if you they don't have internet then can phone me.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: And I'm quite happy - I'll talk about allotments all day every day as you must have realised.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: [Laughs] So yes. The federation has - [51:00] has made a difference. I've - I'm quite proud of the federation. I think it has - I think in many ways our job's slowed down now. S- I mean there's six more voluntary managed sites since the federation started.

KM: Right.

GW: And with another one in the pipeline.

[51:19] KM: And how many sites are there in the borough that are not voluntary managed?

GW: So there's 22. You take -

KM: 22 so it's - coming out 8 or 10 or something like that that are still managed by idverde. And is there - is that - are they - are they not voluntary managed because they don't want to be? Or because there's nobody on the site that is prepared to put the time and effort in that undoubtedly it takes to set it all up?

GW: I think there are several reasons. One is some of those sites are very small. Erm. One has only two plots.

KM: Yep.

GW: One has possibly ten. Another has about six. [52:00] There are four sites that are very small. And they would not be financially viable to be voluntary managed on their own because they have to pay their water bill. They have to pay public liability insurance. They will have to pay for petrol and stuff for their mowers. For communal areas. Paths that sort of stuff. There's expenditure involved. And their income would be very small particularly if they have pensioners. Y'know paying half rent. Erm. So financially they would not be viable. We've looked at other ways of trying to make them more independent. But I don't know. I-it will be tricky for them. At the other end of the scale you've got sites like Tolworth Main which are huge. And the feeling amongst the plot holders there when we put forward the idea a few years was that it was too big. Well actually I disagree with that because we've got Alric Avenue in New Malden which is massive, probably similar size to Tolworth Main. [53:00] And they cope fine, they've been voluntary managed for years, the original ones. But I think the size of Tolworth Main puts them off possibly. But the other thing of course you're right. There's not always people who are willing to do it.

[53:16] KM: And as I think you've said all the way down the line, it takes time. It takes effort. And it doesn't happen overnight.

GW: It does take time. It does take effort. But it's incredibly rewarding to see your site - particularly if you're on a bit of a grotty site. And I've seen some grotty sites with quite difficult problems. Which they've thought were insurmountable but they've gone ahead anyway and they've been ama-they've been a success story. They say I don't know why we didn't do it years ago. We put up with all this - whatever rubbish they put up with.

KM: Mm-mm.

GW: And if we'd gone voluntary managed - just look at us now. So it's worth taking that step but you - and you don't need a lot of people to drive it. **[54:00]** You need half a dozen. Six, eight people tops. As long as you've got a small group of people who are keen it will succeed.

KM: Yeah.

GW: And when the plot holders see the benefits - which of course they all do pretty quickly - they're behind you. And the feeling of community, of - of being a member of a community. And the atmosphere on a voluntary managed site is so much different - people - everybody talks to everybody. Everybody starts to know everybody. You go to a direct managed sites and they tend not to be so sociable. Not because they're not friendly people but because it's a one to one relationship. They've got the tenancy agreement with the council whereas on a voluntary managed site you've got the tenancy agreement with your association who are plot holders. So they - you're all in it together.

KM: Yes. Yeah.

GW: Which helps.

KM: So if one [55:00] person is using too much water and leaving the hose running then it's - then somebody else will have a quiet word because-

GW: Yes absolutely. There won't be all that muttering and muttering, shall we report them to the council staff. Y'know somebody will go and deal with it. Or several people can deal with it.

KM: [Laughs]

GW: [Laughs] And then they'll feel mortified.

[55:22] KM: Wonderful. Again Gloria, many thanks indeed. It's been fascinating.

GW: Well thank you, I really enjoyed talking to you.

KM: Brilliant. Thanks very much.