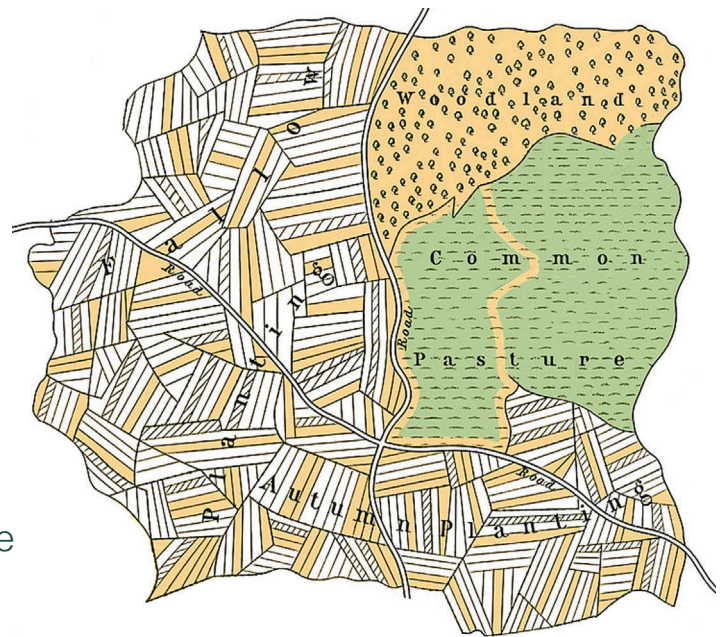


The Origins of Allotments

Until the Victorian period, the majority of the countryside in Britain was “Common Land”. Typically, land was owned by a “Lord of the Manor” but available for local people to use in exchange for a portion of their crop.

Peasants would graze animals on the common pasture (grasslands) in the grazing season and grow crops on thin, unfenced strips of the land in the growing season. People were only growing to feed themselves and their families – not to sell – so they did not need to farm more than these thin strips.

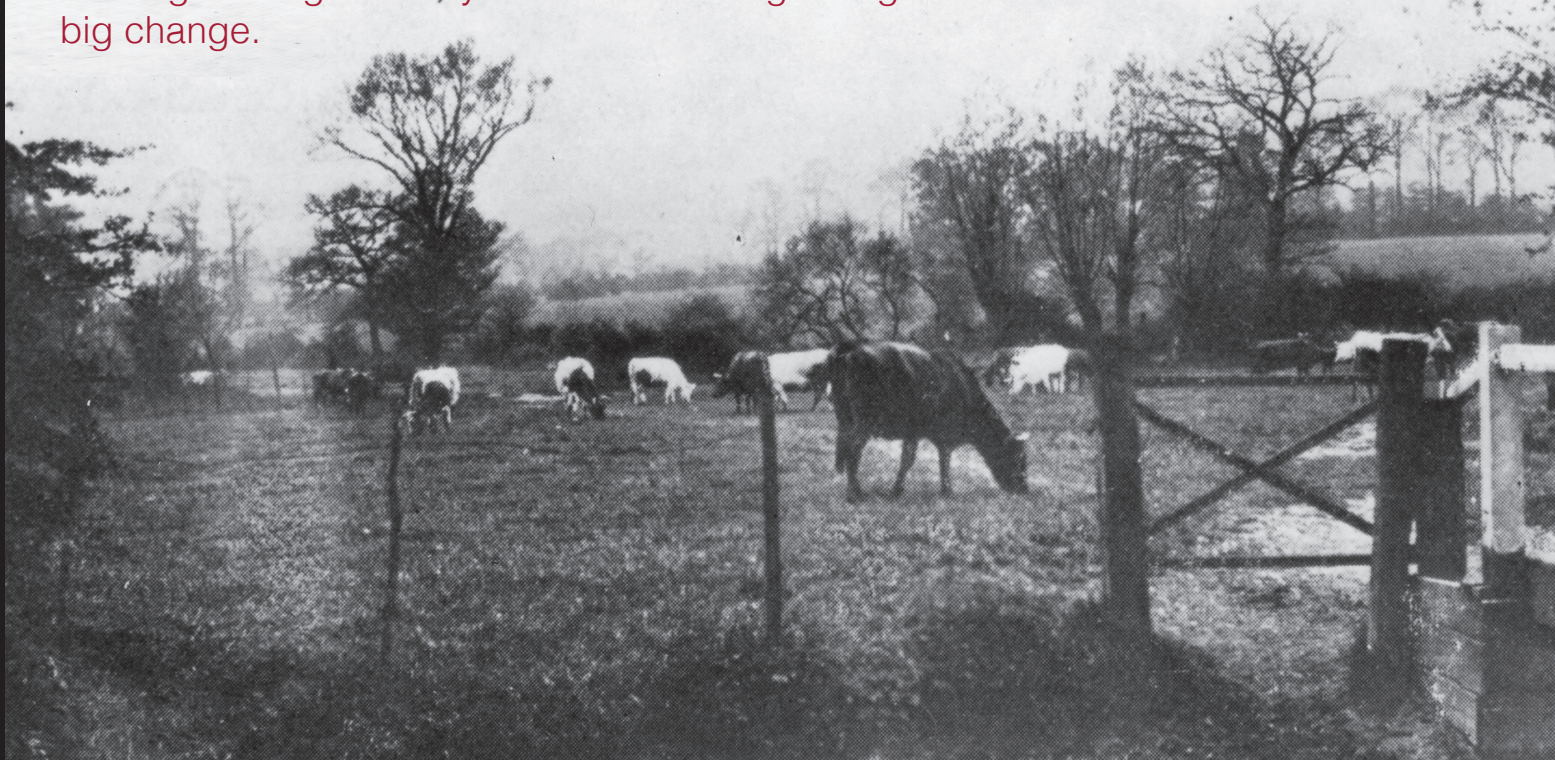


William R. Shepherd, *Historical Atlas*, 1923

Enclosure Movement

However, things changed dramatically with the enclosure movement of 1750 - 1860. This sought to divide the countryside into the larger fenced fields we would recognise today. The government and landowners thought that this would make farming more efficient. They were proved right, but a major downside was that peasant farmers were shut off from the common land on which they had raised crops and livestock for generations.

These landless peasants could labour on the new large scale farms, or move to the cities to find work in the new Victorian industries. Crucially, working people were now working for wages to buy food rather than growing it to feed themselves. This was a big change.



Victorian Poverty

Victorian Britain was a harsh era to live in if you were poor. Whether in the towns or the countryside, unskilled work was usually physically gruelling and badly paid. In the 1880s, an 'agricultural depression' meant the situation went from bad to worse. The risk of farm workers starving to death became a serious possibility. However, poverty was not just a problem in the countryside, it also affected people living in towns and cities.



Allotments are the Solution

Farm owners could not afford to increase the wages they paid to their workers. The only way they could help was to give the workers pieces of unused land so they could grow their own food. To help urban workers, some factory owners and railway companies also provided their employees with plots of land. These were the first allotments. The workers were not especially happy about this as it gave them an extra chore to do on top of their tiring work.

Allotments Come to Tolworth

Tolworth, Surbiton and Kingston were not facing the scale of poverty of the industrial cities. However, even here, at the turn of the 20th Century some allotment provision had been established on Lord Lovelace's estate in Tolworth. However, this was not enough. In January 1908, Surbiton Urban District Council received a petition from 10 allotment holders asking for new land. The following spring the Council began to consider the purchase of land for new allotments at Tolworth and Red Lion Field.