

Transcription of an interview conducted 27 September 2018

Interviewee: GLEN ROWDEN (GR)

Interviewer: JAREK ZABA (JZ)

Surbiton, England

Transcription: JAREK ZABA

[00:00] JZ: Let's go. Erm. What is the date in fact? That's good information to know. 27th September. Right I'm Jarek Zaba with the ShedX project from Community Brain. I'm here in the Museum of Futures with Glen Rowden for a oral history interview. It is Thursday the 27th of September. Glen could you just confirm your name, date and place of birth if that's OK.

GR: Good evening. I'm Glen Rowden. Yeah 9th of 7th '74. I'm 44 years old.

JZ: Lovely. Erm. Right Glen so this is all about just your history with er your allotment and allotment gardening in general. So er do you mind me telling me - first of all you have a current allotment don't you?

GR: I sort of have an allotment. I look after someone else's allotment because they have got more than one.

JZ: OK.

GR: And I've been helping him out for five years. And four years ago he took on another **[01:00]** allotment at Tolworth. And then took on another allotment at Tolworth so he had two of them down there. And one mine's - that then would - in Hinchley Wood. This one, our one. And so he said yeah just erm - if you're happy to you can just take over - do what you want with it. And yeah. U-use it like an allotment should be used y'know.

[01:22] JZ: So th- so that's been for five years you say?

GR: Five years since I've been helping him out. This is my third season-

JZ: Yep.

GR: Third summer of it just being me doing it.

[01:33] JZ: Yep. And prior to that did you have previous - have you held allotment plots?

GR: Not allotments. Growing up, I'm from New Zealand so we didn't have an allotment but we had a big back garden and there was a veggie patch as part of the back garden. So used to help my father.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: Dig over and plant stuff and reap the benefits.

[01:58] JZ: Yeah I was gonna ask actually is there - is there allotment [02:00] culture in New Zealand? Is that a thing?

GR: Not that I know of. Cos everyone's got enough space to do it themselves.

JZ: Oh OK.

GR: And - in a quarter acre section you've got plenty of back garden to do it yourself. Or - if you're from a farming area like I was, yeah it's more of an acre section so you can have half of that with a few animals on it. And then grow your- grow veg or whatever you want to do on other bits.

JZ: And-

GR: Not everyone does it. But a lot of people do do it.

[02:33] JZ: But essentially if anyone wants to do it they have the space?

GR: Yeah.

JZ: And so erm in New Zealand would typically would you grow? W-w-what your father grow or-

GR: Just the basics. Carrots. Cabbages. Cauliflowers. Beetroot. Er- yeah. It wasn't a flash household. Onions.

[02:55] JZ: And that would be for the purposes of using them yourself for cooking?

GR: Yes.

JZ: Yeah. Yeah. There isn't this idea of growing them for leisure or anything like that? [03:00]

GR: No. I don't think - yeah, no it's just - we're pretty practical in New Zealand. You just - everything's got its purpose and its use. So you don't - yeah. Isn't - not many things you do for fun. Well there is a lot of things you do for fun but I wouldn't think growing vegetables would be a fun thing apart from that you enjoy doing it and enjoy having your own produce to eat.

[03:22] JZ: Yeah, yeah. Yeah. So here in the UK what do you grow on-on-on the allotment you've been looking after?

GR: This year I've planted beetroot, leeks, onions, carrots, beans, butternut squash, cucumber, sweet peppers, erm, a few sunflowers for the kids. The kids planted them. And some corn. Some sweetcorn. And broccoli. That's what I've plante- and we've also got a strawberry patch. And a blackberry and raspberry patch. **[04:00]** And three apple trees.

[04:02] JZ: And are they all a success? Or is there anything you've struggled to grow?

GR: They - year to year they vary. Erm carrots were brilliant this year. Erm. Other year - the last two years I've had them - just been eaten by the carrot - I think it's called carrot fly or some little bug that gets in there and just - yeah eats the shit out of it an-

[04:24] JZ: What was that sorry, th-

GR: I think it's called the carrot fly. I'm - I'm-

JZ: Carrot fly. Oh right so that affects just the carrots.

GR: Yeah. So they were great this year. Erm. Beetroot has always been good. It seems to be quite a [hard] thing to do which I - two weeks ago pickled in the back of the MOF.

JZ: Oh right. I was gonna ask do you use all of this for your own cooking?

GR: Yeah.

JZ: Yep.

GR: Yeah. It all comes home.

[04:50] JZ: I mean is that the reason you took up the allotment in the first place because you wanted it as a source of food or was it-

GR: That's - no that's sort of a byproduct. I was more **[05:00]** wanting to get - having your own space.

JZ: Mm.

GR: Living in a flat, it's - we've got lovely gorgeous communal garden wh-where I live. Stream running through it. But it's still a communal garden. You can't just do what you want.

JZ: Yep.

GR: And we have barbecues down the allotment. And I spend the afternoon down there and get the kids digging away and then have a barbecue.

[05:25] JZ: So for you it kind of is a kind of leisure activity in a way?

GR: Well yeah - yeah. If-

JZ: Or it offers you something you wouldn't otherwise be able to have?

GR: Well yeah I crave the space that we used to - I used to have back in New Zealand. Of your own space where you can just do what you like. When I've got a park bench or a picnic table which are built - which folds back into a park bench. So if I'm there by myself I wanna sit down and have a rest whilst weeding - put in the park bench, then when we're down there for the barbecues pulled out to put the table y- kids **[06:00]** use it for erm when we do seeding. Put the - plant all the little seedlings, I get the kids up there the trays with all. They fill all the pots, chuck all the seeds in.

[06:14] JZ: And speaking of the kids, do they - do they like it down there? Do they have a good time-

GR: Yeah. Yeah they do. Erm. They get a bit distracted cos outside the allotment is a park. And they hear all the other kids playing. I take em to there quite often anyway. But yeah it's sometimes [laughs] they get there, two minutes after you've got there, can we go the park? It's like no, we've got to do some bloody work first. [Laughs]

[06:40] JZ: I mean what time of day would you typically go to the allotment or do you have a routine or is it just when you've got an opportunity?

GR: When I've got an opportunity I'm down there during the day. But only after work and I've got kids to bed I go in about 8ish. And do my watering. Erm. Some reason I feel that **[07:00]** watering them at night is a good time to water plants cos they'll all get soaked in. Cos if you water them in the day - a hot day most of it just gets evaporated straight away.

JZ: Oh I see yeah.

GR: The plants don't get the use out of it. Erm. Yeah. Whether it's right or wrong. Erm that's for the experts to tell you.

JZ: Mm.

GR: But - and also - yeah it fits in with what I'm working in and the family. But quite often if I'm not working I'll put the kids up at school and we'll go down then for a couple of hours. And the weekends if I'm yeah - if we can, I'll go down and spend a week or all day down there.

[07:38] JZ: Yeah, yeah. So it is - yeah you can just spend the entire day just-just pottering away down there.

GR: Yep.

JZ: Yeah. And you said about the - that's for the experts to tell you that. Do you research like best practice for certain vegetables or do you just go with your gut kind of thing? Or your own informed knowledge from previous experience.

GR: Bit of informed erm - **[08:00]** Pete the guy's whose allotment it was - is. Y'know - always talking to him about - cos it - [inaudible] - allotment neighbours. Always asking them questions. Erm. Got a lovely lady, Delia next to me. And yeah. She's g- her plot's bl- it's beautiful. And so yeah always asking her or following what she's doing or that's just gone in, that's been taken out, yeah. Yeah there's a lot of allotment envy. Cos there's this other lady ov-over the path. She's fucking - hers - she got a double allotment and it's immaculate.

JZ: Yeah. What in terms of what she grows or the way it's presented or all of it?

GR: All of it. Yeah. Not a weed to be seen.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: Erm. And everything she grows just seems to go so bloody well.

[08:57] JZ: So er - so there is a kind of spirit of [09:00] picking up best practice off your neighbours?

GR: Oh yeah, definite yeah. There's - again one thing I've been learning is what you've got in the store or where you are because half of - two of my - I've basically got four beds. And two of the beds are in the shade 60% of the day. So it's working out what doesn't mind being in the shade. And yeah. I mean I've - again talking to other people and looking at other people's plots er and seeing similar position to me sun-wise to me and that and then yeah. And chopping and changing y'know if things don't work - y-you're supposed to - I've heard that you're supposed to rotate where you put your crops around your beds.

JZ: Oh OK.

GR: Erm. Again some people have said that yeah that's - you definitely should do that but other people saying ah no if it **[10:00]** grows there, grow it, do it. So almost finding where it should be.

[10:06] JZ: So in that sense is it different from your veggie patches back in New Zealand? Like is it a different kind of game?

GR: Yeah. You just - you just [exhales] you've got your veggie patch and you just put things down.

JZ: Yeah. And going back to your fellow allotment holders. Is there a social element to it? Do you - do you-

GR: Yeah.

JZ: Do you make friendships?

GR: Yeah definitely. I mean - a few other families are down there too so Alfie's got a couple of little mates that he - he'll - if they're down there at the time, yeah OK see you later. Y-you're off playing. And he'll come back in half an hour when he's thirsty or whatever. And they're also - they - there's at least two events they've got, midsummer barbecue.

JZ: Mm-hmm.

GR: And everyone gets together, brings drinks - there's a couple of guys who used to be in bands and they play some music. Yeah.

[10:55] JZ: Yeah. Nice. Nice. Right t- and - so are those [11:00] events put on by the kind of people who manage the overall sites do you know?

GR: Yeah there was a chairman. I- I've - of the allotment committee and that and - I mean I've been to the s- summer barbecue twice but they've said it's been going on for 30 odd years. So it's well established thing that just sort of happens. Basically they're going to pick the date and then everyone just does what they do.

[11:27] JZ: Yeah. So it's not a - do you know if it's a c- it's a council managed allotment or whether it's managed by the people who actually - because I know - I d- in Kingston there's a distinction between the two. It can either be directly run by the council or someone-

GR: Right. No we've got - we have got a committee.

JZ: Right OK. So it's probably managed by the plot owners themselves.

GR: But it's pl- it's definitely managed by them because-

JZ: Yeah.

GR: Anytime they've been talked about - because we've had a bit of trouble with fly tipping down there.

JZ: OK.

GR: Guys going no I'm here to drop off things to you guys and then dumping a load of crap instead of manure or something like that.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: **[12:00]** So yeah they definitely put the word around themselves - it's not - it doesn't come from a council rep or anything like that.

[12:09] JZ: Right, right. Cos erm you say it's Hinchley Wood so that probably falls outside of Kingston anyway doesn't it?

GR: It's Elmbridge yeah.

JZ: Elmbridge, yeah yeah.

GR: Just opposite Tangle's place.

JZ: Oh right, got ya.

GR: Tangle being Simon Adrians.

JZ: [Laughs] For the record. An excellent photographer. [Laughs] Someone's er listening to this in the year 2050 they can probably find some of Tangle's photos in the History Centre archives.

GR: Definitely. Or on tanglephotography.co.uk.

[12:40] JZ: [Laughs] He better thank us for that plug. What are some of the challenges? Erm that you mentioned weeds earlier. Is that something that-

GR: Yeah you keep on it.

JZ: -you find a struggle?

GR: Erm. Yeah. You d- yeah. If a plant's growing, the weeds are growing so you've just **[13:00]** s- when I go down there of an evening, takes me 20, 25 minutes to water everything. And then spend another probably half hour just picking things out, or [one way] I'll pick a row, I'll clean that out.

JZ: Mm.

GR: Next night go to the next one. Just tr- but yeah. But they just keep coming back and you've never get on top of it.

[13:25] JZ: And do you struggle much with - I think you mentioned the carrot things. But sort of insects and bugs and pests and things like that?

GR: Yeah. No worse than anybody else up there. But the summer was great because it was so dry so the slugs weren't to be seen.

JZ: Right. Yeah.

GR: But last year or - no two years ago. It was quite a wet summer and slugs were horrific. And - but it was just cos it was so moist there was just so many of them around.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: There's - they was - there was something - someone said it was a warm winter leading into it. So there was some more around. It was - yeah. **[14:00]** What - all my allotment buddies said there was definitely - it happens when you get a cooler - a w- sorry a warmer winter. Going into a bit of a moist summer.

JZ: Mm.

GR: So yeah you just gotta roll with it. You can't - at first - first year proper I was down - I was just going round with a little spade and picking them all up and over the fence.

JZ: [Laughs]

GR: You get sort of 80, 90 in an evening. And you go back the next night and just same again.

[14:34] JZ: And erm - yeah in- in terms of the weather that presumably has an impact on - on what you're doing. Er is it different vegetables depending on what the weather's gonna be like?

GR: No I don't go that specific. No I just plant what I want to plant at th- at the start of it. But there's - I mean if it's wet I still wanna go down cos I got a glass house so I've gotta water those. So - and - y'know - **[15:00]** rain's only water init. It's not gonna hurt you. So I don't mind getting wet.

JZ: Mm.

GR: Tr- tramping down there and-

[15:10] JZ: And er in t- do you - outside of the allotment side that you work on your yourself, do you have many other friends that are allotment holders? Do you notice more people doing it or less people, is-

GR: Er. There's a mutual friend of ours. Erm. Bowden. Lord Bowden.

JZ: Adam Bowden Smith.

GR: Erm. Who's - h-he's about ten plots down from me.

JZ: Yeah. Oh right, he's on the same site is he?

GR: Same site.

JZ: Oh OK.

GR: And yeah - a lot of people I work with have got them outside the other place I got some tips from some old guys that I work with.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: And it's - i- and then there's a lot of people younger than me, think yeah yeah I should, sounds like a very awesome thing to do and. Just get off your fucking arse and put your name down.

JZ: [16:00] [Laughs]

GR: Cos it's probably gonna take two or three years to get one. So put your name down. Oh yeah - well put your name down. If it comes up and you're not ready for it or it doesn't quite [inaudible] out, you

just say no and they pass onto the next person. But - I mean - so it's typical of the - dare I say it, this day and age.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: People want things now.

JZ: Right, right.

GR: And - yeah. That's what y- y'know - going - [inaudible] now or- I want this now. Why isn't it here? No one's willing to wait.

[16:40] JZ: Yeah. And we've interviewed a few people who do actually manage the allotment sites and stuff. You're right there is this sort of incredible three year waiting lists and things like this. Which certainly wasn't the case about 15, 20 years ago.

GR: No.

JZ: So I think society as a whole I guess has - has er - it's grown in popularity among people which I guess is [17:00] a good thing.

GR: But I'd love to see the figures of how many new people and how long they last. Cos-

JZ: Yeah.

GR: What I've seen is people that have it for a year tw-two years, after two years starts running down and then third year they get asked to sort it out or you - it get taken off you. And-

JZ: Yeah.

GR: So I mean it's - you definitely need to want to do it. Cos it is - for what you get out of it. The time you put in and what you get out of it. It's just fucking not cost effective at all. [Laughs] If you put your own - no matter JZ what you do. Y- OK you put it down at the - what's the basic hourly rate? Erm. What's the-

JZ: What, minimum wage?

GR: Minimum wage.

JZ: Err. I don't know, it's -

GR: Eight pound an hour.

JZ: Yeah I was gonna say around the 8, 9, 10 pound mark. It might be as low as 8, I don't know.

GR: OK. So. So do it as that - as 9 pound. I'm putting - I would put in over the [18:00] s- yeah. Average over the year I'd probably put in 9, 10 hours a week. So y- yeah, looking, 90, 100 quid a week in work, in labour.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: You're not getting 100 quid a week of fucking vegetables.

JZ: [Laughs]

GR: At an allotment. You're not saving that at the - at the shops. I mean y- y'know. You're still saving 10 quid a week.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: It's a - it's a lifestyle. It's y-

JZ: Yeah.

GR: I mean y- cos I know I've only got a half plot as well. So I mean on a full plot if you really did it right and everything you could - I mean you still you wouldn't fucking save 100 hundred quid worth of fucking food. I mean unless you were actually vegetarian and you ate every single thing that you grew but that is - [19:00] not many have got ten hours spare a week. It's only cos I've got - I go down at night and I'll spend an hour there in er - in an evening.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: Erm. Getting the weeding done and everything like that. I mean a lot of the time y'know - probably 20 minutes of that hour is just sitting down there and sometimes I'll take a can of beer down.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: And have a spliff.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: And just enjoy - just sit there and look at it and then [bats] start coming in and it's fuckin- it's lovely.

[19:32] JZ: Yeah. So f- so fundamentally is that what motivate- if you're not getting y'know your money's as it were out of er - is what motivates you the - the lifestyle aspect of it? Are you motivated by the kind of sustainability aspect?

GR: Er a-w- the biggest thing really was to teach the kids.

JZ: OK. Oh that's your- oh right.

GR: Show them how to do it. Where it - where your food comes from, it's not [20:00] go to Sainsbury's and get a bag of carrots. Y'know. We go - we walk over that tree and fucking pick an apple. And the grapes an- oh they're grape- I've got a grapevine as well in the glass house. And blackberries and all of that. It's - I mean I've got the two rose trees, one for each of the kids down there as well - rose bushes which also remind me of my grandmother's garden. Cos they had a - about 30 odd rose bushes [inaudible] two acre section. Used to run round with my cousins and brothers and sisters and get granddad to chase us round and play hide and seek and get y'know stuck by the thorns in the rose bushes and that.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: But yeah - but for kids - for them to know that you can - you can just make - grow this yourself, OK. It takes time but - and get your hands dirty, doesn't hurt you. M- so many kids these days don't like being dirty.

JZ: Mm.

GR: [Laughs]

[20:59] JZ: Yeah. Yeah. [21:00] Well that's intere- so yeah the kids - so the kids is a big part of your motivation. Do you - do you then in turn hope that they when they're older sort of grow their own veg in the same way?

GR: Oh well I - that's up to them. I'm giving them knowledge of how to do it.

JZ: Yeah.

GR: And then they can use that knowledge later. Y'know. Like I've taught y'know them don't get a knife and slice your hand. What they do with it later in life - if they wanna turn around and self harm or whatever. But they know the basics of how to do things. And what's right, what's wrong.

JZ: Mm-mm.

GR: And y'know yeah - you can't tell a 20 year old what to do. You can just arm them with tools of what's right and wrong and how to do shit.

[21:45] JZ: Yep. And erm - the original plot holder his name is Pete is that right?

GR: Pete. Pete Strings.

JZ: So is he ever likely to ask for it back or is it kind of yours for as long as you want it?

GR: I think he's happy for me to just - yeah.

JZ: Cos you say he's got multiple-

GR: He's got two [22:00] at Tolworth yeah. Which is also closer to his house.

JZ: How did he end up with like multiple allotment plots? Why did he end up in that situation?

GR: Erm. As I said earlier he got on a waiting list for another plot.

JZ: Oh OK right.

GR: And he - it came up.

JZ: Mm.

GR: He y'know got a phone call saying y'know - da-ding! Your number's up!

JZ: Yep, yep, yep.

GR: So he took it over and then they seen what he was d- what he'd done with his plot. And the one next to him came up and they said well actually if you - y'know and he obviously talked to everyone around as well. Talked to the committee. Made him - made his feelings know of what he would like to do.

JZ: Mm.

GR: And yeah he was offered the other one.

[22:49] JZ: And does he come and visit that plot, your plot?

GR: He hasn't for ages cos he's also in a rock n roll band.

JZ: Is he? Which o-which one? [Laughs]

GR: Erm. Nunchucker.

JZ: Nunchucker.

GR: You know Pete.

JZ: Do I know Pete?

GR: [23:00] Looks like Slash.

JZ: Oh yeah I do know him. Yeah yeah yeah. Oh that's the dude that you -

GR: [Laughs]

JZ: Ohh OK. Sorry yeah oh right. I hadn't made that connection. Oh OK.

GR: [Close to mic] Jarek being an idiot.

JZ: [Laughs]

GR: For the record.

JZ: Never interview your mates. For the record.

[Both laugh]

[23:22] JZ: Er right OK yeah. No that makes sense. Oh I did have - I did have one other question and now you've thrown me with that- with that last bit. Errrr-

GR: [Laughs] With the knowledge that was already in your head.

JZ: [Laughs] No I've completely forgotten what that last one was. Oh no I do know what that last one was. Erm. So just going back to sort of erm - when you talked about what you grew or what your family would grow in New Zealand erm it so-it sounded like very similar to the types of veg we grow here. Is there any big differences in what you'd grow in-

GR: Erm in - no.

JZ: No.

GR: No it's all yeah - it's all just-

JZ: Very similar.

GR: [Crack noise] Sorry. Slapping your bi- bar fly.

JZ: [Laughs]

GR: [24:00] For the record.

JZ: Yeah. An actual fly not a human being who hangs out at the bar. [Laughs] Yeah so no great difference no?

GR: No. No it's -

[24:13] JZ: So this on a bit of a tangent now but New Zealand cuisine is presumably quite similar to British cuisine?

GR: Yeah it's just meat and three veg.

JZ: Yeah, yeah.

GR: There was nothing anything flash happening.

JZ: Yeah, yep.

GR: It was always very ful- fulfilling. Good food. Erm for hardy working sportsmen people and-

[24:34] JZ: And does your other half appreciate when you come home from the allotment with a bag full of veg or whatever?

GR: Yeah.

JZ: Yeah, yeah, yeah.

GR: She's annoyed that I don't do tomatoes but I don't like and Alfie doesn't like them. So her [and Nia] like tomatoes but I don't.

JZ: You don't like tomatoes? I don't like tomatoes either so that's fine. Excellent. Erm. Well I think I've covered everything I wanna cover unless you've got anything else you particularly have a burning i-desire to say on the subject of allotments or growing vegetables?

GR: [25:00] When you grow something, always check the label. Cos when I bought the grapevine I thought it was an outdoor one.

JZ: OK.

GR: Planted it. And Pete was down there and he said do you realise this is an indoor one? So then I had to go out and get a glass case to put around the grapevine. [Laughs]

[25:20] JZ: Right, right. I was gonna say actually where do you - where do you source your growing materials and things like that?

GR: Erm. I keep some seeds from things. And Squires which I'm gonna stop doing cos some of the times it's rubbish.

JZ: What's Squires?

GR: Squires is a garden centre.

JZ: Oh right.

GR: Erm. And yeah. Off other people.

JZ: Yep.

GR: At the allotment,.

JZ: Yep.

GR: Yeah - y- you see someone with a good crop. Y'know - can I - or ask them where they got it from and - yeah.

JZ: Cool. Good stuff. Alright well I think I've got everything I need.

GR: Marvellous.

JZ: Lovely. Thank you very much Glen.